

Must the state provide every Hartford student a seat in an integrated school?

By Jacqueline Rabe Thomas
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State falls short on school desegregation requirements

Efforts to desegregate, expand school choice a challenge with looming deficits.

As a court-ordered deadline approaches for state officials to outline how they will desegregate Hartford's public schools, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy drew a line in the sand on what he is willing to agree to.

Thirty-seven percent of Hartford students attended integrated schools last school year — 4 percentage points shy of the 41 percent benchmark the state agreed to reach by now.

Malloy said Friday the state should not be forced to agree to make changes to increase that percentage further.

"Let me be very clear, I don't think failing to reach a standard is a reason to then raise the standard," he said. "I don't have a problem with the benchmarks as they currently exist. I have a problem when people say, 'Well you didn't meet that benchmark, so we are going to raise it.' That doesn't make a whole lot of sense."

Malloy's remarks follow years of failure on the part of the state to reach agreed-upon benchmarks. The state Supreme Court 17 years ago ruled in the Sheff vs. O'Neill case that the state is responsible for reducing the inequalities caused by the racial isolation of Hartford's largely black and Hispanic student population.

And now that the most recent five-year agreement has expired, the state and lawyers for the plaintiffs are negotiating what's next before the Oct. 1 court-ordered deadline.

Martha Stone, one of the Sheff attorneys, dismissed the governor's expectation that the state would not be responsible for getting more students enrolled in integrated settings.

"These benchmarks in these stipulations and court orders were meant to be a floor, not a ceiling. The [Supreme Court] decision applies to all of the students in Hartford, not just 41 percent of them. The Supreme Court's decision does not call for ignoring the remaining 59 percent," she said.

The state has entered into two separate agreements since the Supreme Court's ruling. The first agreement required the state to have 30 percent of Hartford's students attending integrated schools. When the second agreement was reached, the state agreed to have 41 percent of students in diverse schools or 80 percent of the students who wish to attend a different school to be given the opportunity to do so.

Malloy also said he doesn't think that 80 percent benchmark should be increased.

It's not that Malloy, a lawyer, disagrees with the reforms that have been done so far to integrate Hartford's schools.

"There is important work that you all are leading in this state," the governor told the hundreds of Capital Region Education Council teachers and other educators Friday. Employees of the magnet schools opened by the state to address the racial imbalance, they were gathered in Hartford for a back-to-school meeting. "This is important work," the governor said.

Later, during an interview, Malloy said the billions of dollars the state has spent building new magnet schools -- and the millions spent to bus Hartford students to attend suburban schools -- have been well spent.

"I think we have the program necessary to correct some of the wrongs of the past," he said. "Every child deserves a good education regardless of zip code, I want to be very clear about that."

But Stone, the lawyer for the plaintiffs, said that should include every Hartford student.