

Sheff Ship Needs A Captain

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The latest settlement in a 12-year effort to address racial isolation in Hartford schools has apparently come to this novel conclusion: We've got to get white folks involved.

Suburban districts will have a more pronounced role in this new and improved Sheff v. O'Neill agreement. What's missing now is what's been missing since the landmark 1996 desegregation verdict — someone with the authority to penalize districts that decide to take a pass.

The new agreement encourages the suburbs to build theme magnet schools, to help educate Hartford children along with their own. The carrot is a 95 percent state reimbursement.

Also, capacity counts would be conducted regularly on the Open Choice program, which is supposed to make 1,600 suburban school seats available to Hartford kids. In recent years, Open Choice has been often closed amid excuses from some local school chiefs about population increases and state reimbursements, and whether remedial efforts needed for most Hartford kids will be a drag on the suburban districts' test scores.

The new Sheff goal is to accommodate 80 percent of the demand from student applicants seeking new schools by 2013.

"All sides can agree that opening magnets exclusively in Hartford is not going to [promote] integration," said Steve Perry, principal at Capital Preparatory Magnet School in Hartford. "This is a great opportunity for children to attend school in the suburbs, and suburban students to have students from the urban centers in their schools. I also think it's a great opportunity for some of these small suburban communities to build new schools."

Previously the only options were magnets run by Hartford, the Capitol Region Education Council and through Open Choice. Now suburban magnet schools, charter schools and vocational schools would be added to those alternatives.

"The burden is not on Hartford anymore," said Tom Murphy, a spokesman for the state Department of Education. "Other school districts haven't stepped up. This agreement gives them a better opportunity to participate."

And if they don't participate, there should be consequences. Hire someone — or jeez, even empower Education Commissioner Mark McQuillan — to make sure this plan is implemented. C'mon, no more delays. Watching the plaintiffs running back to the judge every few years is getting to be a bore.

Martha Stone, a plaintiff's attorney, said the Sheff side unsuccessfully negotiated for a "special master" with the authority to make it happen.

"We instead got greater accountability by the state, and we inserted the plaintiff numerous times in the implementation process so we could have a more hands-on look and the ability to enforce the provisions of the agreement at a quicker point in time."

There's a lot to like with this latest Sheff phase, including an edict that a comprehensive management plan be crafted to chart progress, develop student support, address funding needs and add clarity to the application process and transportation issues. What's missing is the legislative will to grant broader authority to McQuillan.

"If all else fails, the commissioner is interested in having the authority to step in and say [to the suburbs], 'This is your responsibility, too,'" Murphy said.

If this latest five-year plan doesn't work by 2013, it will be 17 unfulfilled years since the promise of 1996.

Let's saddle up the commish — ASAP. And let him ride this thing to the finish line.

Stan Simpson's column appears on Wednesdays and Saturdays. He can be heard live Saturday on WTIC NewsTalk 1080 from 5:30 a.m. to 10 a.m.