

State drags feet on disclosing school desegregation data

By: JACQUELINE RABE THOMAS | December 22, 2015

State officials may have promised a judge in February that they would offer hundreds more students enrollment in desegregated environments this school year, but they're not releasing the data to show whether that has happened.

That agreement to offer 1,325 more children living in Hartford seats in existing magnet or suburban public schools was the most recent result of a 19-year-old Connecticut Supreme Court decision in the Sheff vs. O'Neill case that ordered the state to eliminate the educational inequities caused by the capital city's segregated schools. A lower court has been supervising compliance with the decision ever since.

The state passed the deadline to report how many students are in diverse settings more than five weeks ago – and declined Tuesday to provide any timeline for when the information will be available.

Last school year, nearly half of Hartford's 21,500 students were attending schools in a "reduced isolated setting," which means no more than 75 percent of the students are minorities. But thousands of Hartford students were still attending schools with higher concentrations of minority students.

In a meeting that the public was unable to attend Tuesday, a Hartford Superior Court judge met with the parties involved in the desegregation case for 90 minutes. The meeting included attorneys representing the parents that sued the state; Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's top lawyer, Karen Buffkin; and attorneys representing Hartford Public Schools and the attorney general's office.

"We came back to court today because of our frustration with the pace of things," said Martha Stone, an attorney representing the parents. "The needle got stuck. We are looking for forward progress."

State officials – including Connecticut's education chief, the governor's attorney, and a spokesman for Malloy – all declined to comment.

In September, the state informed the court that it wants to end court involvement in the case and that it would not be spending money to build any new magnet schools, which have been the state's primary strategy in the past for integrating Hartford's schools.

"The state knows it's constitutional obligation," Ralph Urban, assistant attorney general, told a Hartford Superior Court judge Friday. "The state, frankly, knows how to do what it needs to do to continue to improve the City of Hartford schools. We don't need the plaintiffs to micromanage us."

Elizabeth Horton Sheff, whose son was the lead plaintiff in the case, said she is disheartened by the state.

"I am saddened that it takes this much effort to uphold our children's constitutional rights. I've never been in such an ugly, negative, hostile negotiation for this case," she said during an interview. "They have no concern for missed deadlines and how that affects kids' choices."



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Elizabeth Horton Sheff leafs through last year's one-year agreement.