

## **State Department of Education is in its own race to meet terms set by Sheff v. O'Neill desegregation court-approved agreement**

### **CREC Races To Open Three New Schools**

By KATHLEEN MEGAN, kmegan@courant.com

July 24, 2012

Bo Ryan fairly danced in front of a couple of hundred parents and children gathered to hear about their soon-to-open new school: the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts Magnet Middle School.

"I want you to know this is going to be one of the greatest schools of all time," said Ryan, who started his job as principal of the academy on July 1. "We want to make sure that every kid will achieve at incredible levels."

Since May, when the Capitol Region Education Council agreed to the state's request that it start three new magnet schools by August, CREC has been on a dead run. With about a month until the schools open, CREC Superintendent Denise Gallucci said they are on track.

"It's a complicated process, but fortunately one that we have experience with in the past," Gallucci said. "We know how to streamline this process and bring efficiencies."

The state held a special lottery in May to find students for the three new schools, while CREC lined up suitable space, got permits and started renovations. Other tasks included purchasing furniture, hiring 250 staff, establishing curriculum and registering about 500 new students. "We are three-quarters of the way to the finish line," Gallucci said recently.

Bruce Douglas, CREC's executive director, said that finding "highly effective" teachers took thousands of hours to recruit teachers, conduct interviews and assess candidates' demonstration lessons.

Besides the arts academy, the other new schools are the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts Elementary Magnet School and Two Rivers Magnet High School. At the open house for the middle school last week, parents and students seemed nearly as excited as Ryan. Betsy Arce of Hartford had tried three times to get her daughter, Nevaeh, who is entering sixth grade, into a magnet school — unsuccessfully each time.

Early this year when the state held its usual lottery, 15,789 children applied but more than 11,000 were turned down, including Nevaeh.

"I would put in the application, send in the stuff," Arce said. "It was routine to do it, but you kind of lose hope."

When Arce heard of the additional lottery, she tried again. She put her daughter, who has a passion for dance and arts, on speaker phone when she got the call saying Nevaeh got in. "She was ecstatic," Arce said.

Arce liked what she heard Ryan describe last week: 80-minute classes and a commitment to assess kids regularly so that weaknesses are identified and plans are made to improve their progress.

"That's exactly what I want," Arce said. "If you see her weakness, give her the extra help."

#### **Why The Rush?**

The state Department of Education is in its own race to meet terms set by the Sheff v. O'Neill desegregation court-approved agreement. The state can meet the Sheff terms if, by this October, 80 percent of Hartford students who apply to at least three integrated magnet schools or to the Open Choice program are accepted; or if at least 41 percent of Hartford

minority students are enrolled in integrated schools.

Kathy Demsey, an education consultant for the department, said the state has been working with CREC, the city of Hartford and the Open Choice program to increase the number of seats in integrated programs.

Last year the state met 66.9 percent of the demand for seats by Hartford students and 33.2 percent of Hartford minority students were enrolled in integrated programs, Demsey said. The state is aiming to meet both Sheff benchmarks this year, she said.

Demsey said the department was confident that CREC would develop the three new programs in a short period of time. "They have such enormous experience with successful magnet programs," she said.

According to data provided by CREC, its black, white, Hispanic and low-income students outperformed their peers across the state in math and reading in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the state's proficiency standard on the Connecticut Mastery Test and the Connecticut Academic Performance Test.

"CREC is slamming the door on the achievement gap and kids are performing at a very high level and teachers are performing at a very effective level," Douglas said. "It just shows this work can be done."

Martha Stone, the lawyer for the plaintiffs in the Sheff case, said in an e-mail, "The proliferation of magnet schools as a result of the Sheff case is exciting and long overdue. Not only do these schools provide an integrated setting for both urban and suburban students but equal educational opportunities for these students."

Demsey said that CREC could move quickly on the new schools because it is "not reinventing the wheel," but rather replicating or extending successful and popular programs to new grade levels. Two of the new schools — the arts elementary and middle schools — extend CREC's Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts high school into the lower grades.

The middle school will start with 200 students in sixth and seventh grades in renovated space at 140 Huyshope Ave. in the Colt Building. The elementary school will start with 150 children in a building at 206 West Newberry Road in Bloomfield.

Two Rivers Magnet High School, which will focus on environmental science and environmental engineering, is an extension of the Two Rivers Magnet Middle School in East Hartford. The high school, starting with 130 students, will be in the Colt Building at 55 Van Dyke Ave.