

## — POLITICS —

### **‘Sheff’ a Work in Progress – Extension Given**

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CTLatinoNews.com

Wildaliz Bermudez was just five years old when she was a plaintiff at the outset of the Sheff v. O’Neill case in 1989. Bermudez said she was the victim of a broken system, with no other option than to attend the underfunded schools in her Hartford district.

The landmark case, which was decided in 1996, allowed future students like her an alternative to settling for substandard schools just because they happened to live in a certain district. Mandates from the case continue to work for equal education opportunities for all students, and the original decision was meant to curb racial, ethnic and economic isolation in Hartford students.

“Looking back on it now, as an adult, I see the missed opportunities. Students like myself, they were not given that chance because the system that was in place did not work in their favor.” Bermudez, now 30, said the pre-Sheff system “had to be changed.” She recalled that before the growth of magnet schools, students had no choice other than to attend underfunded schools within their own districts.

And while some progress has been made in school equality over the last two decades due to Sheff, the state is currently shy of the last set of goals mandated by the Sheff v. O’Neill decision. As a result, it has been granted an extension to continue working toward full integration in Hartford schools, the Connecticut Department of Education and advocates for school integration announced earlier this month. Successive five-year agreements reached after the original court case have laid out goals on the road to full integration.

According to the most recent five-year agreement, 80 percent of families who want their children to attend integrated schools should be afforded that opportunity. In addition to magnet schools, funding for an Open Choice program allows families to send students to public schools of their choice in suburban districts. After falling short by about four percentage points of goal, the one-year extension has been added to allow the state to meet those goals while a new five-year agreement is drawn up. The General Assembly will then have to ratify the next agreement to put it into law.

“The terms of [the] new agreement will get us that much closer to ensuring that all children in Hartford receive an equal educational opportunity,” Martha Stone, Executive Director of the Center for Children’s Advocacy, said.

The agreement will include adding new integrated magnet schools, funding for the Open Choice programs and additional obligations ensuring that the Sheff decision is upheld by the state. The terms aim to make the results of the Sheff decision “more transparent”, Dennis Parker, Director of ACLU’s Racial Justice Program and an attorney to one of the plaintiffs in the case, said.

Requirements include providing funding to plan, develop, construct and operate four new magnet schools which meet the revised magnet capacity goals, the redesign of three existing Hartford public schools into magnet schools and expanding the capacity of existing Sheff magnet schools for more enrollments from both Hartford and suburban students.

Stone, who was the attorney for a plaintiffs in *Sheff v. O'Neill*, pointed out the tangible benefits that the case and its subsequent agreements have brought about for children and their families. "What's particularly important about this last settlement agreement is that there are additional opportunities for Hartford students," she said. "Four of the five new magnet schools have preschools, and it is particularly helpful from a developmental standpoint to get students into these integrated environments as early as possible."

The Sheff decision has already had a significant impact on education in Hartford, where Latino students constitute the single largest population block in the public schools, by creating magnet schools as alternatives to underfunded public schools. The schools now draw students from around the state.

The case stemmed from a 1989 lawsuit alleging "significant violations of Hartford students' right to an education equal to that of their suburban counterparts, and right to equal protection under Connecticut law," according to a statement on the extension agreement.

"The creation of magnet schools afforded us an opportunity not only to provide a system of integration; it also afforded us the creation of new schools which in and of itself was a positive," said former Hartford City Council Member Elizabeth Horton Sheff, mother of plaintiff Milo Sheff.

According to Elizabeth Sheff, the court mandate resulted in the city, state and school districts injecting billions of dollars into reforming the schools, including building renovations and new construction. "Those schools were in poor shape, and all those dollars were laid out to improve our kids' educational experience," she said. She remains active in keeping the state committed to the reforms mandated in *Sheff v. O'Neill*. "We've been going back to court to keep them on point," she said.

Today, there are more than 30 integrated magnet schools that accommodate students from across the state, each pursuing a distinct educational approach, such as Montessori learning, or a different specialization, like aerospace or environmental sciences, according Kathleen Dempsey, a consultant with the Department of Education. She added that in order to be a "Sheff-compliant school", the enrollment had to be 25 percent white. These options have brought suburban students into Hartford in much greater numbers than did earlier integration attempts that simply involved busing students to existing schools in other districts.

"It wasn't just about having black kids, white kids and Latinos in the same building," pointed out Dr. Steve Perry, education commentator for CNN. "The intent of *Sheff vs. O'Neill* was quality integrated education," he said, putting the emphasis on the word "quality". Perry is the founder and Principal of Capital Preparatory Magnet School in Hartford, which was created under the Sheff mandate and has received national recognition for its high college placement rate.

While Sheff asserts with pride that greater Hartford has become a national model for educational reform, Bermudez says equally impressive is the fact that it all started out as a movement of concerned parents. "The initial concept of Sheff came through a grassroots effort," Bermudez said. "There was a push by community leaders, advocates, parents and supporters of diversity who came together in an awesome way."

Perry was quick to point out that the ongoing success of educational reform continues to rest on the sacrifices made by students and parents who want something better than what is available in their home districts.

"This is not convenient," he said. "Sending your kid to our school from Middletown is an eighty minute bus ride. Travel time for our students ranges from fifty minutes to two hours. With that kind of travel time, they could theoretically be going to school in Boston, Providence, or New York City."