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SHEFF MANDATE IMPERILED Don't Let Budget Undo Hartford's Education Gains

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Two decades of hard-won progress toward giving Hartford's schoolchildren desegregated, equal educational opportunity will be unraveled if the budget submitted to the General Assembly by Gov. M. Jodi Rell is approved.

Thousands of schoolchildren have attended city schools as the Sheff v. O'Neill lawsuit, filed April 27, 1989, went through several court battles to win for them the right to a better education. But despite the victory in the state Supreme Court more than 12 years ago, the state's efforts to guarantee these students their constitutional right to an equal educational opportunity have been fitful.

It took another trial more than a year ago, a third mediated settlement agreement by the parties, approval by the legislature and a court order last June before a Comprehensive Management Plan — a blueprint for change — was finally developed by the state to implement progress.

There have been extraordinary gains over the past eight months. Three new, exciting magnet schools were developed by the Capitol Region Education Council, Hartford host magnets have been redefined and expanded, and Project Choice has hundreds on the waiting list with growing enthusiasm by suburban districts to expand their diversity.

A Regional School Choice Office has opened and is staffed to coordinate and streamline these efforts. Most important, the June court order required 19 percent of Hartford's youth to be in a desegregated setting by last Oct. 1 — and the state, for the first time ever, met that goal.

But the governor, in her latest Sheff-related budget requests to the legislature, would stall this positive trajectory. Under her proposal to substantially cut funding for transportation, staffing, and Open Choice and magnet school tuition, the Sheff mandates are threatened once again to become empty promises. Moreover, the state stands to be in serious noncompliance with one of the most important court-approved settlements that will determine the future of our children.

This budget plan puts the next phase of the court-ordered settlement agreement in serious jeopardy. By Oct. 1, the state is required to have 27 percent of Hartford's children in

desegregated settings. To their credit, the state commissioner of education and the State Board of Education recognized their legal obligation and submitted a budget that contained the necessary financial underpinnings to meet the Sheff court mandate. In these economic times, the governor must make difficult choices, but these are unacceptable.

Our legislature now faces its own excruciating challenges over the next few months. We hope our elected officials have the courage to do what's right to fulfill the court mandate.

When the state Supreme Court exhorted that "Every passing day denies these children their constitutional right to a substantially equal educational opportunity," our justices meant "days," not decades. Our children deserve to know they live in a state that honors judicial orders, even in hard times. They deserve to know that they live in a state that provides them what is legally right and what is morally right, even during the most economically stressful periods.

The stakes for them are high. They deserve no less.

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