

Can Connecticut afford school choice?

By Jacqueline Rabe Thomas

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As the state's school-age population declines and money is scarce, key state lawmakers are questioning whether it's appropriate to spend millions of dollars more over the next few years to increase enrollment in magnet schools.

Over the past decade, state spending to operate dozens of magnet schools throughout the state has increased from \$83.6 million a year to \$284.3 million.

"We are paying twice for a lot of these kids. We are paying the district they reside in and then we are paying the magnet school they go to," Sen. Beth Bye, co-chairwoman of the legislature's powerful budget-writing committee, said during a recent meeting with education officials.

"It feels like if we are losing students, we should be paying less money. But it feels like we are losing students, and we are paying more than ever," said Bye, a West Hartford Democrat.

The U.S. Department of Education [reports](#) that Connecticut public school enrollment dropped by 23,000 students between 2004 and 2011, and it estimates a decrease of another 7,000 students over the next 10 years -- an overall decline of 5 percent.

Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's [proposed budget](#) for the coming school year would flat fund the magnet schools throughout the state that are not part of the section of a court-sanctioned agreement that calls specifically for desegregating Hartford schools through magnets. The Democratic governor's budget office in November [reported](#) it also anticipates to flat fund magnets for the next four years.

"The Office of Policy and Management and we are agnostic at the moment on the right solution" for moving forward with enrollment growth at magnet schools, Education Commissioner Stefan Pryor told members of the legislature's Education and Appropriations committees Feb. 27. (Pryor's comment was greeted with laughter from legislators at the meeting.)

"We are open to that discussion [of increasing enrollment]," Pryor continued. "We are not suggesting that today. What we are saying, and it's your decision to be clear, that it might be a downstream decision."

The governor's budget chief, Benjamin Barnes, has indicated that he is open to reining in magnet school growth.

"We are willing to discuss policy alternatives that will enable us to constrain costs in this program in [fiscal] 2015 and beyond," wrote Barnes, head of the Office of Policy and Management (OPM), in recent [testimony](#) submitted to the Education Committee. He said his office would work with legislators to find money to support enrollment increases, if that is what they decide.

If lawmakers move forward with capping state spending on magnet schools, the 10 interdistrict magnet schools that have already opened will be unable to fill their classrooms. Typically, when a new magnet school opens, it phases in enrollment by opening a new grade or two each year until the school is at capacity.

\$50 million more

The education department [reports](#) it will need \$50 million in additional state funding to fill the classrooms as previously scheduled, provide transportation to get students to school and continue offering free preschool.

This price tag surprised legislators because it wasn't in the governor's recommended budget released in early February. But OPM has been aware of this looming cost since November, when the education department first [asked that it be included](#) in next year's budget.

"There should have been no surprise. We have been very open to OPM about the need for those dollars," Pryor told the State Board of Education last week.

In fact, Kathy Dempsey, the school department's budget chief, told legislators she can forecast enrollment at magnets several years out by looking at the magnet schools that have already been approved by the state and their approved capacity. Requests for those figures were not provided to the Mirror last week.

The magnet schools not yet at capacity – three in Bridgeport, one in Windham and five in the Hartford region -- were approved by the state department in 2009.

The state has spent millions to build these schools.

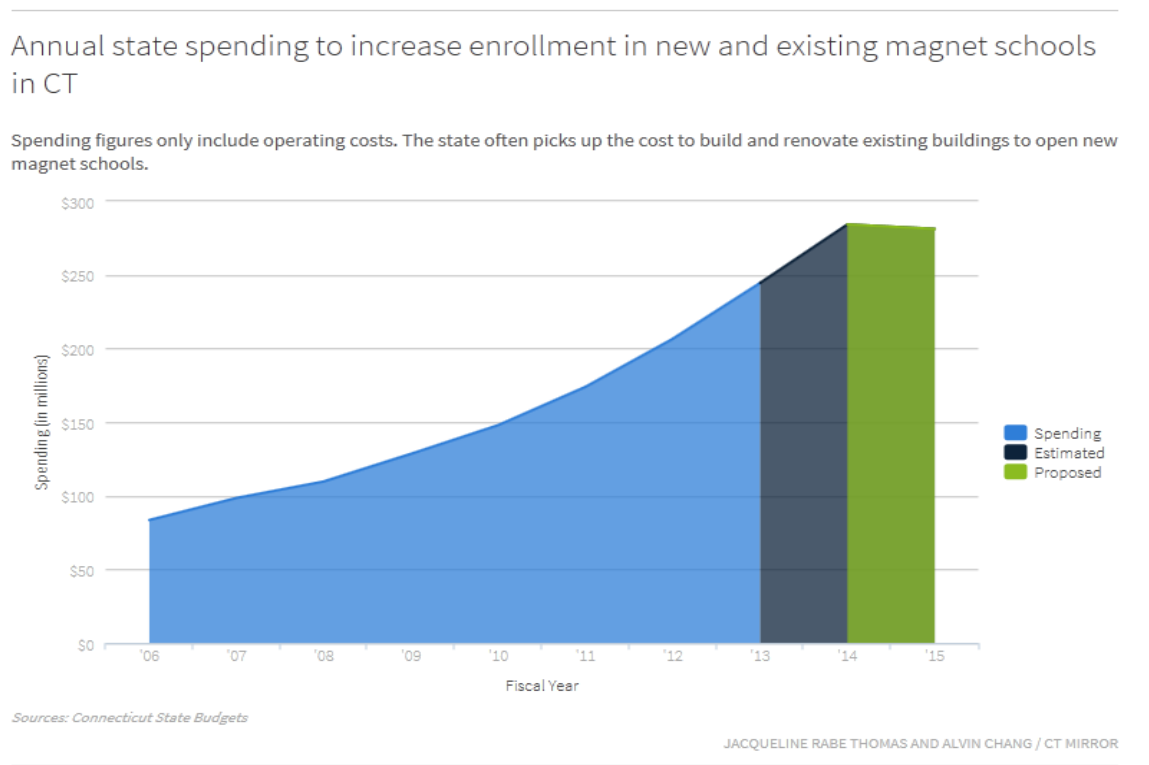
The funding gap in what the governor sought and what Pryor now says is needed has left many legislators puzzled.

