

EDITORIAL

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Too Many Hartford Magnet Schools? No, But We Need A Plan

Bruce Douglas is wrong in his startling statement that there are too many magnet schools in the Hartford region.

But Mr. Douglas — the forceful architect of 16 magnets in his 18 years as head Capitol Region Education Council — is right about most everything else. Including his comment that the lottery used to choose Hartford children for the limited number of magnet seats is "immoral."

It's time to think beyond magnets — theme schools that draw students from outside a neighborhood because of their unique offerings.

It's been two decades since the Connecticut Supreme Court ordered the desegregation of Hartford public schools in the landmark Sheff v. O'Neill case. The state has spent \$3 billion to create magnet schools and otherwise support Sheff integration efforts.

All partners in the case need to take a deep breath and assess the road ahead. That road should include magnet schools, which do attract a more diverse student body than neighborhood schools. They just don't have to be in brand-new budget-busting buildings. A more expansive lottery system could fill existing magnets and new ones could be shaped out of existing schools.

But Mr. Douglas is on point when he says that a quality education shouldn't depend on the luck of the draw. He isn't the only one who has begun to question the costs of the magnet-centric Sheff integration effort. Critics in the General Assembly — from the Education Committee to the Appropriations Committee — have been given pause as state budget deficits persist.

What Magnets Have Done

It would be inaccurate to suggest the magnet-school desegregation effort has been misguided. The region's magnet schools have provided high-quality educational choices to thousands of Hartford families and placed almost 45 percent of Hartford children in schools narrowly defined as desegregated (less than 75 percent minority enrollment).

Tireless advocates such as Martha Stone, a lawyer for the Sheff plaintiffs, deserve enormous credit for the desegregation progress. But the advocates are right when they say the state must stop the year-to-year incremental goal-setting and come up with a better long-term blueprint, a wider vision of how to integrate Hartford schools.

The fact remains that magnets and the Open Choice program (by which Hartford students attend suburban schools and vice versa) are all contortions meant to react to the housing and social segregation in the region.

Many Hartford households would undoubtedly like better housing choices and better neighborhood schools. Others would undoubtedly prefer living in richer school districts in surrounding towns. But most of the suburbs have used zoning and other policies to keep the cost of suburban homes out of the reach of low-income Hartford residents. And suburbs, to their shame, have provided too few Open Choice seats even when they have lots of empty desks.

So, What's The Plan Now?

Hartford magnets, Open Choice and charters (independently operated schools that can be owned by for-profit companies) have been the only tuition-free choices for Hartford families faced with too-often-substandard neighborhood schools — and those choices are limited: Only one in every 3 or 4 applicants gets a magnet or Open Choice seat.

It seems obvious that a vision and a plan — a long-range plan informed by all the stakeholders — are vital. The plan has to look not just at desegregating schools, but at building the supports — economic, transportation, jobs and housing — that will make Hartford schools succeed. (Why, for example, build a new Weaver High School in an isolated spot in the city when it could be connected to a local college, as is the Learning Corridor, and transit that will bring in diverse students?)

A combination of options — charter schools, expanded Open Choice, more affordable housing in suburban school districts that are experiencing declining enrollments and yes, more magnets — should be part of the equation.

With Connecticut suffering from one of the nation's worst achievement gaps — the disparity between white students' academic performance and that of students of color — a strategy to end school segregation has to be shaped.