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## City Students Need More Seats In Suburban Schools State Must Boost Open Choice, Magnets, Other Options To Meet Desegregation Goals

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April 4, 2010

To fulfill the Connecticut Supreme Court's mandate to reduce racial and ethnic isolation in Hartford's schools, the state's Open Choice program must be expanded dramatically.

There are 1,239 Hartford students now going to suburban schools under the program. But the extensive waiting list for inter-district choice transfers is a testament to the desire and need for more suburban seats. A staggering 2,418 Hartford children applied to be a part of the Open Choice program for the school year beginning this fall. Yet sadly, although the state Department of Education requested 1,045 new Open Choice seats for next year, as of this week, the suburban districts have made available only 126 new seats.

This means that the state will fall woefully short of its expectation that 1,800 children would be enrolled in the Open Choice program by the fall.

Meaningful action must be taken immediately. The General Assembly must provide larger amounts of incentive money to suburban districts to prompt them to take more Open Choice applicants. The legislature should also pass a provision proposed by the Sheff v. O'Neill plaintiffs — who won the judgment to end racial and ethnic isolation of students — to allow the state commissioner of education to require districts in the Sheff region to accept Open Choice students. This measure is endorsed by the commissioner and the State Board of Education. The legislature must create and fund new Open Choice seats that would go a long way toward meeting the constitutional requirement for desegregated education, while providing all students in the region with the benefits of a diverse school population.

But Open Choice by itself is not enough. A majority of Hartford's children are still attending racially isolated schools, and the integration goals shared by the Sheff plaintiffs and state and local officials can be reached only by employing every voluntary desegregation method available, including opening up new seats in magnet schools.

State Commissioner of Education Mark McQuillan has recently said, however, that funding the construction of new magnet schools as a means of providing a superior education to children in diverse settings has "run its course" and "doesn't make sense anymore."

These statements are puzzling and disturbing given the popularity of magnet programs, the significant educational benefits they provide to Hartford and suburban children in closing the achievement gap, and their enormous potential to provide desegregated education for students now in racially isolated schools. These programs clearly make sense to the thousands of students on waiting lists to get into the Breakthrough Magnet School, the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts, or any of the other magnet schools that offer programs unavailable

anywhere else in the region. In 2009 alone, more than 9,000 children were placed on waiting lists for magnet schools.

Further, it is difficult to understand how magnet schools can be regarded as having run their course when studies done by the state Department of Education show that they are "raising the educational attainment level of participating students throughout the state through high-quality, racially/economically integrated education." An earlier study by the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School showed that diverse schools, such as the magnets in the Hartford region, result in improved math and reading achievement, improved critical thinking and reduced racial stereotyping.

Others resist expanding existing magnet schools on the ground that they do not attract enough white suburban students to meet integration goals. But data belies that assertion, as almost half of the suburban applicants to Capitol Region Education Council magnet schools are white. Instead of relying on any one method, the commissioner and state legislators should be trying to strengthen all the options, including technical schools, vo-ag schools, magnets, charters and Open Choice.

Only with the full support of the legislature, at this critical juncture, can these programs develop to their potential, inspire confidence and increase participation by parents and schoolchildren. Only with legislative support will the Sheff mandate be realized and the court-ordered goals be met.

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