

State Barely Improves In Efforts To Reduce Racial Isolation

Lack of progress disappoints plaintiffs in the Sheff desegregation lawsuit

By GRACE E. MERRITT, gmerritt@courant.com

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HARTFORD —

The state Department of Education slightly improved its rate of desegregation in Hartford schools over the past year, but fell short of its goal to have 35 percent of students educated in a diverse setting.

The lack of progress disappointed plaintiffs in the Sheff desegregation lawsuit.

Under the court-ordered desegregation agreement in the Sheff v. O'Neill case, the state must reach certain benchmarks over the course of five years to better integrate schools.

The state released statistics for year three of the agreement Tuesday. They show that 27.7 percent of Hartford students are learning in integrated settings, a slight increase over last year's rate of 27 percent. "We're really extremely disappointed," said Martha Stone, the attorney representing the plaintiffs. "I think it's a dismal result for this year. I think that there has to be a much more aggressive response both from state Department of Education and the legislature."

Education department spokesman Tom Murphy said the department understands that the increase is small, but pointed out that this year's goal is an internal benchmark, not an official court order. Murphy said three Hartford schools have fallen out of compliance with the racial balancing quota. Once those schools are brought back into compliance, the numbers should improve. He said the department is also holding sessions to inform parents about school choices and options.

The State Board of Education will propose several bills to help integrate schools in and around Hartford. One proposal, which failed last year, would give the education commissioner the power to force suburban school districts to accept more Hartford minority students through the Project Choice program. The state proposes increasing the \$2,500-per-child payment the state pays the suburb for educating those children.

The desegregation agreement stems from the 14-year-old Sheff v. O'Neill case, which found that children attending Hartford schools were racially, ethnically and economically isolated in violation of the state constitution. Under the Sheff agreement, a school with a mostly minority population must be at least 25 percent white. Conversely, a mostly white school must have at least 25 percent minority students.