

## School Ad Campaign Raises Eyebrows

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HARTFORD —

On Easter evening, school board member Elizabeth Brad Noel was sitting in a mostly empty theater at Bow-Tie Cinemas on New Park Avenue to watch the Disney nature documentary “African Cats,” when a pre-film advertisement appeared on the big screen.

The ad: Numbered balls roll about in a lottery cage. Then the winning ball emerges. It reads “NO” in red letters.

“Your child’s education is a right, and not a game,” Doreen Cunningham, a teacher at Parkville Community School, tells the camera. “Why risk their future on a lottery and then a waiting list?”

The camera cuts to city classrooms with a diverse group of seemingly happy and alert students.

“At Hartford public schools, we guarantee your child a place in one of your school choices. We also provide all students with a college-ready education,” Cunningham says. “They don’t need to go anywhere else.”

Meaning: They don’t need to attend the state-supported, out-of-district, “open choice” magnet schools, which held their lotteries earlier this month.

A recent press release from the school system was even more blunt, urging Hartford families to “avoid the temptation to gamble with their children’s future” and sign up for a city school rather than accept a spot on the magnet waiting lists.

The schools’ “Choose Hartford” media campaign has included ads on local radio, broadcast TV, Spanish-language Univision and Telemundo, and in newspapers such as the West Indian American, the Courant and La Voz Hispana.

They coincide with letters Hartford parents have been receiving from the school system this week that notify them of their children’s placement under the city’s own choice program. The deadline for parents to accept that placement is May 15. The number of children who enroll ultimately determines funding for Hartford schools.

But not everyone is pleased with the tone of the “Choose Hartford” campaign.

“Anti-magnet schools” is the impression Noel got from the advertisement, “which I did not approve of,” she told administrators at a board meeting.

Martha Stone, an attorney representing the plaintiffs in the landmark Sheff v. O’Neill desegregation case, said in a statement Thursday that it was “really disturbing to see the Hartford school system discourage parents and kids from exercising their constitutional right to an equal educational opportunity... .

“The Sheff lawsuit is about access to integrated quality schools,” Stone said.

The state would have preferred “a more positive marketing message,” said state Department of Education spokesman Tom Murphy, who also noted that “Hartford is working very hard to retain its students” and “competition is intense.”

The school system paid Bauzá & Associates, an Asylum Street firm that bills itself as a specialist in marketing

to Hispanics, \$167,550 for the media campaign that began earlier this year — first to remind parents to submit their top four school choices, and now to accept their child's school placement by the deadline, said David Medina, the schools' spokesman.

Medina said the tone of the campaign is straightforward: "We have excellent schools for your children. We have the numbers and CMT test scores to show it, that our kids are moving up. And that's all we're saying."

Bruce Douglas, executive director of the Capitol Region Education Council, which runs magnet schools in Greater Hartford, said he has seen the advertisements and is not bothered by them.

"Actually, it's a sign of the times," Douglas said. "Parents have a choice between magnet schools and charter schools and city schools, and this is the future of what's to come. Schools really have to provide a first-rate product.... In some sense, I suppose schools would be competitive."

He compared the rivalry to "Pepsi vs. Coke."

"It's about time," Douglas said.