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School choice: 'The most efficient way' to desegregate

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As Connecticut spends millions of dollars a year to meet a court desegregation order by building and running racially-integrated magnet schools, parents like Iraida Sanchez of Hartford would be happy with a far less expensive alternative.

Year after year, Sanchez has put her son Nathaniel's name in a lottery. She is not aiming for one of the region's state-of-the-art magnet schools but hoping instead for a desk in a regular elementary school in any of the city's neighboring suburbs.

No luck so far. "Ever since first grade or kindergarten he's always on the waiting list," she said. Nathaniel's now in fourth grade.



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Despite what state officials insist is an ample supply of open seats under a decades-old school choice program, suburban schools have accepted only a trickle of children while Sanchez and thousands of other Hartford parents continue to wait.

Moving some of Hartford's largely minority student population to integrated or mostly white suburban schools was to have been a key element in the effort to comply with a 1996 state Supreme Court order ^[3] in the Sheff vs. O'Neill desegregation case. However, the state put its emphasis - and its money - mainly into building magnet schools with popular specialty themes such as science, performing arts and international studies. The suburban choice program languished.

But today, as magnet schools and the state's fiscal crisis push education budgets to the breaking point, some educators believe this civil rights-era program, now known as Open Choice, could be a more budget-friendly, long-term answer to school desegregation in the Hartford region.

Iraida Sanchez helps her son, Nathaniel, with his homework. (Photo by Robert A. Frahm)

"The future of Sheff rests on the back of Open Choice, not magnet schools," said Bruce Douglas, executive director of the Capitol Region Education Council ^[4] (CREC), an agency that runs both the choice program and several magnet schools in the Hartford region.

Leaders of the state Department of Education and the legislature's Education Committee agree that the choice program should be expanded, and the potentially volatile issue of requiring suburban towns to accept city students may come up in the General Assembly session that starts Wednesday.

Urban-suburban transfer programs have been used to desegregate schools in cities such as Boston, St. Louis and Milwaukee, and plaintiffs in the Sheff lawsuit agree that Hartford's suburban choice program can play a larger role.

"We've always believed that [suburban] choice was a far more effective means to offer quality and integrated education for the bang for the buck," said John Brittain, a civil rights lawyer who was part of the team that filed the Sheff lawsuit in 1989.

Among those hoping to bolster the Open Choice program is state Education Commissioner Mark McQuillan, who is troubled by the focus on magnets as the central strategy to meet the Sheff goals.

"Relative to Sheff, it has not been a good strategy," McQuillan said. Magnet schools sprouted across Connecticut following a 1996 law that promised the state would pay the entire cost (later reduced to 95 percent) of building new magnets.

The state has spent nearly half a billion dollars to build more than a dozen magnets in the Hartford region with several others under construction or in planning. Nevertheless, the effort to place enough Hartford children in integrated schools has been a struggle.

About one quarter of Hartford's 21,730 minority schoolchildren now attend integrated magnet schools, charter schools, regional technical and agricultural high schools, or suburban schools. However, under terms of a court-approved agreement ^[5] with the Sheff plaintiffs, the state must increase that number to 41 percent by the 2012-2013 school year.

As many as 14,000 names remain on waiting lists for magnet schools and the Open Choice program, officials estimate. Most are Hartford students.

Although the legislature increased support for operating magnet schools in the Sheff region this year, it did not increase the subsidy to suburban schools for enrolling Hartford students in the choice program. That subsidy remains at \$2,500 per student despite McQuillan's request for a substantial increase.

Bolstering that subsidy would be far more efficient than building another magnet school for, say, \$60 million, said former Avon Superintendent of Schools Richard Kisiel, now representing the Sheff plaintiffs under the court-approved settlement.

"You take that \$60 million and translate that into [Open Choice] incentive money - absolutely it's the most efficient way, but we can't seem to convince the legislature," he

said. "If they had increased the incentive as the commissioner proposed, I'm convinced that would have opened up seats. . . . I think it could solve the problem completely."

McQuillan still hopes to get more incentive money but also plans to ask the legislature to give him authority to order suburban schools to accept additional Open Choice applicants.

