30 Years Later, Settlement Reached in Connecticut School-Desegregation Case

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Parties in “Sheff v. O’Neill,” a long battle over school desegregation in Hartford, reached a settlement Friday afternoon. While in many communities throughout the country, school segregation is a thing of the past, Connecticut had a three-decades-long legal battle on how to reduce racial isolation within Hartford’s schools.

That court battle—known as Sheff v. O’Neill—ended Friday afternoon.

State and education officials, including Gov. Ned Lamont, Attorney General William Tong, Connecticut Education Commissioner Dr. Miguel Cardona and the plaintiffs’ attorney, Martha Stone of the Center for Children’s Advocacy, plaintiff Elizabeth Horton Sheff, and NAACP Legal Defense Fund attorney Deuel Ross held a media availability Jan. 10 in Hartford to discuss a settlement in the case.

The case stems from alleged inferior resources for some schools.

Among other things, officials said the agreement substantially increases the number of seats available to Hartford students in more diverse educational settings. The agreement also commits to developing a long-term plan with the input of experienced educators and other stakeholders to ensure an equitable Hartford-area voluntary choice school program for the future; and provides additional support to help magnet schools covered under the Sheff settlement, which are in Hartford and surrounding communities, attract more diverse applicant pools.

In addition, the agreement calls for making the application process more user-friendly and transparent. It changes the student assignment protocols going forward so that student lottery selection is based solely on socioeconomic status. Students must enter a lottery to attend magnet schools.

Horton Sheff’s son, Milo, was a fourth-grade student at Hartford’s Annie Fisher Elementary School in 1989. The lead plaintiff joined 10 other families to address what they said was inequity between the education provided to students in Hartford’s public schools, where most students are from racial minority groups, and that available to children in surrounding suburban districts, which are composed predominantly of white students.

In 1996, the Connecticut Supreme Court ruled the racial and ethnic isolation of Hartford’s school children violated the state’s obligations to provide a substantially equal education opportunity and access to a unsegregated environment. Since that time, there have been several iterations on how stakeholders could work toward that goal, but the parties did not reach a consensus until now.

Officials said the settlement doesn’t require legislative approval. But a final settlement pathway, to be negotiated in 2022, is expected to require legislative approval.

State officials and stakeholders applauded the settlement. “Every child in our state is entitled to and should be provided with a quality education, regardless of race or socioeconomic circumstances,” Lamont said in a statement. “Today’s settlement provides that opportunity for more Hartford students, building on the significant progress made since the Supreme Court’s decision in this case.”

The education commissioner agreed. “While we should acknowledge that there is a broader conversation needed in Connecticut about the existence of racially segregated communities, today, our focus is educational policy,” Cardona said. “We are eager to do our part to shift the conversation from litigation to education.”

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