

2,500 Hartford students to have chance to attend different school

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Having run out of time to comply with a court order to desegregate Hartford's schools, the state has entered into a new agreement that will expand school choice opportunities for 2,523 more students.

The new order -- agreed to Tuesday by the Connecticut Attorney General and the plaintiffs in the state's landmark Sheff vs. O'Neill supreme court decision -- requires the state to pay to open four new magnet schools, offer more Hartford students seats in vocational-technical high schools and send more children to suburban schools.

"For all the children that have benefited, this is terrific," Superior Court Judge Marshall Berger said before signing off on the one-year agreement.

The state has spent billions to open integrated schools since the state Supreme Court ordered the state nearly 20 years ago to eliminate the inequities caused by segregating students.



Elizabeth Horton Sheff (center) leafs through the new agreement.

person in the street that parents go to and say, 'I didn't get into a magnet school,'" Elizabeth Horton Sheff said. "We are making progress. We are not there," she said. Sheff's son, Milo, was 10 when she filed the lawsuit against the state. He's now 34 years old.

The cost of expanding school choice opportunities is expected to cost the state \$6 million in the fiscal year that begin July 1.

Asked about a provision in the new agreement that allows the plaintiffs to come back to court if that funding is not appropriated by the General Assembly, an assistant attorney general said no funding has yet been secured from the legislature.

But despite these efforts, the state has routinely fallen short of the benchmarks they have agreed upon.

This school year, 37 percent of Hartford's students are attending integrated schools -- 4 percentage points shy of the number the state agreed to reach in a settlement five years ago.

Addressing the court before the new one-year agreement was approved, the mother responsible for successfully suing the state nearly 20 years ago on behalf of her son told the court she is growing impatient for parents with children still in school. "I am the per-

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"There remain challenges, your honor," Assistant Attorney General Ralph Urban responded.

Education Commissioner Stephan Pryor has proposed a variety of initiatives to expand school choice, many of which cost much more than \$6 million.

Pryor said Tuesday that it is important this new agreement did not divert money away from the needy Hartford schools.

"While we present more opportunities to our young people, we invest in Hartford," he told the court. "We are pleased with this outcome."

It's unclear what happens if the state meets the requirements outlined in the agreement that 41 percent of Hartford students be attending integrated schools or that 80 percent of those who wish to leave their neighborhood school be provided the opportunity to do so.

Martha Stone, the lawyer for the plaintiffs, said she expects the state to enter into a new three- to five-year year agreement to further desegregate the schools beyond 41 percent.

However, the attorney general's office feels differently. Whether the state would remain under a court order to desegregate after next year is "up for discussion at this point," Urban said.

Read details of the new schools and the agreement at <http://www.ctmirror.org/sites/default/files/documents/sheff%201%20year%20agreement%20copy.pdf>.

<http://www.ctmirror.org/story/19879/2500-hartford-students-be-given-chance-attend-different-school>