

New Agreement In Sheff Case Expected Soon State Extends Deadline For New Magnets And Seats To Monday, May 6.

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A new agreement is expected very soon — perhaps Tuesday afternoon — in the Sheff v. O'Neill desegregation case.

Although details were scant Monday, the new agreement is expected to include new initiatives to reach court-ordered desegregation benchmarks, including plans for new magnet schools, for new seats in existing magnet schools, and for enhancements to Open Choice — a program that enables Hartford kids to enroll in suburban schools.

On Monday the state also announced the extension of the application deadline for new magnet schools and new seats in existing magnet schools — elements of the new agreement — to next Monday, May 6. The original deadline was April 29.

The new agreement is a one-year extension of the current five-year deal, which contained desegregation goals that the state was unable to meet, said Martha Stone, the lawyer for the plaintiffs in the long-standing Sheff case. The five-year agreement contained a provision that allowed for a one-year extension.

"Our position is that we were extremely disappointed that the state did not achieve the reasonable and clearly defined goals that we had in the five-year agreement," said Stone. "Nevertheless, we have been negotiating a new agreement that will allow ...thousands more kids to be in a quality integrated setting."

A negotiating session in the case is scheduled for 3:30 p.m. Tuesday in Superior Court in Hartford with Judge Marshall Berger. David Medina, spokesman for the Hartford school system, said he has been told that this is the "final" session in the negotiation, but he was uncertain whether the new agreement would be signed during the meeting.

Medina noted that the Hartford school system is not a party in the case, but that School Superintendent Christina Kishimoto has been present at most negotiating sessions.

Kelly Donnelly, spokeswoman for the state Department of Education, said in email that "until the agreement has been finalized, the specific terms of the settlement remain subject to on-going confidential negotiations. We look forward to discussing the settlement once the agreement is finalized."

The current five-year plan, which expires at the end of this fiscal year, calls for 41 percent of Hartford's minority students to be enrolled in integrated schools by October 2012. The state reached 36.7 percent.

Alternatively, the state could have satisfied the Sheff terms if 80 percent of Hartford students who applied to a magnet school or another desegregated option were accepted to the program. The state met 72 percent of that demand.

Stone said those goals will remain the same in the one-year extension.

She said that soon after the new agreement is announced, the lawyers for the plaintiffs and the state will return to negotiations to come up with a new five-year plan that will take effect after the year-long extension.

Although details of the one-year extension agreement were unavailable Monday afternoon, the recent availability of new magnet schools and magnet seats, or individual student openings, are included in the new agreement.

"These were let out piecemeal," Medina said of the additional magnet seats. The new seats were part of the confidential negotiations but had to be made public, Medina said, "so people could start applying."

In early April, the state announced a second lottery for three new magnet schools and for new seats in five existing magnet schools. On Monday, the state extended the application deadline for those schools from April 29 to next Monday, May 6.

The new schools include Hartford's Pre-Kindergarten Magnet School and its Montessori Magnet at Moylan School. A third new program is Capitol Region Education Council's Academy of Aerospace and Engineering Elementary School in Rocky Hill.

The existing schools that now have additional seats available include Hartford magnets, Betances Early Reading Lab School; Betances STEM Magnet School, Breakthrough II Magnet Schools, and the Hartford Journalism and Media Magnet School. CREC's Two Rivers Magnet Middle School in East Hartford also has seats available.

The programs have limited grades and seats available. For more information, check <http://www.choiceeducation.org> and click on "Make it a GO with the New Schools and Opportunities (NSO) Lottery."

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