

School desegregation: Will focus shift from magnets to suburbs?

By: JACQUELINE RABE THOMAS | November 3, 2015

Dereck Torres would have happily enrolled in a regular high school in one of Hartford's neighboring suburbs, but he didn't have that choice.

In the school-choice lottery, he won a seat in a new state-of-the-art magnet school. That magnet school — Medical Professions and Teacher Preparation Academy — cost the state \$61 million to build and requires about \$10 million to operate each year.

As Connecticut spends billions to build and run 42 racially integrated magnet schools in an effort to meet a court desegregation order, the state has failed to substantially grow a far less expensive alternative by enrolling city students in suburban schools.

Nearly 20,000 city and suburban students this year are attending integrated magnet schools in the capital region while just 2,150 students have desks in suburban schools through the Open Choice program.

Well aware of the expense, state officials last month proclaimed the state would not open any new magnet schools, even through half of Hartford's students still attend segregated schools where more than 75 percent of the students are minorities.

"We are not going to be building any more," Ralph Urban, assistant attorney general, told a Hartford Superior Court judge last month. "We are growing the Open Choice program, and that will continue to grow."



Dereck Torres, at right, walks around a recent school choice fair .

Some are having a hard time believing that, given the program's history of enrolling a small number of students — one in 40 students in suburban schools are from Hartford — and state officials' record of rejecting proposals that would sizably boost participation.

"The numbers are grossly inadequate. Open Choice isn't working," said Bruce Douglas, the executive director of the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), the school district responsible for running Open Choice and several magnet schools. "We are spending money wildly on magnet schools. If we had spent that money on Open Choice instead, we would be further ahead than we are now."

Statewide, Connecticut is slated to spend \$325 million to operate regional magnet schools this year compared to \$43 million on Open Choice. In the Hartford region about \$200 million will be spent to operate magnet schools and \$30 million on Open Choice. It costs the state \$12,220 for each city student enrolled in a magnet school.

Additionally the state has spent more than \$1.4 billion to build and renovate magnet schools in an effort to attract suburban white students to schools with Hartford children.

A trickle of growth

Every January, the state education commissioner writes local superintendents and asks them to enroll more minority students from Hartford. And every year, superintendents enroll far fewer students than they were asked to.

Simbury was asked to enroll 20 more Open Choice students this school year, but Simsbury officials elected to enroll the same number. Of the 26 districts eligible to participate in the program, seven districts decreased the number of city students and three districts enrolled the same number this school year.

"We work hard to help it go up every year," said Glen Peterson, the director of the State Department of Education's Regional School Choice Office. "You set your expectations high, and then you try and get them. We ask for more than we think we will get."

It's been nearly 20 years since the Connecticut Supreme Court ruled in the Sheff vs. O'Neill case that "students in Hartford suffer daily from the devastating effects that racial and ethnic isolation, as well as poverty, have on their education."

Still under court oversight, the state year after year falls short of its promises to substantially grow Open Choice.

In the most recent court-sanctioned agreement, Connecticut's Attorney General George Jepsen agreed to the "target" of adding 325 seats for city students this school year in the nearby suburban districts, which educate 82,300 students.

However, participation in Open Choice increased by 133 students, CREC reports.

This trickle of children winning coveted spots in communities that include Avon, West Hartford and Glastonbury comes as the school-age population in all of the participating suburban districts has declined, on average by 7 percent.

Over the last eight school years, suburban districts that participate in Open Choice have enrolled an additional 1,019 Hartford students while overall enrollment in those districts declined by 7,715 students. Districts that do not participate in Open Choice because more than half their students are already minorities include Bloomfield, East Hartford, Manchester and Windsor.

Instead of filling the empty desks with additional city students, several districts have moved to lay off teachers instead. "They made a local decision. We thought maybe enrollment decline would be an opportunity to increase Open Choice, but it's not necessarily so," said Peterson. "I had a meeting with a superintendent, and the issue was they just finished their budget proposal and were eliminating 12 teaching jobs because the enrollment was decreasing, and therefore their class sizes were going up. He therefore had less room to take Open Choice kids than he would have previously because of the nature of the enrollment and the financial situation in the district."

Why aren't district's participating more?

The shop classes at Plainville High School were recently revitalized so instruction could focus more on engineering, technology and math. The new equipment — including a 3D printer, robots and a textile machine — was not cheap. So when the state offered the district \$50,000 if it increased the number of children from Hartford it enrolls, local officials seized the opportunity. "Those changes wouldn't have happened without that grant," said Jeffrey Kitching, the district's superintendent.

Districts lined up again for another round of funding to cover construction or instructional materials in exchange for expanding enrollment this school year. And then shortly before the start of the school year, districts were told that the funding stream was severed.

"It was unfortunate," said Kitching, whose district had planned to purchase equipment to overhaul its middle school engineering and technology instruction. The elimination of this grant and state rejection of other efforts to entice suburban participation worry the attorney who represents the parents that successfully sued the state.

