

# Officials: Efforts to reduce racial isolation need overhaul

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The state is still falling far short of compliance with a court order to reduce the racial isolation of Hartford's largely black and Hispanic school population, and advocates say drastic changes will be needed to avoid further legal action.

"State officials need to take this court order much more seriously. If they continue down the same path they will not meet the requirements. They need to do something drastic, and soon," said Martha Stone, one of the lawyers for the plaintiffs in the Sheff vs O'Neill lawsuit. That lawsuit led to the 1996 the state Supreme Court [order](#) to desegregate Hartford schools.

The State Department of Education reported this week just over one quarter of Hartford's 21,713 minority schoolchildren now attend integrated magnet, charter, technical, agricultural or suburban schools - well short of the 35 percent target. By October 2012, the state must have 41 percent of minority students attending integrated schools or provide 80 percent of those students that want to leave their local schools with the opportunity to do so.

The Hartford Board of Education [estimates](#) that currently 62 percent of students that want to leave their schools have the opportunity to do so. The SDOE does not calculate that figure.

"It's a very complicated problem to untangle," Education Commissioner Mark McQuillan told the city school board Tuesday night. "This could rest with the Supreme Court deciding what we have to do... A court-ordered solution might not render the best set of solutions."



Hartford and state school officials discuss flagging efforts to reduce racial isolation in city schools

Since the court order, the state's emphasis - and its money - have mainly gone to building magnet schools with specialty themes such as performing arts or environmental sciences in hopes of attracting a racially-diverse student population. The state has spent almost \$1 billion building these schools in Hartford and in the surrounding communities.

But education leaders and lawmakers are now rejecting that approach, calling it too expensive as the state faces multi-billion [deficits](#) in the coming years.

"We have received as much benefit as we are going to get from building magnet schools," said Sen. [Thomas P. Gaffey](#), D-Meriden and co-chairman of the legislature's Education Committee. "We are not going to build our way into compliance."

Gaffey and McQuillan both say in order to get the state in compliance, enrollment of Hartford students into suburban schools needs to explode.

There are currently 1,300 Hartford students enrolled in suburban schools compared to the nearly 4,200 city minority students [enrolled in magnet](#) schools.

To comply with the court order, 3,500 additional students need to be enrolled in an integrated school, either in Hartford or a nearby district by October 2012. But increasing enrollment in magnet schools cannot be a solution without building new schools. There are 14,500 students on [wait lists](#) to enroll in Hartford's 12 magnet schools right now, Hartford Superintendent Steven Adamowski said.

Adamowski told McQuillan Tuesday night that sending students to suburban schools to comply with the court order would be "detrimental" to the education provided in Hartford.

"For us to send another 3,500 out of our district, you can only imagine what the impact will be," he said, estimating six or seven schools would need to close and several hundred teachers and staff would be shed.

Ada M. Miranda, Hartford's school board chairwoman, also does not support expanding the number of students sent to suburban schools through the Open Choice Program.

"It's a force that is really working against what we're trying to accomplish," she told McQuillan. "Why does Hartford have to loose kids?... Parents seem to like having more opportunities, but the dilemma is we want to keep our kids."

But McQuillan and Gaffey say the state is quickly approaching a deadline to comply, and spending millions to build more magnet schools cannot be an option, so the focus has to be on finding students a spot in suburban schools.

The problem is suburban districts have been slow to accept these students, often blaming the lack of space or insufficient reimbursements from the state for these students. The state currently reimburses suburban districts \$2,500 for each student Hartford student they enroll. McQuillan and the State Board of Education are [proposing](#) increasing that amount up to \$6,000 per student for districts that enroll more students.

Bruce E. Douglas, executive director of the regional organization that manages the Open Choice program that sends students to suburban schools as well as numerous magnet schools, said the answer to desegregate schools is obvious.

"Open choice is cheaper. The state has wrongly chosen to pay for magnet schools at the expense of spending more money to incentivize suburban schools. This \$2,500 reimbursement does not cover the costs for these suburban districts, it has to be increased," he said.

And if the \$6,000 reimbursement education leaders are proposing is not enough of an incentive for districts to begin accepting more or any students, McQuillan wants state lawmakers to grant him the authority to require districts accept more students.

"We need more tools to get into compliance. This is one of them," he said.

That proposal is supported by Gaffey, whose committee will consider it in the upcoming legislative session that begins in January.

"The reality is if you want to solve this dilemma then the commissioner of education has to have that type of power," he said. "This is not going to be solved by just looking for volunteers to open up slots in their schools. Finding the money to provide incentives to them is not likely."

Stone said she hopes lawmakers decide soon what to do, because the current approach is not working.

"They have the freedom to choose how they are going to get into compliance. What they don't have the freedom to do is to continue down this path that will keep them in noncompliance," she said.

- [Education](#)

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