

Nearly half the students from Hartford now attend integrated schools

By Jacqueline Rabe Thomas, November 26, 2013

Nearly half of the students from Hartford now attend integrated schools, the state reports -- 17 years after the Connecticut Supreme Court ordered the state to eliminate the educational inequities caused by the segregation of Hartford's overwhelmingly black and Hispanic school population. "We are proud of the progress we've made to date," said Kelly Donnelly, a spokeswoman for the State Department of Education.

The news that 8,374 Hartford students attend "integrated" schools -- a term used when less than three-quarters of a school's student population are minorities -- comes as state officials and plaintiffs' attorneys in the Sheff vs. O'Neill desegregation case negotiate whether to provide even more students with an integrated education.

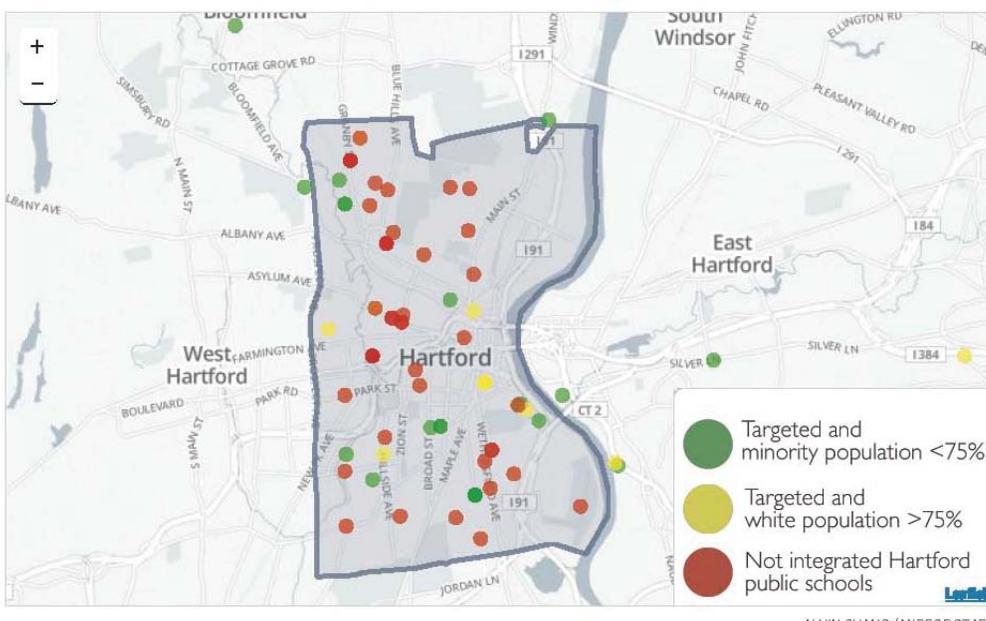
"We will continue to work toward our collective goal: ensuring that all children in Hartford have access to the quality educational opportunities they deserve in their community," Donnelly said in a statement.

Nearly 5,000 students from Hartford who attend segregated schools -- one-quarter of the city's students -- applied to leave their current school for this school year. Thousands were not offered a seat. Seventy-three percent of city students

who applied to attend at least three schools with diverse student populations were granted a spot; another 1,354 students opted to be put on a waiting list in case a seat opened up at the last minute.

Integrated schools in Hartford

Several schools have been targeted for integration in Hartford, but the large majority are still unintegrated.



Source: State Department of Education

The Sheff Movement, a coalition of parents led by the mother of the lead plaintiff in the years-old case, is calling for the state to enroll 82 percent of Hartford students in an integrated school by the 2018-19 school year.

The number of city students attending integrated schools has steadily increased. This year, 1,269 more students from Hartford are attending integrated schools over last year. During the 2007-08 school year, 1,800 Hartford students attended integrated schools -- or 11 percent of the district's students -- compared with 42 percent this year.

"We have a healthy growing system and that is working. But 41 percent is not enough -- we need to keep growing this system so all children have the ability to attend diverse schools," Elizabeth Horton Sheff, the co-chair of the coalition, wrote in an email blast to her supporters last week. When the state failed to provide at least 41 percent of Hartford students with a seat in an integrated school by last November, the state was compelled to negotiate a new settlement with the plaintiffs.

While there are few details on how many more students the state will agree to enroll in integrated settings as negotiations continue, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy has said he opposes raising the standard.

