

Hartford Students in Regional Magnets and 'Open Choice' Outperform Kids in City Schools Test Scores Show Wide Margin Of Success

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Hartford resident students attending regional magnet schools and suburban schools through the "Open Choice" programs outperformed Hartford students in the regular school system by wide margins on state tests taken last spring, according to state data distributed by the Center for Children's Advocacy.

The data shows that the percentage of students who achieved at or above proficiency on the state tests was generally about 20 to 40 percentage points higher for Hartford students in the magnet schools and in Open Choice programs than for students attending regular public schools.

"We must cheer this data... it is showing not only are the magnet schools achieving integration but Hartford students are soaring academically in these schools," said Martha Stone, executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy and lead counsel in the Sheff vs. O'Neill case. Under a 1996 state Supreme Court decision in the longstanding Sheff case, Hartford schools were ordered desegregated.

Stone noted that the data showed higher student test scores for students in magnets and the Open Choice programs in every subject, including reading, writing, math and science, with a higher percentage reaching the "proficiency" and "goal" levels than in the regular Hartford public schools.

Still, in almost every category — but notably not in every case — the Hartford students in magnet schools and Choice programs still scored lower than state averages.

One of the exceptions included Hartford fourth-graders attending CREC schools. About 87 percent of those students scored at or above the proficient level on the reading section of the Connecticut Mastery Test. The state average on that test for fourth graders was 78.3 percent, while 45.7 percent of fourth graders in Hartford public schools were proficient on the reading test.

Stone's group obtained the data on test results for the mastery tests and the Connecticut Academic Performance Test from the state Department of Education. The data was compiled by the Poverty and Race Research Education Council in Washington, D.C.

Stone said the State Department of Education had never made available the data on Hartford student achievement in Hartford Host Magnet Schools or the Open Choice program until this past month.

"We'd always gotten race and ethnicity data," said Stone, "but we were never able to really show the quality. Now for the first time, we are getting both."

"We brought this lawsuit with twin missions—to ensure that the thousands of children in Hartford got access to a quality education and an integrated education,"

Stone said the data shows that "kids are achieving in these quality integrated settings." It's not only the ethnic

and racial diversity that have contributed to students' success, Stone said, but also "the de-concentration of poverty... Not having classes full of poor children."

The state Department of Education's Mark Linabury said the results are "promising, but they are preliminary...I think we would say it's a data snapshot."

To more thoroughly compare the achievement of Hartford students in magnets and Open Choice programs to those in regular public schools, Linabury said that data will have to be tracked over a number of years. "We need more data analysis," Linabury said. "We want to look at cohorts of students.. This was just designed to be a first taste of a deeper analysis of scores and student performance."

David Medina, spokesman for the Hartford Public Schools, said in an email that "the rate of achievement in Hartford Public Schools on the CMT and CAPT has increased at more than double the statewide rate over the past five years, surpassing all of the comparable urban districts in Connecticut."

Bruce E. Douglas, executive director of the Capitol Region Education Council, which runs magnet schools in the Hartford region, said he is "elated" by the results for the CREC's magnet and Hartford's. He said that at some CREC schools in certain grades the test scores show that the achievement gap between suburban and urban kids had been closed or nearly closed.

"Sheff is all about equal opportunity in education and closing the achievement gap," Douglas said.

The development of racially integrated magnet schools and the "Choice" program has been spurred by the long-running Sheff v. O'Neill desegregation case.

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