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OP-EDS OPINION

The coronavirus crisis is showing us how regional approaches work; it's time to apply those lessons to urban schools

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As the plaintiffs and attorneys in the school desegregation case of Sheff v. O'Neill, we have witnessed too many instances in which the state's failure to solve the problem of unequal educational access results in lost opportunities for greater educational equality for everyone. For 30 years, we have maintained that when the state denies one child their right to a quality, integrated education, we all lose.

Long before COVID-19 and the lack of Chromebooks and internet access exposed fundamental educational inequities, the state's failure to create more opportunities at high quality, integrated schools has sustained a pattern in which the districts with the poorest students and the least empowered parents go without.

This situation would be unimaginable were it regarding students from Glastonbury, Westport or Simsbury. A good part of the failure is the result of the state's reluctance, for the last 25 years since the Connecticut Supreme Court mandate, to pursue regional solutions that would benefit thousands more students.

Such solutions have been adopted in other inter- and intra-state initiatives. In the health care arena, Connecticut, New Jersey and New York governors have worked together across state lines to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Within Connecticut, testing sites and mask giveaways have been regionalized. Even those distributing food at Rentschler Field in East Hartford did not ask for proof of residency.

In these instances, we have been able to look beyond our own cities to the greater good.

Why can't similar steps be taken to provide safety and educational benefits — particularly for the thousands of students in Connecticut's urban centers who have lost out on three months of quality education? These are often the same students who were behind even before the virus forced them home.

While the state has taken steps to address disparities in internet and computer access for distance learning, the reality is that some rich suburban families are providing their children with tutoring or additional enrichment learning opportunities. These are options that many low-income parents in our cities simply cannot afford.

One means of addressing both persistent inequalities and new inequalities arising out of the pandemic is to see the opportunity amid this crisis. For example, many of our urban districts are overcrowded, even though many of our suburban districts have extra spaces due to population decline.

The governor and the state Department of Education have the ability to incentivize regional efforts in the short term: They can provide districts with blueprints and funding for regional summer schools to assist children in need of additional educational enrichment because of the COVID-19 related school closures, and they can develop regional pre-K centers so the youngest gain the skills they need before they start kindergarten.

And what an opportunity! Under the current Sheff stipulation, the state is required to produce a plan by June 2021 to meet the "demand" of all Hartford students who want a quality, integrated setting. The lottery application process through the end of April yielded almost 17,000 applications, including 6,000 from Hartford.

The stipulation requires the plan to consider numerous regional solutions that the plaintiffs have been pushing for years. They include, among others:

- Incentives and strategies to increase participation by suburban districts in Open Choice;
- Dual language schools;
- Expansion of regional pre-K centers in Hartford and suburban towns with themes that would attract students across the region; cooperative arrangements with local colleges or universities with early college programs;

- Identification of school facilities that are underutilized or slated to close in Hartford or the Sheff region suburban districts and repurpose them as regional Open Choice schools, regional interdistrict magnet schools or regional Sheff CTEC schools.

The initiatives need not be confined to the Hartford area. They could and should benefit the thousands of young vibrant minds who year after year struggle in some of our poorest performing, racially and economically isolated schools in Bridgeport, New Haven and Waterbury. The solutions shouldn't have to wait for another Sheff lawsuit to be brought in those districts.

And, although they respond to circumstances resulting from the pandemic, they provide an incentive and a pathway to broader, long-lasting educational gains. What an opportune time for the state to provide for quality integrated education and incentivize all districts to deliver education in a different way.

We all gain from building an education system that supports the next generation and results in a better educated workforce and increased economic stability for families.

It's a win-win for everyone. As we reimagine education in these times of social distancing, let's not let the opportunity to finally desegregate our schools in Connecticut pass us by.

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