"Let me be very clear. I don't think failing to reach a standard is a reason to then raise the standard," the governor told reporters in September. "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."

But attorneys for the plaintiffs have argued that the state Supreme Court decision was clear in requiring state lawmakers to provide every student with an equal, and unsegregated, education.

"It is crucial for a democratic society to provide all of its schoolchildren with fair access to an unsegregated education," Ellen A. Peters, the chief justice of the state's High Court, wrote in the majority opinion in July 1996. "Every passing day denies these children their constitutional right to a substantially equal educational opportunity. Every passing day short-changes these children in their ability to learn to contribute to their own wellbeing."

Martha Stone, an attorney for the Sheff plaintiffs, also points to the achievement data of the Hartford students attending the integrated schools as proof this approach is working. "It's significant how well the Hartford students are performing in the integrated options," Stone said during an interview.

What's next?

Some details have been released about what will be included in the next settlement to further desegregate Hartford schools. "There will likely be a new definition of diversity as a result of those negotiations," Sarah Hemingway of the State

Department of Education told the State Board of Education's legislative committee earlier this month.

Included in the department's proposed legislation to the governor's policy office includes a bill that would make "changes to the definition of diversity" for magnet schools. Some officials, including the Hartford school superintendent, have called for factors other than just race to be considered when determining if schools are diverse enough.

Rep. Jason Rojas, "Before the next costly agreement is made [we need to] take into consideration the sustainability of the current remedy, its efficacy and what a more strategic approach might look like."

"We've got to start thinking differently," Superintendent Christina Kishimoto said in an interview with The Mirror earlier this year, suggesting that the strict racial requirements in the Sheff order have produced unintended consequences. "We've got to get to the point where we start talking about things such as socioeconomic factors -- not just race -- because there are too many conditions that have changed." Meanwhile, the Hartford school board approved a plan Monday to covert two neighborhood schools into magnet schools to attract white students from surrounding communities.

The Hartford Courant reported last week, however, that facing parent backlash, the Hartford school board rejected another plan that would have allowed a nonprofit education group to run SAND Elementary School in an effort to integrate that school. In addition, the state education department is asking the governor's budget office for an additional \$51.4 million for next school year to cover the costs of enrolling more students in magnet schools and providing them with transportation. The request for the 19 percent funding increase does not state how many more students would be covered. The department is also requesting an additional \$10.6 million for the Open Choice program, which pays suburban districts to enroll Hartford students. That would be a 29 percent funding increase.

The Sheff negotiations also face a potential backlash from state legislators, who will ultimately have to fund or change state laws to accommodate the agreement. Rep. Jason Rojas, an East Hartford Democrat who serves on the legislature's Education Committee, wrote in an opinion piece in the Courant that the state's approach over the years is not fiscally sustainable. He notes further that East Hartford is also struggling, not just Hartford, which benefits the most from the adopted school choice model.

"The primary strategy being used in the Sheff case, the creation of magnet schools, is having significant unintended consequences and opportunity costs for the region as we struggle to finance a public education system that is already underfunded," Rojas wrote. "I write in the hope that before the next costly agreement is made that we take into consideration the sustainability of the current remedy, its efficacy and what a more strategic approach might look like."

But Phil Tegeler, one of the original lawyers representing the plaintiffs in the Sheff lawsuit and now a leader of the Sheff Movement, said there is no reason to stop now. "More than 60 percent of Hartford children don't have access to quality integrated settings. There's a lot more work to be done," he said during an interview. "The regional school choice remedy has benefited other towns in the region, not just Hartford.... It's a regional remedy. It's not just about Hartford."

In its order to desegregate Hartford schools, the Supreme Court justices pointed to a state law that gives each town control of its school system. That law is the "single most important factor contributing to the concentration of racial and ethnic minorities in the Hartford Public School system," the justices wrote.

That law has not changed, and nearly all of the state's 169 cities and towns continue to operate separate school systems. Stone, a Sheff lawyer, said this law that gives towns the autonomy to run its schools, remains the "elephant in the room." "I think the ultimate answer to Sheff is [the] regionalization" of school districts she said, but points out the political will has not been there to accomplish that task. "That issue has not been addressed."

This link to the CT Mirror November 26, 2013 article includes important information on desegregation data from the State Department of Education, the State's Legislative Proposal, and State Department of Education fiscal requests for magnet schools and Open Choice.

www.ctmirror.org/story/2013/11/25/nearly-half-students-hartford-now-attend-integrated-schools