

# Hartford Courant

## West Hartford Schools Moving Closer to Racial Balance, but 5 Not Yet There

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JUL 08, 2019

West Hartford schools are making progress in obtaining racial balance, although elementary magnet school Charter Oak International Academy remains imbalanced and four others are classified as “impending imbalance,” according to a report from the state Department of Education.

Charter Oak was one of six schools in the state classified as imbalanced, out of a total of about 750 schools eligible for the report. However, the education department’s report also showed that West Hartford’s Braeburn Elementary School has moved into racial balance, after being categorized as impending imbalance last year.

Under state law, a public school is classified as racially imbalanced when its percentage of minority students differs from the total school district’s percentage by 25 points or more. Similarly, a school is classified as at impending imbalance when its percentage of minority students differs from the total school district’s percentage by more than 15 but less than 25 points.

For example, if a school district has 50 percent minority students, then any school in the district with 25 percent or fewer minority students or 75 percent or more minority students would be classified as racially imbalanced. In the same school district, a school would be classified as at impending imbalance if it had between 25 and 40 percent minority students or between 60 and 75 percent minority students.

Charter Oak has been categorized as racially imbalanced since the 2013 report, which is the oldest available on the state education department’s website. That year, the school had an absolute imbalance of 38.35 percent, where absolute imbalance is the difference between a school and a school district’s percentage of minority students. In the 2019 report, the school’s absolute imbalance was down to 27.28 percent.

From the 2013 through 2016, the Florence E. Smith STEM School — the district’s other magnet elementary school — was also categorized as racially imbalanced. In the 2017 report, Smith School progressed into the impending imbalance category and has remained there.

No other West Hartford schools have been categorized as racially imbalanced in recent years, but several have fluctuated in and out of impending imbalance. Bugbee Elementary School has sat in impending imbalance since at least 2013, and is the only West Hartford school that has not budged from that category.

Duffy Elementary School has moved on and off the impending imbalance list, but two other schools — Braeburn and Morley elementary schools — have made appearances on the impending imbalance list only in recent years. As a school district, West Hartford has become increasingly diverse. The 2019 state report showed that 44.31 percent of West Hartford’s students were minorities.

The state education department released its annual racial balance report in June, using school data collected in October 2018. The state education department releases annual reports on racial balance in the state’s public schools, not including “unique” schools such as charters, vo-ag schools and vo-tech schools, among others.

### Ongoing efforts at Charter Oak

Charter Oak sits in the Elmwood neighborhood, at the corner of Flatbush and Oakwood avenues. Superintendent of Schools Thomas Moore said the neighborhood has a majority Asian, black and Hispanic student population. The school is a districtwide magnet school, which means that students from the neighborhood can opt out of attending and students from other neighborhoods can opt in. But Moore said nearby families don’t often opt out.

“People love their schools, so nobody leaves,” Moore said. “So the issue we had over the years (was) making sure we had enough spots (for) people that want to go there from other parts of the district.” This led to a school with a majority

of minority students, Moore said. According to the 2019 racial balance report, Charter Oak had 71.59 percent minority students, compared to the district's 44.31 percent.

But in 2015, crews began constructing a \$42 million new building for Charter Oak, and students moved into the new space for the 2016-17 school year. The new digs don't just bring the school into modern times — they also aim to improve the school's racial balance. The old school building housed about 340 students, but the new building is significantly larger. Projections for the upcoming school year estimate 536 students will attend. Moore said the school's recent expansion is allowing more students from outside Charter Oak's neighborhood to enroll in the schools, leading to more diversity.

The expansion, however, has not reached its peak, Moore said, as the district has opted to expand each grade primarily at the pre-kindergarten level. In late 2018, when the data was taken for the most recent racial balance report, the expanded grades had reached through third grade, meaning that the fourth and fifth grades had not yet been fully expanded.

Even so, changes are slowly becoming visible. For instance, the school's absolute imbalance was at 34.59 percent in the school's last year of data from its old building. The most recent data, showing the expansion through third grade, reported an absolute imbalance of 27.28 percent, which is a change of 7.31 percent.

"That shift is still significant when you're going from 300 to 500 (students)," Moore said. "Just in raw numbers, you're pulling more people in."

In addition to expanding Charter Oak, Moore said the district strives toward racial balance by participating in the Open Choice program and spreading the word within the community about the benefits of magnet programs. Moore also credits Charter Oak Principal Juan Melian and Smith School Principal Teresa Giolito with creating welcoming environments at their magnet schools. "Both of our magnet schools have dynamic principals who are bilingual (and) who are well-known in their community, not just as principals but as advocates for their kids," Moore said.

### **The importance of diversity, and the limits**

**Martha Stone, the executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy and an attorney for the plaintiffs in the landmark school desegregation case *Sheff vs. O'Neill*, said racial diversity in schools helps expose students to a variety of experiences.**

**"It's important for all races," Stone said. "And especially (for) kids because of the prejudices that start to mount up when there's no exposure to people that don't look" like them.**

Moore said this exposure is integral to the education of West Hartford children. "People want to move to a school system and to a town where they know their child's going to get a great education," Moore said. "Part of that education is going to be sitting in class next to people with different life experiences."

Moore said, for example, that a student in a West Hartford classroom might hear another student talk about going to the mall, being tailed and wondering if that behavior is because of the color of their skin. "That's powerful. That brings an element to the American experience to all of our kids," Moore said. "That real exchange of ideas and exchange of experiences is why I think people are choosing to live in West Hartford. ... It's not just the restaurants."

**Although diversity is important, Stone said that it isn't enough on its own. School districts also need to work toward equity and inclusion, she said, from the way they welcome students and parents to the accessibility of Advanced Placement courses. "There's a lot of issues to pay attention to," Stone said. "It's important not to just get diversity for diversity's sake. You need diversity, equity and inclusion."**

Moore and West Hartford Board of Education Chairperson Carol Blanks both said that the school district aims to make every child feel like they belong, regardless of race or ethnicity. "Everybody who attends a West Hartford school is part of the West Hartford school district family," Blanks said.

Moore said he feels that the town's residents back that goal.

"One of the most gratifying parts of this job is the support I get from the community in making sure that every child is treated as if they're my child," Moore said. "And that they're not 'those kids,' they're 'our kids' no matter what they look like (and) no matter where they're from."