

School Choice Lottery Poorly Managed, Critics Say Odds are against winning an 'Open Choice' seat, yet some seats still unfilled this year

By Kathleen Megan, November 16, 2011

Diana Turner's son, Travis, is thriving at Two Rivers Magnet Middle School in East Hartford, but her daughter, Arianna, has missed out on a chance for a magnet school four years in a row and, Turner said, is not challenged at a parochial school.

"It's a little bit disheartening, a little bit sad," said Turner, a New Britain resident, who nonetheless will submit an application again on her daughter's behalf. "My son has had it so easy. My daughter is just as bright, has just as much talent. Unless we fight for it, she's not going to have these opportunities."

Keisha Belcher of Hartford went to Plainville High School through the former Project Concern program back in the 1990s. Now she hopes to get her 3-year-old daughter into a suburban school — she'd like Windsor or Plainville districts — through the state's Open Choice program or to get her admitted to a magnet school for next year. "I'm a little nervous because she might not get a seat," said Belcher. "If she doesn't get a seat, I'll have to put her in the Hartford public schools."

The annual high-stakes game of chance is again warming up — a lottery that offers about a one-third chance of success for applicants hoping to attend a magnet school or a school in the suburbs through the choice program.

"There's really no way to handicap this thing," said Jim Caradonio, who is bureau chief of the Greater Hartford Regional School Choice Office. "It's roughly 33 percent, but I tell people, if they don't apply, they have a zero chance."

Last year, 13,000 students applied for 4,000 seats, Caradonio said.

'A Management Problem'

Some advocates for the regional choice program say that if the state improved its management of the program, more seats would be available for students through the Open Choice program in the suburbs, and placements would be made efficiently and promptly.

Bruce Douglas, executive director of the Capitol Region Education Council, said more should be done to help Hartford parents learn about the suburban schools available to their children through Open Choice.

"Many of the parents are applying for schools they don't know anything about," said Douglas. "I think it's not a respectful way to approach this." In addition, Douglas said the lottery has occurred too late in the school year — he said it was April last year — and decisions are made too slowly. Some suburban schools have unfilled openings for Open Choice students this year, he said.

"We are not facilitating the program in a way that makes it attractive for parents to select Open Choice," Douglas said. "The towns have made more seats available than are being filled... This is not a problem with local school districts. This is a management problem."

Martha Stone, one of the attorneys for the plaintiffs in the Sheff v. O'Neill school desegregation case, said, "Open Choice holds the promise of the state meeting its mandate" to achieve school integration targets, but "there has been a tremendous delay in getting the kids into the Open Choice program when there have been openings in the suburban districts."

Stone said the Open Choice program "needs to be given higher priority by the state Department of Education," including more staffing and better computer technology services. The marketing is not nearly as robust as it needs to be."

Mark Linabury, spokesman for the state Department of Education, said the state's regional choice office is "working closely with CREC to improve the Open Choice program.

Clearly [there are] any number of hurdles that need to be overcome. We've enjoyed a collaborative arrangement with CREC... We're committed to support the program."

Education Commissioner Stefan Pryor was not available for comment.