

School Reform Misses Interdistrict Opportunities

By MARTHA STONE | COMMENTARY

The Hartford Courant, 6:22 PM EDT, May 25, 2012

Conspicuously absent from the General Assembly's recent debate over education reform and the need to close the state's worst in the nation achievement gap between poor and more affluent students was any mention of the Connecticut Supreme Court's decision in the Sheff v. O'Neill desegregation case and its constitutional mandate for quality integrated education.

Now, as the state Education Commissioner Stefan Pryor implements the education reform bill proposed and signed by Gov. Dannel P. Malloy, he must also take on discussions surrounding the end of a five-year court order in the Sheff case, which should lead to more court-ordered stipulations to bring Hartford's schools into compliance.

Ignored in the discussions among legislators, educators and the governor was the stark evidence that Sheff magnet schools run by the Capitol Region Education Council and Hartford Public Schools have closed the achievement gap for urban students. And disregarded by non-urban legislators was the fact that in January, more than 10,000 students from their districts applied to these integrated quality magnet schools. Also missing in their dialogue was recognition of urban students' achievements in suburban schools through the Open Choice program.

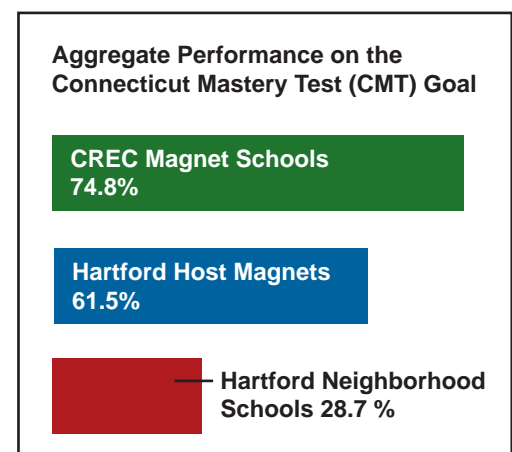
That these advances were made by sending urban students to the suburban schools and to interdistrict magnets and drawing suburban students to magnets outside their districts, surely points to the broader solution, which, inexplicitly, despite all this progress, is the elephant in the room — regionalization of the schools around Hartford and across the state.

Other troubled systems would clearly benefit from the solutions being applied in Hartford. One or two "turnaround schools" will not do anything for students in Bridgeport, for example, where the words "equal educational opportunity" ring hollow. This was the opportune time for the legislature to apply the lessons learned from Sheff statewide as part of achievement gap remedial measures.

Instead, 1,000 segregated preschool slots were created without an overall plan to ensure that the gains made by our youngest students wouldn't be lost when they entered kindergarten in their poor-performing neighborhood schools. Why was there no discussion about attaching these pre-K opportunities to interdistrict options?

The same is true for charter schools. Rather than creating a parallel, segregated system, the legislature had a chance to embrace charter schools as part of an interdistrict remedy by changing statutes to allow these schools to receive the same construction and transportation reimbursements as the magnets.

Even last year's successful venture by the legislature to raise the number of Hartford students going to schools in the suburbs through the Open Choice program by increasing payments to suburban districts



was not considered for other parts of the state. Another missed chance, as incontrovertible national research shows that — when going to schools across district lines — poor and minority children make gains, academic and otherwise.

Lost chances at best, and huge oversights at worst.

Unfortunately, urban reform efforts were primarily limited to those that could occur within the existing four school walls. Not all bad. Another tool in the toolbox. But let's be honest. The debate is long past whether poor kids can learn. Shuffling poor children around and adding some extra supports will get us some progress, whether in charters or "turnaround schools." But research shows that if there are overwhelming concentrations of poor children (i.e. 100 percent of the class is below the poverty line), it won't be enough "progress" and it won't be fast enough.

To be more specific, the free and reduced lunch population (the proxy measure for poverty) of Jamoke Academy and Achievement First — the state's two most touted, successful charter schools — is only 72 percent and 68 percent respectively. They are educating poor children but in an economically diverse population. Contrast this to the Hartford public schools in general, where 93 percent of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch, or Bridgeport, where 99 percent qualify.

Separating the scores of the Sheff-mandated Hartford host magnets from the overall scores of Hartford public schools proves the point. Although Hartford students are thriving in the city-run magnets (and in the Capitol Region Education Council magnets), the real story is that Hartford faces continued obstacles to making gains for those left behind in their non-magnet neighborhood schools.

A telling indicator is the aggregate performance on the Connecticut Mastery Test goal:

- Hartford Host Magnets: 61.5 percent
- CREC Magnet Schools: 74.8 percent
- Hartford Neighborhood Schools: 28.7 percent

Is it too late? Never. Quietly inserted into the legislative mandates for "turnaround schools" was a "magnet school" option. The momentum for changing the educational model is with us. The commissioner has an occasion to take a stand. The next legislative session is a long one. Let's not lose another opportunity to make progress.

Martha Stone is the executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy and one of the lead attorneys for the plaintiffs in Sheff v. O'Neill.