

State Fails To Meet School Desegregation Requirements for Hartford Plaintiffs Say Targets Were 'Achievable;' State Says Progress Made

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The state has failed to meet the court-ordered benchmarks for integrating Hartford's largely black and Hispanic public school system. For the state to comply with a court settlement reached five years ago in the Sheff v. O'Neill desegregation case, it could have met one of two possible targets.

Recently, the state Department of Education reported that 36.7 percent of Hartford students are attending integrated schools — about four percentage points less than the 41 percent requirement agreed to in the court settlement. The other target required that 80 percent of Hartford students are accepted when they apply to at least three integrated magnet schools or to a program where Hartford students enroll in suburban schools. The state reached 72 percent on that measure.

"We feel those benchmarks were extremely reasonable and achievable," said Martha Stone, the lawyer for the plaintiffs in the longstanding Sheff case. "Unfortunately, they failed to live up to their end of what we agreed to."

In a 1996 state Supreme Court decision in the Sheff case, Hartford schools were ordered desegregated.

Stone said that she feels that over the past five years, that state Department of Education has not made compliance with the benchmarks "a major focus. There hasn't been adequate resources and staffing put to achieving the goal," Stone said. The benchmarks "were and are achievable."

By contrast, state officials emphasize the progress made in the past five years.

"I think we've been very successful," said Kathy Demsey, an education consultant for the state. "From our perspective, the state has been very committed to this and that commitment has shown through the progress we have made." Demsey said that 1,800 Hartford public schoolchildren were in integrated settings in 2008; that number is now up to more than 7,000.

The demand for seats has been on the increase, Demsey said, with 10,500 applicants for the fall of 2008, compared to 15,757 applicants for the fall of 2012. Thousands of student applicants were not able to get seats in integrated schools this year. To provide those seats, the state has expanded the number of magnet schools in recent years and provided suburban districts with financial incentives to enroll Hartford students through the Open Choice program.

Demsey said the state might have reached the 41 percent benchmark, except that three of the newer magnet schools do not yet have enough white students to be considered integrated. To be considered integrated, at least 25 percent of the students must be white. It often takes two to three years to reach that mark, Demsey said.

With the state's failure to meet those benchmarks, the parties in the Sheff case are in negotiations over what will happen next. "The case doesn't end here," Stone said. She said the Sheff plaintiffs did not bargain to have "a slice" of Hartford students in integrated settings. "The case applies to all Hartford schoolchildren," Stone said.

Stone said that Hartford students in the integrated programs have outperformed their peers in regular Hartford public schools on state standardized tests.

"We are getting quality integrated education," Stone said. "The Hartford students in these options are achieving dramatically."