



Billions in school construction in CT hasn't made a dent in segregation — but this year, things could be different

EDUCATION, INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC RECOVERY by JACQUELINE RABE THOMAS JANUARY 4, 2021

The state has spent \$10 billion since 2000 largely to help districts build segregated schools on top of segregated neighborhoods.

“Get your son out of this school.”

That's the message Mary Yaniros received seven years ago from her son's kindergarten teacher shortly after moving to Bridgeport, the only community in the region where she could afford an apartment. Her son had learned to read in pre-school before leaving Shelton, and now Yaniros was being told that his teacher needed to focus on his classmates, who were far behind him academically.

“It was so discouraging to have a teacher beg you, ‘You have to figure it out. You have to get your kid out of here, because at the end of the year he's going to be behind,’” said Yaniros.

A few months later, she cried while reading the letter saying her son had won a coveted spot through the school choice lottery in Westport Public Schools, the top ranked district in the state and No. 28 nationally.

“I was excited to the point of tears, because it meant a lot to me that he would be in a place where he would be challenged, where when he graduates he would be, I would say, on equal footing with most people in the state,” said Yaniros, who grew up in public housing and attended schools in Bridgeport and Puerto Rico. “It was heartbreaking to see the differences in Westport.” She also has a daughter who is now in the Westport school system.

The opportunity given to Yaniros' two children, however, is not shared by the majority of students from Connecticut's cities, where schools are largely filled with poor students who are multiple grades behind. Why? Because for decades state lawmakers have relied on predominantly white suburban communities to voluntarily offer enrollment to city students or to allow the construction of affordable housing so low-income city dwellers can move to their suburb and attend their schools.

Neither strategy has consistently worked.

Instead, the state spends nearly half a billion dollars each year to help local officials build segregated schools in segregated neighborhoods, all while funneling taxpayer dollars to erect more affordable and public housing in poor communities. Access to the funding spigot has been unfettered for generations, even as school segregation thrived.

And while the state has tried to address the problem by providing incentives for suburban districts to enroll more Black and Latino students from Bridgeport, Hartford and New Haven through the Open Choice program, the results have been paltry.

Now, in the wake of George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter movement that followed, top legislative leaders say they are ready to increase their efforts — either by providing more carrots or using sticks — to get suburban white towns to open their doors to city students.

By many measures, the state's current approach is not working. Namely, Connecticut's schools and municipalities are among the most segregated in the country.

Westport — a district that spends 46% more per student than Bridgeport and offers few opportunities for poor families to move into town — is emblematic of wealthy communities across the state. The district first opened its doors six decades ago to 25 Bridgeport students. This school year, Westport has 67 Bridgeport children attending its schools, which is 1% of Westport's total enrollment.

“I would love to move to Westport, but I can't afford it, there's just no way. You know, I can barely afford Bridgeport. Rents

are a lot of money, especially for single parents. I honestly don't know how people do it," said Yaniros, whose son and daughter are now in middle school in Westport. "You work your 9-to-5 and you just kind of struggle."

In Glastonbury, there are 54 Hartford students enrolled in the town's top-rated schools — an increase of only six students since 1968, when the town allowed 48 city students into its classrooms. This reluctance to participate in the Open Choice program happens even though the district experienced a 20% enrollment drop over the last 15 years and affordable housing continued to make up the same small share of the town's housing.

"Basically, district boundary lines are the modern form of Jim Crow segregation, separating assigned students between urban and suburban," John Brittain, a civil rights attorney who successfully sued the state in 1996 for allowing school segregation to thrive in Hartford, told a packed room during a forum on housing segregation in Westport last winter. "That's Connecticut: a tale of two states."

An opportunity for change

Some prominent state lawmakers and civil rights leaders plan to push for changes this upcoming legislative session, an effort to rekindle the momentum to address racial inequities that took center stage last summer in the wake of George Floyd's death and the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on Black and Hispanic people.

They see opportunity in the roughly \$450 million the state spends each year to help local school districts build new schools — a trough that lawmakers have historically dipped into when a school in their own districts needed to be rebuilt or renovated.

Senate President Pro Tem Martin Looney plans to introduce legislation that would link the state's share of school construction costs to how much affordable housing that municipality allows to be built within its borders. He also plans to propose tacking a surcharge to residential property taxes in communities that don't allow the construction of affordable housing.

Basically, district boundary lines are the modern form of Jim Crow segregation, separating assigned students between urban and suburban. ... That's Connecticut: a tale of two states." — John Brittain, civil rights attorney

"Affordable housing continues to be a challenge in Connecticut, and the practices of exclusionary zoning, which very often mask a racist intent, continue to plague us. That is going to be a point of focus this upcoming session," said Looney, D-New Haven. "For towns that are recalcitrant on issues like affordable housing, there ought to be some reduction in the percentage of reimbursement they get out of their school construction grant."

