

Number Of Hartford Students In Integrated Schools Drops By Hundreds

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The number of Hartford minority students counted as attending integrated schools under the Sheff v. O'Neill ruling dropped by more than 800 this year, with hundreds more counted only because their segregated schools were granted waivers.

By the state's count, 45.6 percent of Hartford's roughly 21,000 black and Latino students attend school in a "reduced-isolation" setting. That is a drop from the 49 percent of students counted last year, and below the 47.5 percent figure mandated by the most-recent settlement between the state and the Sheff plaintiffs.

Under the Sheff ruling, a school is deemed integrated if at least 25 percent of its students are white, Asian, Native American or Pacific Islander, or it is operating under a waiver. Since last year, five magnet schools fell out of compliance: Hartford's Noah Webster MicroSociety School; the Connecticut River Academy in East Hartford, run by Goodwin College; and three schools operated by the Capitol Region Education Council: the Public Safety Academy in Enfield, the Academy of Science and Innovation in New Britain, and the Metropolitan Learning Center in Bloomfield.

But through waivers, the state still counts students attending three other magnet schools that are well below the 25-percent integration quota, and two more schools that are within 1 percent of the standard.

A sixth school, Hartford's Journalism and Media Academy, was "de-magnetized" over the summer after years of fruitless attempts to attract an integrated student body. This year, the school has a minority enrollment of nearly 94 percent, but it is still included in the state's count of integrated schools, based on a waiver that had been granted in past years.

"It's more than disappointing. It's unacceptable. And it could have been avoided," said Martha Stone, a lawyer for the Sheff plaintiffs. "You can fix this issue. You can allow for more opportunities for Hartford kids, which is what this case is all about."

The number of black and Latino Hartford students attending suburban schools through the Open Choice program also dipped slightly this year, with 2,121 students in the program, down from 2,157. Two years ago, state education officials called on the suburbs to take about 2,400 students, and offered larger grants to schools that agreed. Few did.

The state Supreme Court ruled in 1996 that Hartford's segregated schools violated the Constitutional rights of its students, calling on officials to create integrated schools "before another generation of children suffers the consequences of a segregated public school education."

The state spent \$3 billion on a nationally touted network of interdistrict magnet schools that this year enrolls more than 7,500 black and Latino Hartford students. But after a period of steady growth, fewer and fewer Hartford students have attended truly integrated schools in recent years, with the Sheff plaintiffs blaming enrollment caps imposed by the state, and the state blaming the region's changing demographics.

The Courant reported earlier this year that at some schools, officials were checking the race and ethnicity of students on wait lists, admitting them if they were white or Asian, and leaving available seats empty if the students were black or Latino. The state has seized on that to argue for a change in the Sheff integration standard.

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“Earlier this year, the state sought to mitigate the unintended negative consequences of the Sheff compliance framework with a proposal to change the current 25% reduced-isolation standard to a more sustainable standard of 20% for schools below or close to the integration standard,” the state Department of Education wrote in a statement accompanying Wednesday’s release of the integration numbers. “The proposal would have offered more Hartford students enrollment in integrated settings by creating a diversity standard that recognized the changing demographics in the Sheff region, taking into account that an increasing percentage of applicants to magnet schools are students of color.”

Sheff plaintiffs have countered that a school in which four out of five students are black or Latino is not integrated, and a minority population that high would make it increasingly difficult for those schools to attract white and Asian families.

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.

That extension expires this summer, and the two sides are likely headed toward a new court battle in mid-2018 — nearly three decades after the Sheff suit was first filed.