"Choice is the preferred strategy," McQuillan said, "but you can't execute a strategy like that if you don't have any power and, secondly, no money."

State Sen. Thomas Gaffey [6], D-Meriden, co-chairman of the legislature's Education Committee, supports the idea of allowing the commissioner to order schools to increase participation in the Open Choice program. "I don't see how you reach the [Sheff] goal . . . unless he does have that authority," he said.

Nevertheless, forcing schools to accept students in what has always been a voluntary program undoubtedly would be met with resistance. "In my community, the fact it's voluntary has an extremely positive effect. Mandating things is very corrosive," said Cal Heminway, chairman of the Granby Board of Education and past president of the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education.

Granby is among the most active school systems in the Open Choice program, taking more than 3 percent of its student body from Hartford.

But is the expansion of Open Choice the best strategy for pursuing the Sheff goals?

The magnet school approach has led to major school construction projects in places such as New Haven and Hartford, helping those cities replace or renovate crumbling schools. Magnets also have renewed interest in city schools from thousands of applicants, including suburban families who have put their names on long waiting lists for the popular specialized schools. Four Hartford magnet schools recently were cited in U.S. News & World Report's survey of America's best high schools.

"As long as there is a demand, then we haven't reached the limit" for magnets, said Norma Neumann-Johnson, principal of Hartford's Breakthrough Magnet School. "Just building magnets may not be the only solution. Choice should be part of it, but I think we need to keep going."

Edward Linehan, who formerly ran magnet programs in both Hartford and New Haven, said state officials should not ignore the benefits of magnets.

"If Open Choice were seen as the only future expansion [of desegregation programs], you lose the potential impact on urban school districts that magnets represent," he said. "The cost of voluntarily desegregating our schools is going to be substantial, and the least expensive alternative may not be the most effective."

The choice program was known as Project Concern when it began in 1966 with 266 Hartford children bused to schools in Farmington, Manchester, Simsbury, South Windsor and West Hartford. It drew national attention and was once considered a showcase for racial integration, but after reaching a peak of about 1,200 students in the 1970s it fell on hard times and nearly closed.

Today, enrollment hovers near 1,200 again but growth has been slow. A state study last year reported that suburbs have the capacity to enroll three times that number. Still, of more than 4,000 applicants this year, just 236 children were selected in a lottery for new seats, according to CREC.

Suburban officials have been reluctant to open more spaces. Some question the accuracy of the state study on school capacity. Others cite factors such as cost and limited class sizes. Many accept only the youngest students, those in kindergarten or the primary grades, saying older students have more difficulty adjusting or are sometimes lagging academically.

In Granby, for example, schools accept new Open Choice applicants only up to second grade so that they can stay in the Granby system throughout elementary, middle and high school, said Heminway.

"You send us a ninth-grader with \$2,500, and there is no way we can service that kid," he said.

To run a choice program successfully, schools should have support to pay for services such as extra training for teachers or after-school buses allowing city children to take part in sports or extracurricular activities, Heminway said.

In Plainville, about 50 students from Hartford attend school under the choice program. "We keep trying to take more, but we don't have the space," said Kathy Binkowski, superintendent of schools. Some classrooms already exceed school board guidelines on class size limits, she said.

An early study of the choice program, then known as Project Concern, said it produced long-term benefits. The study, published in 1992 by Teachers College at Columbia University, found that graduates of the program had lower dropout rates, more social contact with whites, better success in college and fewer problems with police.

"I learned how to deal with different cultures," said Angela Minto, of Hartford, a former Open Choice student and one of nine black graduates in a class of 192 seniors at Plainville High School in 2004. "In the real world when you grow up, you're going to have to deal with different kinds of people," said Minto, who later attended Howard University, where she graduated in 2008.

Minto's mother enrolled three daughters in the choice program in Plainville, looking for "a diverse education," Minto said, and "a better education than what Hartford schools were giving at the time."

That is the same goal that prompts parents such as Iraida Sanchez, Nathaniel's mother, to put their children's names in the lottery again and again.

"I'm still keeping my fingers crossed," Sanchez said.

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