But incoming House Majority Leader Jason Rojas doesn't believe there is political appetite in the legislature to financially penalize towns. Instead of using a stick on uncooperative towns, Rojas plans to support legislation to entice towns to allow more affordable housing by increasing state funding for school projects if the town is deemed an "inclusive municipality" when it comes to housing.

"Is there an opportunity here to encourage more communities to think about how they approach affordable housing if given the right incentive? School construction, obviously, is a pretty significant expenditure that our towns make when renovating a school or building a school. Why not kind of tie that issue to this larger question of trying to improve integration and or diversity within communities?" said Rojas, D-East Hartford. "There is a lack of political support for [penalties] from legislators ... It's hard to go back home and say, 'We're losing something here because we did this.' That's just the reality of things."

Gov. Ned Lamont is open to considering such changes, his spokesman said.

"Governor Lamont supports a strategic use of the state's bonding dollars, and that holds true for school construction," said Max Reiss. "As school and municipal leaders look to serve students and families better with declining enrollment, the state could play a supportive role in assisting them with a targeted use of taxpayer dollars that improves facilities in communities."

But civil rights leaders point out that incentives historically have not broken the gridlock to integrate schools in many Connecticut towns. For example, suburban districts for decades have been offered state aid if they open their doors to children from Bridgeport, Hartford, or New Haven — and suburbs do not have to pick up any of the added costs if the child has a physical or learning disability — but participation in the Open Choice program has still grown at a snail's pace. About \$2 million in state funding set aside for the Open Choice program goes unused each year.

"The suburban districts are not opening up their seats commensurate with their declining enrollment, despite the incentives," said Martha Stone, executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy, who successfully sued

the state years ago to desegregate Hartford schools.

“What are the suburban districts going to do this year? Because George Floyd happened in May, and the districts had already declared [how many city residents they would enroll for this school year]. So now, in the face of more consciousness about racism and that it’s everyone’s responsibility to address the inequalities, will the suburban districts step up and meet the challenge?”

Black Lives Matter rallies happened in nearly every community over the summer, including in Woodbridge, which has increased the number of New Haven students it allows to enroll from nine students during the 2006-07 school year to 16 this year. This town, which requires 1.5 acres to build a single family home nearly everywhere in town, has virtually no affordable housing for families and has rejected proposals over the years to make the town more accessible to lower-income residents.

Outgoing State Education Commissioner Miguel Cardona — whom President-elect Joe Biden has chosen to become U.S. Education Secretary — said last January when the state settled *Sheff v. O’Neill*, the Hartford desegregation case, that attention needs to be given to how neighborhoods end up segregated.

“We have to remember how this case started. We wanted to mitigate racial isolation in the state of Connecticut, and that is still our goal. While the State Department of Education’s focus is on educational policy, we must also acknowledge that racial imbalance exists to a large degree outside of the schoolhouse as well. We are committed to being a part of that broader conversation,” said Cardona, the state’s first Latino education commissioner, who was born in public housing in Meriden.

He struck a similar tone two weeks ago when Biden chose him to lead the U.S. Department of Education.

“I, being bilingual and bicultural, am as American as apple pie and rice and beans. For me, education was the great equalizer. But for too many students, your ZIP code and your skin color remain the best predictor of the opportunities you’ll have in your lifetime,” he said.

But given the legislature’s history of rejecting or blunting desegregation proposals — including in the aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination — the odds are not in favor of those who want to see changes.

National civil rights groups have a name for Connecticut’s inertia: They titled their recent report outlining rejected proposals and “dynamic gradualism” by state leaders “A Steady Habit of Segregation.”

“Public deference to white suburbia would fatally circumscribe the state’s practices in the area of desegregation for decades to come,” Susan Eaton wrote in the report released by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and the Poverty & Race Research Action Council.

The state stopped surveying local officials in 2013 about the condition and capacity of Connecticut’s schools. This makes it difficult to gauge how many upcoming projects could be impacted by linking school construction dollars to affordable housing.

Konstantinos Diamantis, who for the last five years has overseen school construction projects and is now deputy under-secretary of the governor’s Office of Policy and Management, said the state is working to launch a new school facilities survey this summer. He expects it to show there are many schools nearing the end of their lives, as the state has helped pay to rebuild or renovate only about half the schools in the state.

“So we’ve got a lot to go of the 1,187 schools,” he said during an interview. “We will have a really good idea of where we are, and it also is a good tool for us to move forward in planning on budgets in the future.”

The beginning of the seven-year survey hiatus began in the years leading up to a landmark school funding trial, where the condition of city schools became an issue. As state lawmakers waited for the Connecticut Supreme Court to hear the case, the General Assembly in 2017 changed the law to push back the already long-overdue report requirement to July 2021.