"I am trying to understand how the projections shifted so dramatically in 20 days," Rep. Andy Fleischmann, D-West Hartford, House chairman of the legislature's Education Committee, told the commissioner during a meeting last week.

Gian-Carl Casa, a spokesman for the governor's budget office, said his office was aware of the request but had reason to omit it from the recommended budget.

"We were not certain and appropriately hesitant to put a large amount like that in the budget without better data. In fact, we still haven't gotten the October 1 enrollment figures necessary to update the projections," he said.

The governor's budget does provide funding for three new charter schools to open in the state for next school year. Asked by the co-chair of the Education Committee if the \$17 million in additional funding for charter schools can be cut to help fill the gap in funding for magnet schools, Pryor said he would recommend against using all of that money.



A 'fundamental shift'

While the Malloy administration has left the decision of magnet school growth on legislators' shoulders, certain spending decisions about magnet schools are out of their reach.

Nearly 20 years ago, the Connecticut Supreme Court [ordered the state](#) to eliminate the educational inequities caused by Hartford's overwhelmingly minority population. Numerous settlements throughout the years -- negotiated by the state's education department with the plaintiffs and approved by the courts -- require the state to open new, specialty magnet schools to lure white students from surrounding suburbs to attend school with Hartford minority youth. This has been the state's primary strategy to providing an integrated education for Hartford-resident students. The other mechanism [is the Open Choice program, a cheaper approach for the state but used less often](#), in which suburban schools offer these students enrollment in their schools.

The move – which has resulted in 42 percent of Hartford youth attending integrated schools this year – has been expensive.



The state agreed that it would plan, develop, open and operate these schools," said Martha Stone, an attorney for the plaintiffs in the Sheff case.

Over the last 10 years, the state has spent \$1.4 billion to build new magnets and renovate existing buildings as a result of the Sheff vs. O'Neill lawsuit, the state department [reports](#). More than \$140 million is spent each year to operate those schools. Next school year, the [state has agreed](#) to offer 1,353 more Hartford students a seat in an integrated magnet school, a promise that will cost the state at least an However, of the \$50 million left out of the governor's budget for magnet schools, some of it is needed for five "Sheff" schools in the Hartford region that have been slated for growth and about \$15 million to cover the transportation costs for students attending integrated schools.

"The state agreed that it would plan, develop, open and operate these schools," said Martha Stone, an attorney for the plaintiffs in the Sheff case. "They have a legal obligation to fund the agreement."

While they support the intention behind the lawsuit to improve education for Hartford residents, some legislators are not happy about the price or its impact on students in other parts of the state.

"There are many of us in the legislature who are saying, 'What about the rest of the state?' There are these same issues in urban areas in the rest of the state, and because they're not under a court order, they're unfortunately, due to limited resources, left out of this discussion about how to best address the same issues," Sen. Andrea Stillman, co-chairwoman of the Education Committee, told the education commissioner during a recent public hearing.

"Those children are not being afforded opportunities that, you know, the schools under the Sheff decision are.

That's why -- after 20 years -- you might hear little grumbings from folks," said Stillman, D-Waterford.

Rep. Toni Walker, D-New Haven, the House chair of the legislature's budget-writing committee, wants to know whether the spending has provided results.

"Every time I see Sheff it just seems to be getting bigger and bigger. And the one thing we as legislators would like to understand is what are we trying to achieve," she told the education commissioner during her committee's budget workshop with him.

"We would just like to know what you are doing and how you are doing it," she said.

Pryor said the state is undergoing a "fundamental shift" in its strategy moving forward to integrate Hartford's schools. That strategy is focused on avoiding spending money to build new magnet schools and instead to "turnaround" existing Hartford schools through state investments.

"We are very proud of that. That way the [Hartford school] system becomes healthier rather than deteriorated," he told legislators, referring to the most recent agreement that does not commit the state to building new magnet schools. While the governor is recommending \$9.9 million in new construction funding for Sheff schools, the latest settlement instead funnels new money to existing schools in Hartford. This is accomplished by reclassifying a school as a magnet while still promising to expand enrollment in existing magnet schools throughout the region.

Those additional magnet school seats in the Sheff schools are the only ones at this point that the governor is recommending be funded.

"We simply have no recourse but to approve it," said Rep. Jason Rojas, D-East Hartford, a member of the Education and Finance, Revenue and Bonding committees. "I think we should all begin to ask questions if we should continue to move in that direction... We are about to codify a new revenue stream for new programs when, in my opinion, we can barely afford to fund what we currently have in place."



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