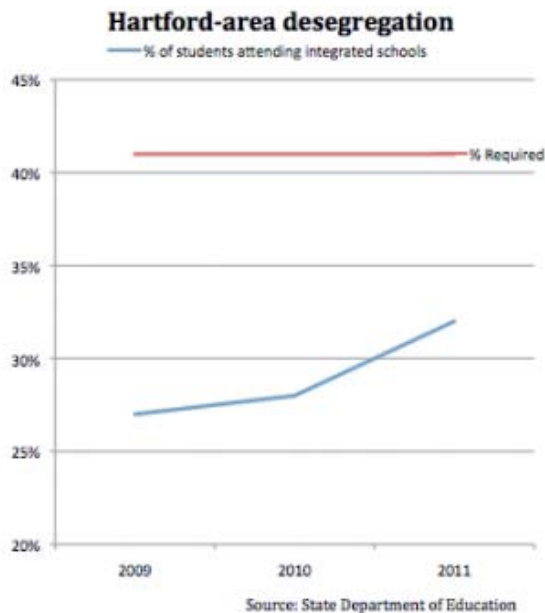


## With deadline looming, state still far from finish line on integrating Hartford schools

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November 21, 2011

Connecticut is running out of time to comply with a court order to reduce the racial isolation of Hartford's largely black and Hispanic school population, and it's still far from the finish line.

"They have a lot of work to do to get to where they need to be for next year," said Martha Stone, a lawyer for the plaintiffs in the 1996 Sheff v. O'Neill case that led to the Connecticut Supreme Court's ordering the state to desegregate Hartford schools. "Things need to change."



To comply with the settlement, the state needs to have 41 percent of minority students attending integrated schools by October 2012. If the state doesn't meet that benchmark, it must offer 80 percent of the students who apply to leave their neighborhood school the opportunity to do so.

Figures released by Stone show that just 32 percent of Hartford students are attending integrated schools, and only 67 percent of the students are given the opportunity to leave their neighborhood school.

Education Commissioner Stefan Pryor said last week he is working on how to get the state to where it needs to be. He was unavailable for comment Monday.

A spokesman said the department "is very pleased with the progress that has been made."

Last year, the State Department of Education, under Pryor's predecessor, Mark McQuillan, released a list of initiatives to reduce the education inequities Stone says are the result of this racial isolation of Hartford's 21,699 minority students. But many of those proposals were expensive, and at the time, the state was figuring out how to close a massive budget deficit.

That plan would have provided money to reopen suburban schools that have been closed, with the requirement that 25 percent of their enrollment be Hartford students. It also would have more than doubled current reimbursements for districts that enroll a certain threshold of Hartford students, increase transportation grants to get students to alternative schools and give the education commissioner authority to require suburban districts to enroll Hartford students.

But Stone says that state can get out of this 15-year order with minimal costs.

"There are definitely some low-cost or no-cost options" to get the state into compliance, Stone said. "They just need to be implemented."

She suggests opening new diverse charter schools in the Hartford region and better marketing and filling open seats made available for Hartford students in suburban schools. The state did increase reimbursement rates this school year for suburban districts that offer more seats to Hartford students.