

## With 'Mixed Emotions,' Sheff Plaintiffs Sign New Agreement In Desegregation Case

June 10, 2016

Matthew Kauffman and Vanessa de la Torre

HARTFORD — Frustrated plaintiffs in the Sheff v. O'Neill lawsuit accepted a new agreement Friday to continue desegregation efforts in Hartford, asking a judge to approve a one-year extension that does little more than maintain the status quo during the state's fiscal troubles.

"It's with mixed emotions that I present this stipulation to your honor," Attorney Martha Stone, who has been involved in the case since it was filed 27 years ago, told Superior Court Judge Marshall K. Berger.

"Great start," the judge quipped.

The stipulation — the fourth short-term agreement in the last 3 1/2 years — sets a new goal for increasing the number of seats in suburban schools that are available to Hartford students through the Open Choice program. It also maintains funding for the expansion of Sheff magnet schools that were already approved to add additional grades, and directs that any state money left over in a special Sheff account be used to partly offset cuts in state funding for area magnet schools.



Breakthrough Magnet School  
Students at Breakthrough Magnet School in Hartford. File photo. (Richard Messina / Hartford Courant)

Even as she praised the progress that has allowed thousands of Hartford students an opportunity to attend innovative schools, Stone criticized the pace of progress.

"There is going to have to be an increase in the amount of courage, vision and leadership that is shown by all the parties," she told the court. "The glass is still half-empty. And the promise to thousands of children in Hartford is still very elusive. So we're going to have to step it up and we're going to have to do some things differently."

Seven Sheff magnet schools are slated to add grades next school year, which will add an estimated 474 seats, nearly half of which will be reserved for students who live in Hartford, according to the state Department of Education.

The most concrete change in the latest stipulation is a requirement that the Open Choice program, in which more than 2,000 Hartford students attend non-magnet schools in the suburbs, be expanded by 300 seats. The Open Choice program had become an increasingly popular tool in the Sheff negotiations, and the state has steadily increased the amount of money suburban districts receive for accepting Hartford students. Towns that accept large numbers of students can receive as much as \$8,000 for each student. But despite the millions of dollars offered, suburban districts have consistent-

ly fallen short of the goals set by past Sheff stipulations.

"The suburban districts have been really recalcitrant in offering a sufficient number of seats," Stone said after the court hearing.

While Stone spent several minutes in court expressing her disappointment with the negotiations, lawyers for the state and city made only brief statements to the judge asking that the settlement be approved. "We think it's realistic and appropriate, under the circumstances," Assistant Attorney General Ralph Urban said.

Those circumstances include the ongoing state budget crisis -- including nearly \$1 billion in cuts recently enacted -- that the Sheff lawyers acknowledged played a role in the stipulation they signed.

In the landmark 1996 decision, the state Supreme Court declared that severe racial and ethnic isolation in Hartford schools "deprives schoolchildren of a substantially equal educational opportunity and requires the state to take further remedial action." But the court ordered no specific action and set no timetable, leading to two decades of sometimes-contentious negotiations.

The state has spent nearly \$3 billion promoting integrated schools in the Hartford region since the Sheff decision, with much of the money going for the construction of a network of magnet schools in Hartford and suburban towns. Neither the plaintiffs nor lawyers for the city or state had an estimate of what the new initiatives might cost.

The parties also agreed Friday to bring in a mediator — to be named as early as next week — to help hash out the next stipulation, which will be the eighth written agreement since the case was decided nearly 20 years ago.

As she did when the last agreement was signed 16 months ago, Stone said Friday she hoped the next round of negotiations will produce creative, long-term approaches to improving educational quality for Hartford schoolchildren. She called on state leaders to take a greater leadership role in promoting integration.

"We all need to tackle this differently and look at it as an opportunity, not as a burden," she said. "You can't ignore it and you can't maintain the status quo. Because the plaintiffs are not going away and the Connecticut Supreme Court mandate is not going away."