

New Sheff Agreement To Increase Integration For Hartford Students

By Kathleen Megan

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A new one-year agreement in the long-running Sheff vs. O'Neill desegregation case with an estimated price tag of \$3.5 million calls for the enrollment of an additional 1,350 Hartford students in integrated schools, the expansion of several magnet schools and the creation of four new magnets.

The agreement reached Friday after seven months of negotiation also calls for the percentage of Hartford students attending integrated schools to climb to 44 percent by Nov. 15, 2014, up from 42.4 percent now.

"There is still much to be done," said Martha Stone, the attorney for the plaintiffs in the case. "We can applaud the advancements of this new agreement, but we must not forget that there still remains a majority of Hartford students relegated to poor performing segregated schools."

She said she is particularly pleased about the requirement for increased integration. "It propels the numbers going forward to increase the educational opportunities for Hartford children to be in quality integrated settings," she said.

Hartford Superior Court Judge Marshall K. Berger Jr. approved the agreement.

The 15-page agreement also includes some innovations, including the establishment of a "lighthouse school," which would transform an existing neighborhood school into a "high quality" school designed to help stabilize a neighborhood and lead to greater diversity in that community.

"This one-year agreement puts a focus on strengthening neighborhood schools and gives Hartford resident parents a voice," said Matthew Poland, chairman of the Hartford Board of Education. "That alone makes it a breakthrough agreement."

In a nod to the changing demographics of the region, the agreement also alters the definition of when a school is considered integrated. Currently, the aim is to have white students account for at least 25 percent of a school's population, while all other minorities comprise the balance.

Under the new agreement, Asians, Pacific Islanders and American Indians can be counted in that 25 percent. The change is expected to free up more seats in magnet schools for black and Hispanic students from Hartford.

Gov. Dannel P. Malloy said in a statement: "In these negotiations, the state fought hard to open more seats for Hartford's children in a variety of learning environments."

"Over the next year, it will be important to take a hard look at what's changed since this case was decided nearly 20 years ago," Malloy continued, "to listen to parents, students and the community; to acknowledge the complex demographic changes in the region; and to focus, first and foremost, on making a quality education available to every child."

The demographic changes have been dramatic: Since 2008, among public school students in the 22-district Sheff region, the percentage who are minorities has climbed from about 35 percent to 49 percent, according to state data. With many black and Hispanic students in the surrounding suburban districts, one state official said that half the students in a magnet might have to come from outside Hartford to ensure that at least 25 percent of the students are white.

A statement from the Hartford schools sent by spokesman David Medina expressed support for the lighthouse model. "For the first time, meaningful amounts of state Sheff funding will be invested in a Hartford neighborhood school," the statement said.

Hartford Superintendent Christina M. Kishimoto said in the statement, "Hartford was pleased to have a place at the table where the voices of current parents with their concerns were able to be heard early in the process. Going forward the negotiating team should continue to look at ways of bringing more parent input to this process."

Last month, after hearing protests from parents, the Hartford School Board turned down a request from Capital Preparatory Schools Inc. — a non-profit educational management company led by Capital Preparatory Magnet School Principal Steve Perry — to transform SAND Elementary School into a lighthouse school.

Since then, the Hartford board has established a process for selecting a lighthouse school, which involves appointing a four-person committee and holding community forums.

Malloy said that over the past decade, the state has spent approximately \$2.5 billion in capital and operating funds to comply with Sheff. The Sheff vs. O'Neill lawsuit was filed in 1989, seeking to reduce racial and ethnic isolation of Hartford's public school students. Seven years later, the Connecticut Supreme Court decided in favor of the plaintiffs.

Since then, a series of multiyear agreements have required the state to create 39 magnet schools and to fund Open Choice, a program that allows Hartford students to attend schools in suburban districts.

Stone noted that this year's lottery for the 39 magnet schools began Dec. 2 and has already attracted more than 5,000 applicants — a record high number in the opening days.

The new Sheff agreement calls for the addition of 500 seats to the Open Choice program and 407 seats in new Sheff magnets. The new magnets will include Capital Community College Senior Academy, where students will be able to take college-level classes, and the conversion of High School Inc., Hartford's Insurance and Finance Academy, into a magnet.

Other magnets will be expanded to add 696 new seats.