The last report, from 2013, shows that more than two-thirds of high schools in Connecticut were not using at least 10% of the building’s capacity and the unused capacity was even larger in the younger grades, with five out of every six elementary or middle schools not using at least 10% of the schools’ capacity.

Since that report was released, statewide school enrollment has dropped by 42,400 students, a nearly 8% decline. Over

the next eight years enrollment is projected to dip by another 41,200 students, a 9% decline.

Rojas believes the state is missing an opportunity with school construction. “We need to know where there are open seats all over the state before we go about building more schools. We know that there’s an overall declining population in school-aged children. Why would we be building more schools and creating more infrastructure when we can’t even support the infrastructure that we have today?” he asked.

As part of the Hartford desegregation case, the Lamont administration last January agreed to identify school facilities that are underutilized or slated to close in the Hartford region and consider repurposing them as regional schools for city and suburban students. No schools have yet been proposed for such repurposing.

While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends schools have proper ventilation systems to curb the spread of the coronavirus, the 2013 survey found that one in 13 schools had substandard air conditioning, and one in 70 had a poor heating system. In the state’s most impoverished districts, a lower percentage of the schools had areas of their buildings rated as being in fair or excellent condition.

In the most affluent districts, 88% of the schools were either constructed or underwent a major renovation in the last 20 years, compared to 71% in the high-poverty districts.

Diamantis said the primary criteria for whether the state grants a school construction funding request are the age of the building, the needs of the district, if the project is “shovel ready,” and whether the state can afford the project while hewing to the Lamont administration’s goal of trimming spending to \$400 million.

The state has spent heavily building dozens of themed magnet schools for city and suburban students to attend together rather than getting more suburban districts with rapidly declining enrollment to fill their empty desks with city students through the Open Choice program.

Diamantis said his team does ask if the town has considered teaming up with neighboring districts for a regional project when the governor’s school construction office is asked to help cover the cost, even though it’s not a requirement for receiving state funding.

“We ask districts if they’re talking to their neighbors and are they thinking about a regional program,” Diamantis said, but “the understanding is that whatever they work out with the financing of that for the [operating costs] ... is between the districts to resolve, because we don’t get into that.”

However, he expressed concerns about linking the funding to desegregating schools because he worries about what will happen to students if their district opposes such a policy request. “Then we should not renovate that school, and those kids should be sitting in a school that is hazardous to their health? So that would be the outcome,” he said.

Westport plans to ask the state for \$5 million to help cover the nearly complete renovation of Coleytown Middle School, a school with a mostly white student body that saw a 17% drop in enrollment between the 2014-15 and 2018-19 school years.

Gary Conrad, the finance director for the town of Westport, said the town pushed forward with the \$34 million project not knowing if the state would reimburse it for any of the work. Mold was discovered in the school, and there was no question the building needed to be gutted, he said. “We knew that we had to do this. We were working with the state as we were going along, looking to see if they would reimburse,” he said.

Westport considered consolidating schools in the district and closing Coleytown but never seriously considered turning it into a regional or magnet school to accommodate more Bridgeport students.

“That really wouldn’t work for all the kids. That’s a specialty-type school. The way they choose kids to go to the magnet schools — they actually have to apply, and it’s based on individual basis, so you couldn’t move the whole school over to a magnet school,” Conrad said. “Towns in New England sort of like to run on their own and like to have their own schools.”

The way the state funds school construction is long overdue for change, said Rojas. “We essentially have just granted those dollars, because that’s the way things have always been done,” he said of the \$10.4 billion the state has spent building and renovating schools over the last 20 years.

Open Choice grows at a snail’s pace

Ask Lamont if the state needs to diversify its schools, and he will tell you how much he supports Open Choice, the pro-

gram used by the state to reimburse suburban districts to enroll students from Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven.

“I like the Open Choice Program. We’re putting some money behind that,” he said last year outside the Superior Court-house in Hartford shortly after the Hartford case was settled. “What we’re seeing is successful here in Hartford, we’re going to take around the rest of the state ... A lot of our urban schools are over capacity, and I’m doing everything I can with the Open Choice program to have more diversity and allow those kids to go to, you know, other schools in the ring schools outside.”

Turning to Elizabeth Horton Sheff, whose child was the lead plaintiff in the Hartford case, Lamont said, “You lit a fire, and we’re going to take it around the state. Right now, what we’re doing here is on a voluntary basis. We’re using incentives when it comes to the Open Choice program, we’re going to schools with an incentive to take some of these kids so we have more slots open.”

The state budget Lamont proposed last February included no increased reimbursements for town in the Bridgeport or New Haven region that participate in Open Choice. It also didn’t include expanding the program so students living in cities other than Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven could participate.

Legislators from both parties support this voluntary program.

State Sen. Will Haskell, D-Westport, recently shared his support on social media to place the expansion of Open Choice on this year’s legislative agenda. “We need to build communities that are welcoming and affordable to all. One small but important step is expanding the Open Choice program and creating more diversity in the classroom,” he wrote.

