

State report: Students in desegregated schools test higher

By Jacqueline Rabe Thomas
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The State Department of Education reports that Hartford students attending a magnet or suburban school significantly outperform their peers who attend their neighborhood schools run by the Hartford Public School system.

"The performance of Hartford youth soars once they attend magnet schools and schools in the suburbs," said Martha Stone, the lawyer behind the successful school desegregation lawsuit that led to the Connecticut Supreme Court's ordering the state to reduce the inequities caused by the capital city's predominantly black and Hispanic student population.

Released Wednesday, it is the first report the education department has offered on the achievement of Hartford students who leave their neighborhood school in the 17 years of the state attempting to comply with the Sheff vs. O'Neill court decision.

"The data indicate that Hartford-resident students enrolled in choice programming opportunities perform at higher levels than those who are enrolled in the city public schools," said Kelly Donnelly, a spokeswoman for the State Department of Education. "In terms of change in performance at the goal level from 2012 to 2013, the results were mixed... We're in the process of looking at these and other data in a variety of additional ways that have the potential to shed further light on results in the Sheff region and beyond."



The differences in the achievement of Hartford students in math, reading, writing and science are huge, depending on the type of school they attend. When city students attend schools that enroll a mix of suburban and Hartford students, city students test higher.

For example, in a typical fifth grade Hartford classroom of 25 students last school year, 12 students were not proficient in reading. In a magnet school run by the Capitol Region Education Council with students from all over the region, just two of the 25 students from Hartford were not proficient. For Hartford residents who enroll in a suburban school through the Open Choice program, seven of 25 students in fifth grade were not proficient. Students are accepted into these schools through a blind lottery operated by the state.

"I challenge the state to show any other mechanism that is closing the achievement gap as quickly," said Stone. "The state should be looking at regional solutions if we really want to solve the problem in a robust way."

Requests for an interview with anyone representing Hartford Public Schools were turned down.

"The Sheff v. O'Neill case is a Supreme Court case about providing access to quality seats for Hartford students. What we have [done is open] state of the art facilities and well-designed themed schools that are providing great options and opportunities for suburban families... We believe these educational opportunities and resources should be open to more Hartford students," Hartford schools spokesman David Medina wrote in an emailed statement.

But why do Hartford students perform so much better in suburban and magnet schools?

"The district will have no further comment," Medina wrote.

Hartford Public Schools have opened a dozen magnet schools in the city with financial help from the state, and the scores from those schools also show that integration pays off, according to the same report from the state.

The state department did look at how these results compare to 2012 -- though did not included that information in the report -- and a spokeswoman said that between all the types of schools, more tested grades and subjects experienced declines than increases from the 2011-2012 school year to the 2012-2013 year.

This news comes after the state promised the judge overseeing the Sheff case that it would report on the academic performance of students in the inter-district programs the state pays for in an effort to comply with the 17-year-old court ruling.

It also comes about two weeks before the deadline for the state to enter into a new agreement on what will be done to further reduce the segregation in Hartford's schools.

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

Stone and advocates of the reforms made so far are arguing that the next agreement with the court should have a benchmark higher than 41 percent.

"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," Stone said last month.

The Sheff Movement, a coalition of parents led by one of the original attorneys for the plaintiffs, wants every student in Hartford to be attending an integrated school.

"This goal is clearly achievable," Phil Tegeler, a leader in the Sheff Movement, wrote in an opinion piece in The Mirror earlier this month.

But Democratic Gov. Dannel P. Malloy is not supportive.

"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," the governor told the Mirror last month.

It is clear, however, that Malloy supports what has been achieved so far.

"You are a role model for the rest of this state," he told teachers and other educators at CREC magnet schools during their annual back-to-school conference in Hartford at the end of August.