

The New York Times

Sunday Review EDITORIAL

Fighting Racial Isolation in Hartford

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD JAN. 31, 2015

The fact that New York has the most segregated public schools in the nation does not bode well for the state's future. It is a disaster for poor and minority children, who are disproportionately trapped in schools that will not prepare them for the new economy. And it is harming children of all races and economic levels who are in demographically homogeneous schools that do not reflect society or expose them to fresh perspectives.

New York's political leaders need not look far for ideas. Connecticut has a desegregation program that has revitalized the once-dismal school system in Hartford. Created in response to a 1996 State Supreme Court ruling, it has relied on a voluntary school transfer plan and a vibrant system of magnet schools to improve opportunities for inner-city children and draw suburban families back to a city that was considered an educational dead zone.

This renaissance has its roots in a 1989 civil rights lawsuit, *Sheff v. O'Neill*. The plaintiffs' lawyers argued that minority children in Hartford and white children in the surrounding suburban districts were

both being denied the racially integrated public school educations they were entitled to under the state's Constitution. The complaint also showed that the heavily poor, mainly minority children of Hartford were receiving a worse education than their suburban counterparts.

The Connecticut Supreme Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and urged political leaders to put school integration at the top of their agenda. Eventually, the state, the city and the plaintiffs agreed to a sweeping desegregation plan that called for a huge state investment in a new system of magnet schools and a two-way transfer plan that allowed Hartford children to attend school in the suburbs and suburban children to travel to the city. One of the most prestigious magnet schools, the Academy of Aerospace and Engineering, is rated the best high school in the state and 15th in the nation by U.S. News and World Report.

Connecticut as a whole still has some of the country's worst achievement gaps. But a study of 2012 data by the Capitol Region Education Council, a nonprofit that operates 19 of the Hartford area's magnet schools, showed



Students at the Aerospace and Engineering High School in Hartford.
Credit Gregg Vigliotti for The New York Times

academic improvement for all ethnic groups — and smaller achievement gaps than in the state as a whole — even though the schools have a higher percentage of poor students than the state average.

Racial isolation was the norm when the suit was first filed. Recent data show that 47.5 percent of Hartford children now attend integrated schools — defined under the Sheff agreement as schools in which fewer than three-fourths of the children are members of minority groups. This means that more than half of city students are still confined to segregated, often low-quality schools. But the agreement has shown many parents what public schooling can be and is creating demand for reform of the schools left behind.

The Hartford experience shows that it is possible to fight racial isolation and improve education at the same time. Political leaders in New York should bear that in mind when they feel tempted to throw up their hands and declare the segregation problem insoluble.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/01/opinion/sunday/fighting-racial-isolation-in-hartford.html>