

New Measures Aim To Desegregate City Schools

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After setting enrollment quotas that went unmet, failing to reduce racial segregation in Hartford schools, state officials have tentatively agreed to take aggressive measures to comply with a court desegregation order.

The proposed revision of an agreement in the Sheff v. O'Neill lawsuit calls on the state to spend millions of dollars more over the next five years to subsidize magnet schools, charter schools and other programs designed to bolster integration, officials said Wednesday.

The tentative settlement, which requires approval by the legislature and the courts, would extend a 4-year-old court-approved agreement that expires at the end of this month.

The state and the Sheff plaintiffs signed the original 2003 settlement in hopes of reducing the racial isolation of blacks and Hispanics in Hartford schools. That settlement had called for creation of new, specialty magnet schools in Hartford that, in theory, would draw a mix of white students from the suburbs and minority students from the city. But none of the nine schools created since then has reached its goal.

Some of those schools remain almost entirely black and Hispanic.

"We admit we didn't get where we wanted to," said George A. Coleman, deputy state education commissioner.

Problems with busing, delays in construction of new buildings, and Hartford's troubled history of sub-par public schools have hindered efforts to lure enough white students to the city's new magnet schools. In addition, Sheff plaintiffs said the state has been too passive in its efforts to promote integration.

The proposed agreement, Coleman said, "looks at greater involvement of the state ... assuming responsibility for creating better options" for desegregation.

Lawyers for the plaintiffs said Wednesday they would not comment on the new agreement until it is approved by the legislature.

The Sheff plaintiffs filed the suit in 1989 and won a court order in 1996 requiring the state to alleviate racial isolation in Hartford's public schools. But progress remained slow even after the two sides signed the court-approved settlement in 2003.

Under that settlement, officials agreed to use voluntary enrollment in city and regional magnet schools, along with a program allowing Hartford children to enroll in mostly white suburban schools, to bolster the level of integration. The goal was to place at least 30 percent of the city's children in

integrated schools by this year, but the state is barely halfway to that target.

A key feature of the newly proposed settlement is a partnership between Hartford and the Capitol Region Education Council, also known as CREC, to run the city's magnet schools. For years, CREC has operated its own regional magnet schools and, educators say, has a solid track record of managing successful magnets.

The tentative agreement also:

Calls for additional means of promoting desegregation, including voluntary enrollment of Hartford children in new or expanded charter schools and state technical high schools.

Would create an "information service center" to advise families on options for enrolling in magnet schools, charters, suburban schools or other racially integrated programs.

Sets new integration goals, starting in the 2008-09 school year, when the target is to have 22 percent of the city's children in integrated schools. By 2012, the goal would rise to 41 percent.

Seeks new state money to support the expanded programs, starting with an additional \$4.9 million in 2007-08 and climbing to \$43.2 million more in 2011-12, the final year of the agreement.

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