



Backers say charter schools could help state reach integration goals

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With the state falling well short of complying with a court order to desegregate schools in Hartford, lawyers and advocates are urging inclusion of charter schools in the effort. "These schools have an untapped potential to expand diversity," said Philip Tegeler, one of the original lawyers who filed the Sheff vs. O'Neill desegregation suit and is now with the Sheff Movement. "Why shouldn't charter schools be part of the solution?"

To comply with the state Supreme Court order to reduce the inequities caused by racial isolation in Hartford's schools, the state needs to have 41 percent of minority students attending integrated schools by next October, or provide 80 percent of the Hartford students that apply to attend non-traditional public schools the opportunity to do so. The state had just 27 percent of its 21,713 minority students attending integrated schools last school year. So does the state intend to start looking to charter schools to fill this void?

"I know it's something that's being considered," said Rep. Andy Fleischmann, the House chairman of the Education Committee. But one main sticking point is finding the state funding to open new charters that promise to be racially integrated.

"The state has an obligation to provide great, racially diverse schools. Charter schools should be another tool in the toolbox," said Martha Stone, a lawyer for the Sheff plaintiffs.

The three existing charter schools in the Sheff region that collectively have 1,050 students are under no obligation to be racially integrated. Jumoke Academy and Achievement First elementary and middle school would fail the racial integration qualifications, with 99 percent of their students being minorities, according to the State Department of Education's most recent report. Odyssey Community School in Manchester, which is part of the Sheff Region, is racially integrated, with half of their students being minorities.

Stone and Tegeler are not suggesting existing charters in the Sheff Region be required to diversify, because they have admirable achievement records. Instead, they want all new charters that open to be required to be integrated and be included in Sheff calculations.

"If the state is going to spend money on opening charters then they should help the state meet its obligation to provide a quality education in an integrated setting," said Stone.

Charter school leader Dacia Toll, the president of Achievement First, a network of charters based in the Connecticut, New York and Rhode Island, agrees. Last year, Toll approached top state legislators asking for permission to open a new racially integrated charter high school for 420 student in Hartford that would help the state comply with Sheff. But their proposal never came to fruition. "It's still under discussion," Fleischmann said. And while the state deliberates on Toll's offer to open an integrated high school, which could cost the state more money to help her provide transportation to suburban students, she in hoping to move forward with opening a traditional charter school--a cheaper option for the state but not helpful to get the state in compliance with Sheff integration requirements.

"We are looking at our other options now," she said. "It's not from a lack of support to make us a Sheff school, the resources are just tight."