

Magnet Schools Struggle On Quotas State Likely To Miss Integration Mark

By MATTHEW KAUFFMAN and VANESSA DE LA TORRE

November 28, 2017

The number of black and Latino Hartford students attending integrated schools has likely dropped by more than 1,000 this year, as some Greater Hartford magnets struggle to attract enough white and Asian students to meet racial quotas under the state's landmark desegregation case.

The state does not usually report its annual compliance in the Sheff v. O'Neill case until December. But this fall, The Courant gathered enrollment data directly from magnet school operators, and those preliminary figures show that the state will apparently miss the court-ordered mandate that 47.5 percent of Hartford-resident black and Latino students attend integrated schools.

Last year, state education officials said a record-high 49 percent of Hartford's roughly 21,000 black and Latino schoolchildren were in "reduced-isolation" settings.

The drop comes at a tense time for the Sheff parties, as both sides gear up for another potential court battle that could decide the fate of the long-running civil rights suit. Reasons for the decline are in the enrollment data: Four magnet schools that were deemed integrated last year no longer meet the Sheff standard, which requires that black and Latino students make up no more than 75 percent of the student body. In addition, a fifth magnet school closed over the summer and a sixth lost its magnet status and reverted to a neighborhood school.

Martha Stone, a lawyer for the Sheff plaintiffs, said she has not seen verified enrollment figures and the numbers could change when the state releases its compliance report next month. The state uses an enrollment snapshot from Oct. 1. **"But our understanding is that there are still too many schools that are not compliant and it's tremendously disheartening," Stone said. "And there could have been numerous steps taken by the state to avoid this situation."**

Returning To Court

Twenty-one years ago, the state Supreme Court sided with the Sheff plaintiffs and ordered the state to desegregate Hartford schools. Despite a \$3 billion network of nationally touted magnet schools, most Hartford students still attend segregated neighborhood schools.

The new Courant analysis shows that even among magnets that meet the integration goal, about 100 fewer minority Hartford students were enrolled in the fall as those schools tilted toward suburban applicants to meet the racial quotas.

Meanwhile, negotiations between the Sheff plaintiffs and the state are deadlocked, with the civil-rights lawyers who brought the case frustrated by what they see as a lack of commitment by the state, and lawyers for the Malloy administration arguing that the Sheff remedy no longer serves the Hartford students it was intended to help. Last June, for the first time since the two sides agreed on a desegregation plan in 2003, talks collapsed and Superior Court Judge Marshall K. Berger later stepped in to enforce a one-year extension of the expired agreement.

The Sheff plaintiffs have asked the judge to schedule a trial in mid-2018, preparing for another showdown in the case a generation after it began.

With thousands of students left on magnet school waiting lists, the plaintiffs say the state needs to lift the cap on the number of magnet school seats it will fund. The state has countered that changing demographics in the region have made it

difficult for schools to meet the current integration standard, leading some schools to leave seats empty rather than enroll minority children.

And now, Sheff plaintiffs say it may be even harder to integrate schools without the incentive of free prekindergarten for children as young as 3, which had been offered for years by regional operators such as the Capitol Region Education Council — an important marketing tool for magnet elementary schools looking to attract suburban parents who would otherwise have to pay for pricey day care or pre-K in their home districts. Starting next year, the state will enforce a law requiring regional districts to charge higher-income families for prekindergarten.

The Courant's analysis of magnet enrollment data shows that while a significant number of suburban students return to their home districts by first grade, the infusion of white and Asian children in pre-K is the integration difference-maker at some schools — even if classrooms for students in later grades are heavily segregated. Overall, two-thirds of magnet schools run by Hartford Public Schools and CREC have at least one grade level that does not meet the integration standard.

For example, at CREC's University of Hartford Magnet School, the overall student body is about 25 percent white and Asian — just barely meeting the Sheff standard. But in Pre-K classes, the percentage is nearly twice as high, and without so many white and Asian preschoolers, the school would not be considered integrated.

There is a similar pattern in Hartford Public Schools, which will continue to offer prekindergarten for free in its magnet programs. At Breakthrough II in north Hartford, pre-K classes are comfortably integrated. But in the school's seventh- and eighth-grade classrooms, about 90 percent of the students are black or Latino, a level of racial isolation that integration experts consider "hyper-segregated."

In the case of Noah Webster MicroSociety Magnet School in the city's West End — one of the four Sheff schools that likely fell out of compliance this fall — first grade is the only non-Pre-K grade at the school that is considered integrated, according to preliminary data. Yet in the bid to meet the Sheff goal, city first-grader Isiah Rivera, who sat at the top of Noah Webster's waiting list, was turned away because adding another Latino student would have put the school further out of compliance, The Courant reported in September.

Hartford school officials were not available for comment.

Stone, however, sees a silver lining in the grade-by-grade integration gaps, if it means schools that were not integrated have worked harder to attract white and Asian families to their entry grades — and if they work to retain those families as the children move into higher grades.

Months ago, the state argued unsuccessfully in court for permission to count certain schools as integrated if no more than 80 percent of the students were black or Latino — instead of the current 75-percent mandate. If that proposal had been accepted, the state might have been able to count as integrated the four schools that fell out of compliance this year, based on the preliminary numbers: Noah Webster; the Connecticut River Academy in East Hartford, run by Goodwin College; and CREC's Public Safety Academy in Enfield and Academy of Science and Innovation in New Britain.

A third CREC school, the Metropolitan Learning Center in Bloomfield, fell just short of the Sheff target, although its students likely will be counted as receiving an integrated education under a waiver granted to magnets that are within one percentage point of the Sheff standard.

Superintendent of CREC Schools Tim Sullivan said a multimillion-dollar grant under the federal Magnet School Assistance Program will improve recruiting and pay for an overhaul of the magnet themes at the three schools that failed to attract enough white and Asian students. CREC sought the grant earlier this year to pay for a "significant revision" of the schools' themes, with the aim of attracting a more-diverse student body and reducing the achievement gap in the region. "CREC is committed to providing a quality integrated education at all of our magnet schools," Sullivan said. "We are confident that all three schools will be compliant in the near future."

Lynn Guerriero, senior director of magnet school operations for Goodwin College, said Goodwin's magnet schools are facing the same challenges as other Sheff schools — mainly, the shrinking percentage of lottery applicants who are white or Asian. It's an issue Goodwin is discussing with the Sheff plaintiffs, the state, CREC and Hartford Public Schools as they work to meet compliance standards.

"We believe the issues facing many magnet schools in this region are primarily due to shifting demographics in the region," Guerriero said.