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In Hartford Magnet School Visit, Education Secretary Gives High Marks For Diversity

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HARTFORD — Elizabeth Horton Sheff seemed to sense the restlessness that has been percolating in recent months and years over the Hartford school desegregation case that bears her son's name.

At a roundtable panel Wednesday at Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy, one of the standout magnet schools that resulted from the state's landmark Sheff v. O'Neill settlement, Horton Sheff compared herself to a mother bear who is protective of her cubs.

The education activist had quite the audience: U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King Jr., U.S. Sens. Chris Murphy and Richard Blumenthal, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy and state Education Commissioner Dianna Wentzell were among those seated nearby.

"If we do not prepare our children, give them equal access to a quality integrated education where people can come together and learn together, be American together, compete in the global economy together, then the nation is at peril," said Horton Sheff, who joined suit with other families against the state in 1989. "We've had stormy days here, but we've made progress. We're at a point now in this state where, because there have been ups and downs, people are getting frustrated. ...

"'Because my child didn't get in,' people are getting frustrated," she said, referring to residents who do not win a magnet seat in the school choice lottery. At city school board meetings and public forums, there has also been open resentment over Sheff's racial integration quotas, and the deterioration of several city neighborhood schools as magnet schools rise.

"Now is not the time to turn back and throw the baby out with the bathwater," Horton Sheff said Wednesday. "We have come far, much too far to drown in shallow water. And so we are at a point now where we need to lay down our petty differences, because it's the adults ... that can either make this situation happen or not."

During the panel, no one disagreed with Horton Sheff. King, who was in town to promote the Obama administration's "Stronger Together" budget proposal to encourage socioeconomic diversity in schools, said the desegregation work in Hartford could serve as "a model for the country," with its heavily state-funded magnet schools to attract students from the suburbs, voluntary busing and seats reserved for Hartford children in suburban districts.

Mostly, the politicians, parents, students and educators on the panel talked about the life-changing impact of having a diverse classroom, including the importance of hiring and retaining minority teachers. National teacher of the year Jahana Hayes, who teaches social studies at John F. Kennedy High School in Waterbury, recalled a white student telling her years ago that she was grateful to have her as a teacher "because I know that what my father says is not true about black people."

"To hear a student say that to you," Hayes said, "really says that we have a greater obligation and responsibility to society, because we cannot be surprised by the adults in this world if we're graduating students who have no regard for anyone but themselves and the people that look like them."

Deb Avery, a social studies teacher at the integrated Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy, said her school is so amazing that it turns bittersweet.

"One of the things that my students say that really bothers me is that they really feel like they won the lottery when they got here," Avery said. "And it shouldn't be like that in America. You shouldn't think, 'Oh my God, this is so great, but I'm the only one who got lucky enough to get here.'"

While citing the legacy of Sheff and Hartford's "extremely successful magnet schools," Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin allud-

ed to the high-poverty, highly segregated, non-magnet neighborhood schools that dot the city.

“There’s much, much more work to do,” Bronin said. “We’re a city where we have many schools that remain not just racially isolated, but socioeconomically isolated.”

After the panel, city school board member Tiffany Glanville said she supported a more “inclusive view of diversity” that includes students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, English language learners and those in special education. Just this week, the board passed a resolution to “demagnetize” Journalism and Media Academy, a magnet high school that has fallen short of Sheff’s integration goals because it has failed to attract enough white or Asian students.

“I welcome the conversation that was started today about a broader definition of diversity than the strict racial quotas we have been grappling with,” Glanville said.

Murphy, who has introduced federal legislation that would offer \$120 million in grants to support school districts’ voluntary integration efforts, said the thorniness of desegregation “is not a Hartford problem, it’s not a Connecticut problem. This is an American problem. The federal government has been at its best when we have made commitments to marry together education and civil rights.”