

SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

Five-Year Plan For Desegregating Hartford-Area Schools Presented

By JODIE MOZDZER | The Hartford Courant

January 7, 2009

The state Department of Education has released a report outlining how it plans to desegregate Hartford-area schools over the next five years — a plan that requires \$49 million in its first two years to succeed — at a time when the state is already facing large budget deficits.

The Comprehensive Management Plan is part of the latest agreement in the 1996 Sheff v. O'Neill school desegregation lawsuit. The agreement, approved last spring, aims to satisfy 80 percent of Hartford students who seek a spot in a racially diverse school by 2013-14, when the agreement ends.

If that figure is not reached, at least 41 percent of Hartford students must attend a desegregated school by that year to satisfy the terms of the agreement.

The management plan gives specific answers about how the state plans to reach that goal. It calls for a mix of expanding existing programs, creating new magnet and charter schools, beefing up support for the programs and collecting data on the progress.

For example, the management plan aims to increase the percentage of Hartford students attending racially diverse schools each year. The plan calls for 27 percent of Hartford students to attend integrated schools next year.

The plan also calls for making all existing magnet schools compliant with the Sheff v. O'Neill decision, meaning that non-minority students should make up no more than 25 percent of a school's enrollment. Five of the 21 magnet schools in the region did not meet the standard this year, according to the report.

If the state achieves those two goals, about 30 percent of Hartford's minority students would be attending integrated schools without requiring the opening of new schools, according to the report.

But the goals require money. To entice suburban schools to accept more Hartford students during the next five years, the state Department of Education hopes to increase its payments to the suburbs from \$2,500 a student to \$3,000 to \$6,000 next year. The proposal also calls for giving grants of \$35,000 to \$75,000 to school districts that enroll Hartford students.

State Rep. Andrew M. Fleischmann, D- [West Hartford](#), co-chairman of the General Assembly's education committee, said he does not view the Sheff funding as optional.

"The General Assembly last year approved this agreement. We have a legal and a moral obligation to uphold the agreement, and I will be supporting the funding needed to do that," Fleischmann said.

The Sheff v. O'Neill case has been a long and complicated battle. Civil rights groups filed a lawsuit on behalf of 17 schoolchildren in 1989, with Milo Sheff, then 10, serving as the lead plaintiff.

In 1996, the state Supreme Court ruled that the segregation of Hartford's schools violated the state constitution, but it was not until 2003 that the first court settlement was approved.

It expired last summer, far short of its goal of having 30 percent of Hartford students attending racially integrated schools by 2007. Only 9 percent did, according to a report by [Trinity College](#) researchers.

The state and plaintiffs are more optimistic that the goals will be met this time around.

"We've been waiting for a plan for over 20-something years," said Martha Stone, one of the plaintiffs' attorneys. "And so we are heartened that finally the state has developed a plan. And we are also heartened that the plan contained in its form the provisions we had negotiated as part of the stipulation."

[Thomas Murphy](#), a spokesman for the state Department of Education, said a major difference in the latest agreement is the creation of a regional school choice office and the addition of the 80 percent demand stipulation.

"Under the first stipulated agreement, everyone saw their roles differently, and certainly had their own issues," Murphy said. "Now we expect there to be a better coordination."

Stone said that the plaintiffs still have some comments and concerns they want to share with the state. She declined to say what the concerns were while the plaintiffs continue to review the report.