

# Hartford Courant

COMMENTARY

## Magnets And Choice Can Close Education Gap

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Feb. 8 promises to be an important date in this year's legislative calendar. Gov. Dannel P. Malloy has guaranteed an unveiling of his education reform package to close the achievement gap between low-income students and their peers. Connecticut, the wealthiest state in the nation per capita, should be embarrassed by its ranking as No. 1 on the achievement gap chart.



The governor has promised "bold" proposals. If he really wants to change "the Land of Steady Habits," the most bold action would be to take up the gauntlet thrown down 16 years ago by the Connecticut Supreme Court's decision in *Sheff v. O'Neill*, where the court found that the state's "school districting scheme ... is unconstitutional."

It has become politically correct to talk about regional water, police, fire and transportation boards. Why are we so afraid to put forth proposals to regionalize our school systems except for those in the most rural or semi-rural places?

If we really want to reduce the achievement gap, we should build on the successful education experiment in the General Assembly's backyard in Hartford and surrounding towns. Expanding the number of magnet schools opened under the *Sheff* decree and bolstering the number of spaces available in the suburban Open Choice schools would reduce redundancy and costs to the state and create educational opportunities for all Connecticut children.

The *Sheff* magnet schools have accomplished just what the state wants — some have actually eliminated the achievement gap entirely in the crucial third grade year. Others have dramatically narrowed the gap and given students access to high-quality educational programs that are producing life-changing results. Data from the National Coalition on School Diversity shows the proof.

The Open Choice program, a less costly alternative where low-income minority students attend school in suburban districts, shows similar success with better graduation rates and life outcomes. The lottery for entrance into the Open Choice and *Sheff* magnet schools for next year just closed. There are 16,000 Hartford and suburban students applying to go outside of their neighborhood schools for a better educational opportunity. That should tell us something.

We are not naïve enough to believe a regional network of schools will occur overnight, but we are approaching the 16th anniversary of the Supreme Court decision and year five of the court order. What better time to marry *Sheff* initiatives with those aimed at closing the achievement gap? By doing so, we can reduce racial and economic isolation and address the needs of low-achieving students.

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Be bold, Gov. Malloy. Consider how some of your proposals can be implemented in a way that will ensure fairness and provide equal educational opportunity for all Connecticut students:

1. You're putting state and federal money into enhanced early childhood and pre-kindergarten programs. Don't allow them to be created in a way that separates low-income children of color into separate schools based on town of residence. Put strong financial incentives in place to regionalize such programs to allow for racial, ethnic and economic integration.
2. You advocate increasing the number of charter schools in Connecticut. Encourage innovation and reduce racial and economic isolation by assuring that any new charter schools satisfy the mandate of the state's highest court. Give the proposed schools the same entitlement to school construction and transportation reimbursement as interdistrict magnet schools as long as they participate in the Sheff agenda.
3. You want to increase suburban participation in the Open Choice program. Almost 4,000 Hartford students are clamoring for a coveted spot next year. Propose legislation to give the state Department of Education commissioner the authority to require suburban districts to make open seats available at all levels, rather than allowing them to continue their paltry participation.
4. You want to address the achievement gap in the entire state. Do in Bridgeport what has been successfully accomplished in Hartford. The state already has taken over the Bridgeport school system — begin to implement Sheff-type initiatives there. We don't need to keep low-income children in separate schools to close the achievement gap. Just the opposite.

What are we waiting for? Milo Sheff was 10 when we filed this lawsuit. His child is now in fourth grade.

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