



Controversial ads to keep students in Hartford likely to resume

Jacqueline Rabe Thomas - October 18, 2011

Unfazed by the backlash sparked by a similar campaign, Hartford's school board is expected today to endorse new television and radio advertising urging city parents to forgo the opportunity to send their children to suburban schools.

"The intent is still to highlight the quality options that are here in Hartford," said Christina Kishimoto, the school superintendent. "We need to provide a lot more information than we currently do about our Hartford options."

The board will be asked to approve another \$183,500 contract to begin another wave of ads. "As a superintendent of schools, I do not want my students to leave Hartford," she said. "I certainly want our families to understand all their [school] choice options."

Those options include schools run by Kishimoto. "Why risk [your children's] future on a lottery and then a waiting list?...They don't need to go anywhere else," the last advertisement says.

But that message is infuriating the lawyers for the plaintiffs in the Sheff vs. O'Neill case, which resulted in a state Supreme Court order for the state to reduce the inequities caused by racial isolation in Hartford schools. The approach the state has taken to attempt to comply with that ruling has been to desegregate the schools and send students to racially integrated regional magnet and suburban schools. Officials also encourage white suburban schools to accept more Hartford minority students under a transfer program known as Open Choice.

"There should not be a campaign encouraging students not to participate in these amazing education opportunities," said Martha Stone, one of the Sheff lawyers, who hopes the Hartford School Board rejects the proposal to extend the ad campaign. "It's a negative campaign telling students to choose our schools, not theirs."

But it seems Kishimoto has the votes to get the ads back on air, just in time as students begin applying for schools outside Hartford for next school year.

"I am concerned," said Brad Noel, one of the few board members expected to vote against renewing the contract. "We will not have any control over what message they put out there. This last ad was offensive. It was a very strong 'Choose Hartford and not anything else.'"

Kishimoto disagrees, saying it's intended to spread the message that students don't have to leave the city to get a quality education. "If they're opting out of Hartford because they feel they cannot find a quality school in Hartford, then yes, I would not want that to be a reason. ... I want families to understand the quality options they have in the city of Hartford," she said.

While the school system has made progress in recent years, they still are among the state's bottom-performing districts. For example, one out of every ten high school students drop out of school each year and just 34 percent of the city's third graders are proficient in reading on the Connecticut Mastery Test.

Jim Carodonio, who runs the Regional School Choice Office that is responsible for marketing all the alternatives Hartford students have, says he is not worried about these advertisements.

"Whenever you offer choice and there's competition, obviously they are going to want to protect their marketshare. So that's what they're doing," he said. "Look we are trying to get them to leave their school. They don't want that and are telling people to stay in Hartford."

He actually sees these advertisements as just another avenue to better inform parents of their vast options when deciding where to send their students. For example, parents with elementary school-aged children have 34 school options to apply for enrollment.

About 27 percent of Hartford students currently attend choice schools, and to comply with the Supreme Court ruling the state needs to increase that number to 41 percent by next year.

Kishimoto said this \$183,500 her district plans to spend on advertisements is pale in comparison to the millions the RESCO office has to market their schools.

"Their brochures are glossy and they can put their ads into movie theaters and on tv, and we are nowhere near having funds for anything like that," she said. "We surely attracted a lot of attention with the last Choose Hartford approach ...I don't think [a decreased interest in choice schools] is something you can blame on a small choose Hartford campaign."

Opponents of these advertisements will have to get used to them, because Kishimoto says they are necessary and she will continue to push for them.

"As long as we are running a portfolio of schools we will need to market our schools every year," she said.