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Hartford School Board Pushes To 'Demagnetize' Journalism And Media Academy

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HARTFORD — The city board of education passed a resolution Tuesday night that essentially demands that the state "demagnetize" Journalism and Media Academy and revert it to a neighborhood school.

The 7-0 vote allows Superintendent Beth Schiavino-Narvaez to work with the state Department of Education to strip the school of its magnet status effective July 2017. The state says it would need to approve the final plan.

In unusually blunt comments centering on the landmark Sheff v. O'Neill desegregation case, Hartford school officials say Journalism and Media Academy has no hope of meeting integration goals and that attempts to keep the school from spiraling further out of racial imbalance have hurt Hartford students.

When Journalism and Media badly misses its integration targets, that failure also hurts the state, which is the defendant in the long-running Sheff case.

"We look forward to learning more about their ideas and working with them as this process moves forward," state education spokeswoman Abbe Smith said Tuesday.

But Martha Stone, an attorney for the Sheff plaintiffs, said she believed the resolution was "premature" and that the school could do more to market itself to suburban families. She also noted that Hartford is part of continuing Sheff talks and that the district's Equity 2020 panel that is reviewing school facilities is months away from making recommendations.



"It feels to me like there's a perfect storm, with the Sheff mediation and the Equity 2020 and declining enrollment in the Hartford schools," Stone said. "There should be a carefully thought-out plan that should not be done piecemeal. It should be done in coordination with each other."

Hartford's push to demagnetize comes just three years after Journalism and Media Academy, originally a program of Weaver High School, was converted to a magnet school under the court-ordered Sheff agreement.

In 2013, the school opened on Tower Avenue in north Hartford after a heavily state-funded, \$37 million renovation and expansion of the former Barbour School that included new television and radio studios. Journalism and Media was built for 400 students, with the idea that white suburban students would fill some of the seats.

The school is way underenrolled: Among its nearly 200 students in the past school year, only 23 students were white or Asian, according to state data released in January that identified Journalism and Media as out of compliance with Sheff standards.

Under Sheff, white and Asian students are supposed to make up at least a quarter of the magnet school's enrollment. And while about 85 Journalism and Media students came from outside of Hartford, data show, few of them were white and lived in areas that include East Hartford and New Britain. Overall, 88 percent of Journalism and Media students were identified as black and Latino in the 2015-16 year.

Despite the school's empty seats, the district said Tuesday that 21 Hartford students who wanted to enroll at Journalism and Media last school year were left on the waiting list. The enrollment was suppressed because accepting those stu-

dents, who were likely black and Latino, would have thrown the school further into noncompliance, school officials said.

"The school was built to help Hartford children, and Hartford children can't go there?" school board Chairman Richard Wareing said. "In the name of helping Hartford children? Yeah. It's one of the most perverse, unintended consequences of Sheff, which is not to say Sheff hasn't done a lot to help a lot of kids, because it has. But like everything else, it has negative, unintended consequences."

Board Vice Chairwoman Tiffany Glanville, in an op-ed published in *The Courant*, said students on the waiting list "clamor for the opportunity to matriculate in a high-quality school right in their backyard."

The board already plans to include Journalism and Media Academy as part of the new Weaver High when it reopens after a \$100 million renovation, expected to be finished in three years. And district leaders have been talking about using the gleaming Tower Avenue building for a neighborhood school.

On Tuesday, Stone said Hartford officials had not consulted Sheff plaintiffs on the proposal to demagnetize Journalism and Media Academy. "It's a premature decision," she said, and suggested adjusting the state's enrollment caps, perhaps tweaking the school theme or doing more to expand and publicize the school's partnership with Connecticut Public Broadcasting Network, which hosts juniors and seniors during the school day at its Asylum Avenue headquarters.

Stone also expressed alarm over the board's pointed tone in its resolution, which she considered "needlessly inflammatory." It stated, in part, that "the board's support for the goals of Sheff notwithstanding, the first obligation of the board is not to support the state's attempts to meet its obligations under Sheff, but rather to provide all of Hartford's children with a high quality education in as excellent a facility as can be obtained from the city of Hartford."

"To me, that's not a necessary sentence, and to me, you have obligations to do both — it's not one or the other," Stone said. "I'm really trying to de-escalate the tension so that we can coordinate, so we can work together, so we have an overall coordinated plan."

An open question is whether suburban students already enrolled at Journalism and Media will be able to remain there if it's no longer a magnet school, said Donna Sodipo, CPBN's senior vice president of education. "Will students' learning be interrupted?"

<http://www.courant.com/community/hartford/hc-hartford-jma-demagnetize-vote-0817-20160816-story.html>