

# Hartford Courant

Connecticut Education

## **Thousands Disappointed In Hartford Region's School Choice Lottery; Three New Magnet Schools Planned**

**Of Nearly 16,000 Seeking To Enroll In Open Choice Or Magnet Schools, Only 4,153 Win Places**

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More than 11,000 children were turned down in the first round of the school choice lottery for the Hartford area, but the state has asked the Capitol Region Education Council to open three new magnet schools.

According to state numbers made available Monday night, 15,789 students entered the Greater Hartford Regional School Choice lottery — up nearly 21 percent from last year.

Of those applicants, about one-fourth won a spot — 3,758 in interdistrict magnet schools and 395 in the state's Open Choice program. Under Open Choice, city students can seek a spot in a suburban classroom, and suburban public school students can apply to attend Hartford public schools. About 5,700 of the applicants were from Hartford, and about 10,000 were from the suburbs.

Bruce Douglas, executive director of CREC, said Tuesday that three weeks ago the state asked the agency to open three new magnet schools. Douglas said there will be another lottery in mid-May to fill these schools, which will have about 600 seats and will open in September.

Douglas declined to discuss the sites for the three schools, but said they will include two schools for the performing arts — one for young children and the other for middle-schoolers. "We will start the children on stringed instruments and dancing early on," Douglas said. "We are in the process of getting violins and cellos right now." The third school will be a high school in Hartford partnered with Two Rivers Middle School in East Hartford.

Douglas said he understands that the state also hopes to add another 100 seats in the Open Choice program.

Jim Polites, a spokesman for the state Department of Education, said that so far about 560 students chosen for magnet schools in the first round declined the placement, so the state will fill those seats as well.

### **10,000 Disappointed Children**

Even with these additional seats, that still leaves about 10,000 disappointed children.

Marsha McKenzie was so excited when she received the letter on her children's lottery applications to magnet schools in Hartford — until she opened it.

"Neither got in," said McKenzie, of New Britain. "It's disappointing, so disappointing."

Her daughter and son are only 2 and 3 years old, but McKenzie hoped to get them into preschool programs at magnet schools. For several of the schools, her children are on waiting lists that number in the hundreds. "So there's definitely no possibility there," McKenzie said. "The whole process is just insane, absolutely insane."

Viviana Torres of Hartford had good news from the lottery. Her daughter, Andrea Mass, 8, was placed in the R.J. Kinsella Magnet School of Performing Arts — Torres' first choice. "I have to say I was lucky," said Torres. "I

was praying all the time."

Paul Diego Holzer, executive director of Achieve Hartford!, a nonprofit agency that promotes excellence in Hartford public schools, said, "It's elation and disappointment on both sides."

"It's clear that in this city, magnet schools still represent the majority of the best schools, so it's hard for parents to swallow," Holzer said. "They still have a relatively small chance of getting in. The numbers speak for themselves."

Rep. Douglas McCrory, D-Hartford, said it's unfortunate for students to feel "I have to hit the lottery to get a good education."

McKenzie said she'll apply again next year for her children or possibly try again in the May lottery for the three new schools. Her older daughter, Serena Simmons, applied three or four times for admission to a magnet school before winning a spot at the Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy, where she now is a sixth-grader.

"I wish all the schools were great, so that one child getting picked didn't mean that the other will be disadvantaged," McKenzie said. "I wish everything was similar in terms of the opportunity, and you didn't have to go through this ordeal."

Avon parent Ben Colman had mixed results. His oldest son won a spot at the Academy of Aerospace and Engineering in Bloomfield, but his two younger sons, aged 5 and 9, did not get into any magnet schools and are way down on the waiting lists. Colman said all three children will go to school in Avon in September, but they might apply again to magnet schools next spring.

## **Integration Goals**

The state's lottery effort is driven by the Sheff v. O'Neill desegregation case. The state can meet the Sheff terms if, by October 2012, 80 percent of Hartford students who apply to an integrated magnet school or Open Choice program are accepted; or if at least 41 percent of Hartford minority students are enrolled in integrated schools.

Martha Stone, one of the lawyers for the plaintiffs in the Sheff case, said that right now about 32 percent of Hartford's minority students are enrolled in integrated schools.

She said the huge number of applicants shows there is "real interest" among families and students "in getting a quality integrated education ... outside of their home district. ... We have known Hartford and suburban students are clamoring for these options, and they need to get developed at a faster pace."

Increasing the number of seats in the Open Choice program would be the simplest way to do this, she said. She said the education commissioner needs to have the authority to secure seats in the suburbs when there is space available.

The state "can't just leave it up to the districts' goodwill," Stone said, "because so far their goodwill hasn't produced enough spaces."

Polites said the number of Open Choice seats is 395 this year, up from 170 last year.