

New Settlement In Hartford's Sheff Desegregation Lawsuit

By ARIELLE LEVIN BECKER And COLIN POITRAS | Courant Staff Writers

Nearly two decades after the Sheff v. O'Neill lawsuit was filed, the parties in Hartford's longstanding school desegregation case have reached a tentative settlement that seeks to reshape how the state addresses persistent racial isolation in Hartford schools.

Friday's accord opens the door to greater participation beyond the city limits, anticipating measures such as building magnet schools in Hartford-area suburbs and expanding the number of slots for Hartford students in suburban public schools, as well as in racially integrated preschools and technical and agricultural high schools.

It also attempts to tackle some of the logistical problems that critics say have stalled efforts, streamlining the application process to magnet schools, increasing academic and social support for Hartford students who attend schools in other districts and improving student transportation.

The tentative settlement must now get through the legislature and receive approval from a state judge. Other key elements include calls for the state to create a comprehensive plan to address racial isolation and a role for the plaintiffs in overseeing the desegregation efforts.

An information center, to be housed in a Regional School Choice Office, would offer a sort of one-stop shopping for families interested in all interdistrict programs and market available programs to increase interest.

Attorney General [Richard Blumenthal](#) said the efforts defined in the settlement — improving existing magnet schools, expanding slots for Hartford students in suburban schools and establishing cooperative oversight — would foster greater progress than the earlier settlements.

"Ultimately the proof is in action and accomplishment, not abstract provisions or concepts on paper," he said. "It has to work in the schools even more than in the courts."

Martha Stone, executive director for the Center for Children's Advocacy at the University of Connecticut School of Law and one of the plaintiffs' attorneys, said having a comprehensive plan and many of the specific steps outlined in the settlement would advance a case that began in 1989.

"The progress has been unacceptably slow up to this point in time, so we're really hoping that the structure that we're putting in place will really continue to jump-start the effort and get the children what they are constitutionally entitled to," Stone said.

Past efforts to integrate Hartford schools have fallen short.

A settlement reached in 2003, following a 1996 court order to desegregate Hartford schools, called for increasing racial integration through voluntary enrollment in city and regional magnet schools and allowing Hartford students to enroll in suburban schools. The settlement set a goal of having 30 percent of Hartford students attend racially integrated schools by 2007.

But by last year, when the settlement expired, the state was far short of that goal. According to a report by [Trinity College](#) researchers, only 9 percent of Hartford students attended schools that would be considered racially integrated under the Sheff case. Even using a more generous definition, only 17 percent of students could be considered to attend integrated schools, the report found.

Progress also fell short in the Open Choice program, through which Hartford students attend schools in mostly white suburban districts. Enrollment was intended to reach 1,600 students but missed the mark by more than 500 children in 2007, according to the report.

Suburban participation in the desegregation efforts will remain voluntary, but the settlement tasks the education commissioner to "use his best efforts to encourage suburban school districts" to expand their participation in Open Choice.

That includes allowing the commissioner to conduct an independent review of the space available in suburban districts if he believes a district has more capacity than it reports, and to propose legislative changes if necessary.

State Sen. Thomas P. Gaffey, D- [Meriden](#), co-chairman of the legislature's education committee, said he believes the latest plan has a better chance of succeeding than any other in the past decade.

"Sheff is just so important," Gaffey said. "All of us in the legislature realize that. It is not an issue we want to leave unaddressed."

But if the latest initiative fails, Gaffey said, the time may come for the legislature to give state Education Commissioner Mark K. McQuillan greater authority to make sure the integration goals are met. Last fall, McQuillan suggested he would like the authority to force suburban districts to accept more Hartford students, "if all else fails."

While the accord lays out a process for the construction of new magnet schools in the suburbs, it does not spell out specific plans or funding levels. Officials over the past few months have said magnets in the suburbs might do a better job attracting white students than schools built in the city.

The settlement makes it possible for the quasi-public Capitol Region Education Council, which now runs a number of the magnet schools in and around Hartford, to be an active player in helping negotiate desegregation initiatives between the city and surrounding towns.

Bruce E. Douglas, CREC's executive director, said the latest plan was "more detailed and more descriptive" than any previous plan, giving participants a clear strategy for resolving longstanding issues.

"It spells out how the partnership will work," Douglas said. "It's very prescriptive toward its timelines and benchmarks for achievement."

Hartford School Superintendent Steven J. Adamowksi said Hartford looks forward to working with its suburban towns in carrying out the proposed plan.

"Hartford has been a leader in the regional desegregation required by Sheff," Adamowski said. "And we hope the stipulated agreement, however it is finalized, will serve to engage the suburban towns in the region to match Hartford's efforts by developing a comparable number of magnet schools in the suburban towns."

The accord also spells out a new way of defining success.

While the current benchmarks measure the percentage of all Hartford students that attend racially integrated schools, the settlement uses a measure based on meeting the needs of students who want to attend such a school. By 2012, for example, at least 80 percent of Hartford students seeking spots in racially integrated schools must be accommodated under the agreement.

Still, if the state does not meet that goal, it could remain in compliance with the settlement if at least 41 percent of Hartford schoolchildren attend racially integrated schools.

A tentative accord reached in the case last year called for spending \$112 million over five years to create magnet, charter and vocational-technical schools. But legislators refused to ratify it.

With the proposed settlement stymied, the plaintiffs filed a motion to return the case to court. A trial was held last fall, showcasing a wide range of views on the case, but the judge held off on a ruling until the legislature addressed the pending settlement. Last month, the settlement was withdrawn before the legislature could act as the parties continued working on a new plan.

State Rep. Andrew M. Fleischmann, D- [West Hartford](#), co-chairman of the education committee, praised the new settlement. "I'm sensing broad support in the legislature," Fleischmann said.

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