Westport enrolled one more Bridgeport student this school year.

Preliminary figures provided by the state Department of Education show that the number of Hartford and Bridgeport children attending suburban ring schools dropped slightly since last year, while suburban districts around New Haven enrolled 44% fewer of that city’s students this year. The program also remains off-limits to students living in the state’s other cities, like Waterbury and New London, because lawmakers have restricted it to the three urban areas.

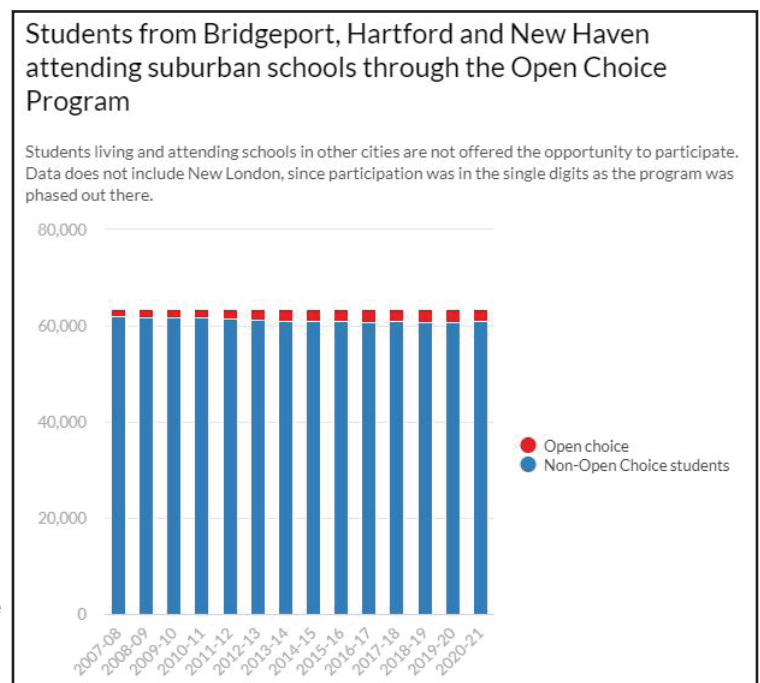
Once again, unspent money that has been set aside to reimburse districts for Open Choice is expected to be returned to the state’s coffers.

It’s unclear how COVID-19, which led to many students learning at home rather than in classrooms, has factored into these participation numbers. Districts had to declare how many seats they planned to use shortly before the pandemic hit last March, and it is not clear if city students turned down seats in suburban schools.

Historical participation numbers in Open Choice, paired with the declining enrollment numbers in districts, suggest that the incentives are not working to lure many communities, especially in the Bridgeport and New Haven region. Between the 2006-07 and 2019-20 school years, suburban districts opened their doors to 1,022 more city students. All of that growth has been in the Hartford region, however, which has provided more robust financial incentives for districts to participate because of the various desegregation court settlements. In New Haven and Bridgeport, for example, there is a flat, \$2,500 per student reimbursement, while reimbursements in Hartford start at \$3,000 and climb to \$8,000 for districts that offer more students a seat.

In Glastonbury, a suburb of Hartford, the district recently closed a school rather than fill some of those empty desks with Open Choice students. Alan Bookman, who has led the Glastonbury school system since 2004, said he will take the lead from his school board on whether to offer more seats to Hartford students.

“I may make a recommendation, but it is up to the board to make that decision,” he said, declining to say whether he plans



to recommend an increase. "You know the cost of bringing students in is a lot more expensive than the money that is given to us by the Open Choice program. So this is a cost to taxpayers, and they have to balance the need of bringing in Open Choice students and the cost to taxpayers in Glastonbury."

Bookman estimates that it costs the district about \$8,000 for each Hartford student it enrolls, but the town is only reimbursed \$3,000 per student. He said he hasn't been getting questions about how to increase participation from residents.

"I haven't really heard that request for increasing Open Choice. We are looking at all the issues of cultural diversity, recruitment of minorities. We are looking at our curriculum to make sure there's no bias of any type. Probably one of the issues that the [school] committee will be looking at is Open Choice, I would imagine," he said.

Over the summer, Glastonbury hosted a Black Lives Matter rally to recognize racial injustice. Stone and other civil rights leaders hope the increased consciousness on this topic will lead to breaking suburban towns' lackluster performance on school segregation.

"It's been disappointing over the last number of years that Open Choice has not been substantially increased," said Stone. "It's still disappointing. But I think that now it's like, will the suburban districts meet the challenge? Will they put their action where their mouth is?"

ctmirror.org/2021/01/04/billions-in-school-construction-in-ct-hasnt-made-a-dent-in-segregation-but-this-year-things-could-be-different/