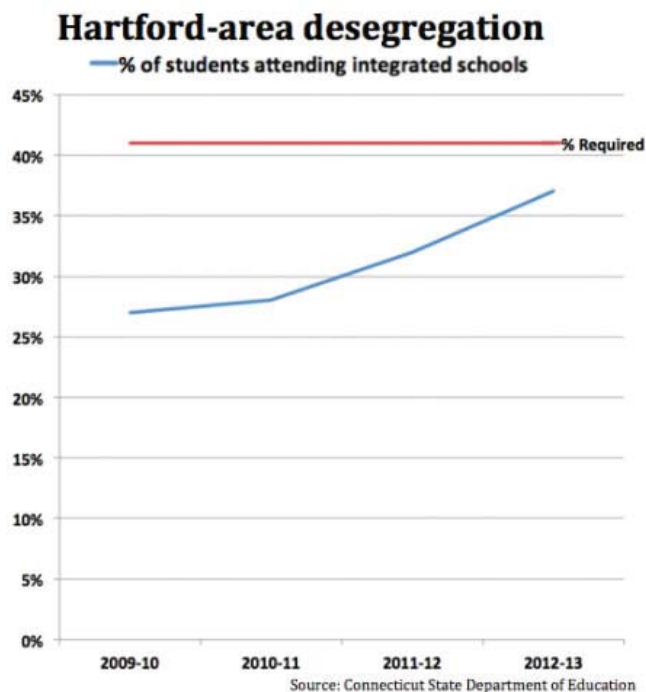


## State falls short on school desegregation requirements

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Connecticut has run out of time to comply with a court order to reduce the inequities caused by the segregation of Hartford's largely black and Hispanic school population.

The state Department of Education on Thursday afternoon reported that 37 percent of Hartford students are now attending integrated schools -- 4 percentage points shy of the number the state agreed to reach in a settlement five years ago. The shortfall means the state will have to negotiate a new settlement with the plaintiffs.



"We are extremely disappointed. They have had years to reach this requirement. It was a reasonable and achievable goal," said Martha Stone, a lawyer for the plaintiffs in the 1996 Sheff v. O'Neill case that led to the Connecticut Supreme Court's ordering the state to desegregate Hartford schools.

Almost 6,000 Hartford students -- about one-third of the capital city's students -- applied to leave their neighborhood school for this school year. Thousands were not offered a seat.

For those students who applied to attend three schools other than their neighborhood school -- the maximum number they were able to apply to -- 72 percent were granted a spot. Another 1,300 students opted to be put on a waiting list in case a seat opened up at the last minute.

Kathy Dempsey, the leader at the state Department of Education's office responsible for complying with the settlement, said despite the state's falling short, the state's efforts have been successful. Those efforts include opening new magnet schools and luring suburban districts with financial incentives to offer enrollment to Hartford students. "I think they've paid off," she said. "We've made significant progress."

During the 2007-08 school year, 1,800 Hartford students were attending integrated schools, or 11 percent of the district's students. Today, 7,105 students attend integrated schools, or 37 percent. Because the state did not reach the integration requirements, a new settlement is being negotiated.

Stone, the lawyer for the plaintiffs, said she's asking that new agreement provide that the percentage of Hartford students attending integrated schools be even higher than the current 41 percent. "We have a decision from the Supreme Court that all the students be attending integrated schools, not just a slice of them," she said. "It's court ordered."

Stone points to a new report provided to her from the state Department of Education showing that thousands of students are now better off because of school choice. Those results show that students in the choice programs test

significantly above their peers in the zoned neighborhood schools.

"The fact that all these students are not getting this opportunity is extremely troubling," she said.

No timeline has been set on when a settlement will be reached. The state education department has proposed a variety of initiatives to expand school choice to the governor's budget office to comply with the court order.

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