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Op-Ed: Lawsuit Threatens Sheff Desegregation Gains

Elizabeth Horton Sheff and Sandra Vermont-Hollis

In July 1996, the Connecticut Supreme Court issued *Sheff v. O'Neill*, a landmark school desegregation ruling. Based on the principles established in the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board* decision, the state Supreme Court ordered the state to remove the barriers that denied students of all races in Hartford and its suburbs the opportunity to attend integrated schools.

Because of *Sheff*, education in Hartford looks very different today than it did 20 years ago. At the center of the transformation is a regional school system established after the *Sheff* ruling that serves thousands of students in 41 racially and economically integrated magnet schools. Those students — a population that includes almost half of Hartford's black and Latino students — now benefit from studying in a diverse and academically stimulating environment. Students at *Sheff*-related schools not only outperform their counterparts in Hartford public schools, but also perform extremely well in relation to all students across Connecticut.

Sadly, the hard-won progress that has arisen from *Sheff* is now being threatened by a lawsuit brought by the Pacific Legal Foundation, a conservative California law firm that has challenged racial integration policies, bilingual education and other programs that help students of color. Pacific Legal Foundation has come to Connecticut to challenge the lottery system that determines enrollment in the magnet schools; arguments begin today. If the suit succeeds, the region's magnet schools would re-segregate, erasing years of progress.

We know firsthand what a devastating blow that would be for all students. One of us, Elizabeth Horton Sheff, is the mother of Milo Sheff, the lead plaintiff in the *Sheff* lawsuit. The other, Sandra Vermont-Hollis, is the mother of Saige Hollis, a high school freshman at one of Hartford's integrated magnet schools, where she is thriving academically and socially. Neither of us claims that the magnet school system is perfect. But both of us firmly believe that to undo the *Sheff* ruling would be an enormous step backward.

The progress achieved through *Sheff* consists of far more than just high graduation rates and improved test scores. When students have a chance to learn alongside kids who come from different racial and economic backgrounds, it broadens their perspectives, making them more comfortable with a variety of people and cultures. In our democracy — where different racial groups are not always provided opportunities to interact with one another — an integrated school is a crucial experience that every child should have access to.

Over 20,000 students now benefit from the programs created because of the *Sheff* ruling. But there is more work to do. State-created limits keep the current system from offering integrated schools to every interested Hartford student, leaving too many to struggle in the city's racially isolated schools. For those families who have not yet been granted their constitutional right to an integrated education, the lack of complete relief is deeply frustrating.

We share that frustration. But to respond by trying to end efforts to integrate schools is counterproductive. Why attack a system that lets almost half of Hartford's students of color attend integrated schools? Why not push the state to expand integrated opportunities to all children, as the state Supreme Court said it must? Our children are better served by working together to create more integrated educational options for interested families.

Milo Sheff is now an adult, and progress came too slowly to allow him to attend an integrated school for very long. Saige Hollis has secured her place in the magnet school; just three years from now, she will graduate. It would be easy for both of us to say that integration in Hartford schools is no longer our concern. But this isn't just about our kids. We are Hartford natives. We care deeply about this city, and about its children. That's why we are active in this fight. Although we still have a long way to go, we believe we can get there — maybe not in time for all of today's children. But we can get there. That is the promise of the *Sheff* and *Brown* rulings — the promise that the Pacific Legal Foundation now seeks to destroy.

To abandon integration altogether will only put Hartford right back where it was 20 years ago: white and black, separate and unequal. We have come too far to go back now.

Elizabeth Horton Sheff has served on the Hartford City Council, and is the co-chair of the board of directors at the Sheff Movement. Sandra Vermont-Hollis is the mother of Saige Hollis, a freshman in one of Hartford's magnet schools. Both authors are plaintiffs in Sheff v. O'Neill