"The state is staring in the face of a cost-affective remedy, and their approach has been dismal. They can't say, 'We don't want any more magnets, and we don't want substantially more Open Choice seats,'" said Martha Stone, an attorney for the parents and the executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy. "They're depriving our kids of an adequate educational opportunity."

Douglas agrees. "If they keep saying 'no' to everything, then what's their plan? The low participation, it's strong evidence of a lack of a strategic plan," said Douglas, who is retiring in December from CREC.

State leaders contend the incentives are robust enough to lure suburban districts to enroll more minority children from Hartford. There are three main grants districts receive each year from the state for Open Choice students.

The first is the Open Choice grant, which gives districts between \$4,000 and \$8,000 per city student, depending on how many enroll.

The second is the Education Cost Sharing grant, which is the state's primary education grant for all districts, regardless of participation in Open Choice. A district receives half of its per-student grant for each Open Choice student it enrolls. For Granby, that's about \$1,400 per city student. For West Hartford, it's \$900.

The third grant provides between \$575 and \$900 per student for added academic supports, such as tutoring. If a district's enrollment of city students tops 2 percent, the district will get an additional \$50,000 a year for these purposes.

The state reports that all these grants mean districts with high participation levels get more than \$10,000 per student. "Obviously, that's a big incentive," said Peterson. "It's certainly approaching, if not greater than, a district's average per pupil cost."

"What town wouldn't go for that?" asked Douglas during an interview, pointing out that separate funding also pays for transportation and special education costs.

Participation numbers suggest the incentives aren't attractive enough. One-third of the suburban districts enroll fewer than 2 percent of their students from Hartford.

Kitching — whose district enrolls more city students than nearly every other at 5.3 percent — said that districts have different pressures to consider. "If you only look at the financial piece, you miss the boat," he said. "It's completely reliant on the context of the district."

Got suggestions?

For example, Rocky Hill needed a new middle school and saw an opportunity as the state moved forward with a new state-of-the-art magnet school in town, to be operated by CREC. Rocky Hill school and town officials proposed building their new middle school on the same site as the magnet school and sharing common spaces, such as a cafeteria, gym and computer labs.

The state typically reimburses Rocky Hill 37 percent of construction costs. District leaders and the Rocky Hill legislative delegation were asking the state to boost that rate to at least 80 percent, a move that would cost the state \$11.6 million more. In exchange, Rocky Hill promised to enroll 150 more Open Choice students.

The legislature didn't take them up on the offer, and voted to cover just half the costs for their new middle school. Meanwhile, state legislators voted to spend \$49.3 million to build another regional magnet school, the Aerospace Elementary School, in Rocky Hill.

"It was disappointing," said state Sen. Paul Doyle, D-Rocky Hill. "There is a desire to help with the goals of Sheff... This was quite a unique solution."

Officials at the State Department of Education declined to say whether they supported the project. "We are always open to having discussions about how communities can expand their participation in Open Choice. Deliberations of any proposal that extends beyond the multitude of existing incentives must factor in many additional considerations that extend beyond the specifics of the proposal, such as current existing space in the district to expand Open Choice seats, projected growth in the district, among many others.

"Given the complexity of the analysis required, such conversations often remain ongoing," spokeswoman Abbe Smith wrote in a statement responding to questions about the department's position on the Rocky Hill proposal.

Other proposals to entice districts to participate have not been acted upon.

Douglas said he has suggested numerous times that the education department exempt Open Choice students from school ratings and other school accountability measures for their first year or two in a new district. Such a change would mean city students would not affect a suburban school's performance ratings, test results or teacher evaluations until they have been attending school in the district for some time.

"We want these kids to be part of the local school district. We don't want them to be treated like 'other.' We don't want them to be referred to as those kids. Anything that we do to differentiate, we really don't want to do," said Peterson. "I think for the most part the districts and superintendents are taking the number of students they feel comfortable with."

Meanwhile, parents are flocking to enroll their children in magnet schools since that's where the open seats mostly are.

"We are open to both at this time," said Suhash Ghosh, a parent looking for a preschool for his 3-year-old daughter next year, either through Open Choice or in a magnet school.

When the state began expanding preschool — an initiative dubbed Smart Start — efforts to exchange that additional state funding for an increase in how many students suburban districts enroll were largely ignored.

Three districts were given funding to open new preschool classrooms this school year. Only Enfield promised to increase participation in Open Choice.

Meanwhile, Ghosh found out at a recent School Choice Fair that participating Open Choice districts don't offer preschool to 3-year-olds, and only four of the districts offer preschool to 4-year-olds.

"We want her preferably to start next year," he said, after leaving the Open Choice booth.

He then headed with his daughter Suhani and wife Neeta Roy to get more information from one of the many magnet school booths that offer preschool for 3-year-olds.

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