

Latest Sheff Deal Offers New Money For Schools

By KATHLEEN MEGAN, kmegan@courant.com
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A one-year extension of a 2008 settlement in the Sheff v. O'Neill desegregation lawsuit, approved by a state judge Tuesday, will cost about \$6 million in new or reallocated funding to ensure that thousands more children are educated in racially diverse schools.

Many of the court ordered initiatives — including the establishment of four new magnet schools and the addition of seats in existing magnet schools — were already underway, even before the agreement became official.

In addition, the extension agreement calls for enhancements to Open Choice — a program that enables Hartford kids to enroll in suburban schools. Those measures include a higher per pupil grant for districts where enrollment of Hartford students exceeds 4 percent, as well as \$750,000 in capital funding for building renovation and the purchase of equipment and technology.

The extension agreement also calls for the state commissioner of education and a top administrator to personally call local districts to help raise participation in Open Choice and requires state technical high schools to expand their capacity to enroll Hartford students.

"We have signed an agreement today that creates new schools that will allow thousands more of Hartford's school children to take advantage of equal educational opportunities," said Martha Stone, a lawyer for the plaintiffs in the case. "This is great news for the children who have been shut out."



Over the past 40 years, civil rights leaders and state lawmakers have grappled with efforts to integrate Hartford area schools.

Stone said that about 2,500 additional students will be enrolled in integrated settings as a result of the new opportunities.

The need for an extension of the court settlement was prompted by the state's failure to meet the court-mandated benchmarks for racial integration set out five years ago.

"Unfortunately, we appear before the court this day with the state having failed to meet the achievable and very clear goals that were set forth," Stone said, addressing Hartford Superior Court Judge Marshall K. Berger Jr. "But we come before you to move forward."
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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. About 72 percent of students reached that goal. The extension will give the state until June 30, 2014 to meet those goals.

In signing the agreement, Berger said, "We have made significant progress. We fell short of the goal, but not by much. If we measure it in terms of children's lives and children's education, yes, that's a loss. We did not meet that, but for all the children that have benefited, this is terrific."

The initial lawsuit was filed in 1989, on behalf of 17 children, including lead plaintiff fourth grader Milo Sheff, whose mother, Elizabeth Sheff, was in court Tuesday. "I'm a little impatient, maybe, after 24 years," she said. "But it's moving."

Ralph Urban, the state's assistant attorney general said, "I think it needs to be noted that remarkable progress has been made." Urban said that "billions of dollars have been expended ... scores of new schools and programs have opened, all of which provide greater opportunities for both suburban and urban students in the Hartford region."

Hartford Schools Superintendent Christina Kishimoto said she is in "full agreement" with the extension plan, "primarily because it really aims to keep Hartford public schools healthy... So it's not focused on having students leave Hartford in order to have an integrated setting, but rather to look at Hartford public schools as a context for the integrated setting."

Kishimoto referred to the part of the plan that calls for three existing Hartford public schools to be newly designated as magnet schools. She said these include the Hartford Journalism and Media Magnet School, a new Hartford Pre-Kindergarten Magnet School, and the Montessori Magnet at Moylan that will be moved to a new location.

The plan ensures, Kishimoto said, "that we are not bleeding out Hartford Public Schools of students and reducing the size of the district."

The fourth additional new magnet schools is the expansion of the Capitol Region Education Council's Academy of Aerospace and Engineering to elementary-aged children.

While the negotiations on the extension were confidential, the state did announce the plans for the new magnets and new magnet seats earlier this month so that students could apply for the new openings. On Monday, the state extended the deadline for application to these schools to next Monday, May 6.

The existing schools that now have additional seats available include the following 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.

In addition, the extension allows districts with capital costs related to the expansion of Open Choice to be eligible for grants from a \$750,000 fund to cover building renovations, classroom expansions, and the purchase of equipment and technology.