



## Letting parents know the odds of getting into a magnet school

Jacqueline Rabe Thomas - October 17, 2011

It took Paola Arrospide four years to get her daughter out of a low-performing Hartford public school and enrolled in a magnet school.

"I started screaming when we received news she got in," said Arrospide, a baker from the South End of Hartford. "We won the lottery finally."

But the odds of that lottery never were clear to the Arrospide, whose daughter was one of about 13,000 students who apply every year for a seat in the Hartford area's non-traditional public schools or a chance to attend a suburban school under a voluntary choice program.

That's about to change. Starting this school year, the state will begin measuring what percentage of Hartford Public School students are turned away from attending an alternative to their local school. The measurement is an attempt to meet a requirement of the settlement in Sheff vs. O'Neill, which produced an order by the state Supreme Court that the state to reduce inequities caused by racial isolation in Hartford's schools.

To comply, the state needs to provide 80 percent of the Hartford students that apply to attend non-traditional public schools the opportunity to do so, or have 41 percent of minority students attending integrated schools by next October. The change could help Arrospide, who two other children in a school where test results show students' achievement levels are significantly below state standards.

"Maybe it won't take as long to get them in a better school," she said. "I'm not holding my breath though." Arrospide's story is common. Hundreds of parents and their children flooded a fair at a Hartford vocational technical high school over the weekend to apply for a seat in one of the magnet, vocational or charter schools or other choice programs. Many of them had stories of going through the same routine for years.

"We are in a business where we can't satisfy everyone. So parents come back next year and the next and the next until their child gets in," said James Caradonio, who heads the Greater Hartford Regional School Choice Office, which is responsible for the lottery.

Last year, the state fell well short of meeting the 41 percent requirement, with just 27 percent of minority students attending integrated schools. Results of this year's demographic breakdown will be released by Nov. 15. It's currently anyone's best guess how many of those 13,000 students wanting to leave their local schools actually had the opportunity to do so.

Martha Stone, a lawyer for the Sheff plaintiffs, said she suspects that state is turning too many students away. "Thousands of kids are not getting the type of education they are entitled too still," she said while touring the School Choice Fair over the weekend, adding this requirement of reporting how much demand is being fulfilled will only further highlight how the state is doing.

Caradonio said he cannot guess what the Nov. 15 numbers will show, but said one truth remains -- students have a better choice of getting into another school if they apply than if they stop applying because they are frustrated it is taking so long.

"If you don't play, your odds are zero percent," he said. "Keep applying, and apply to multiple schools." Arrospide is already following his advice, and has applied for five magnet schools for each of her two children still in a Hartford Public School.

"It's all about luck," she said. "I am hoping my luck changes soon for my son and daughter."