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Integration Ambassadors

A Grassroots Network of Parents and Educators in Greater Hartford, Connecticut, Keeps Racial and Economic Diversity in Schools and on Agendas

STORY BY SUSAN EATON

Some six decades ago jazz great Dave Brubeck and his wife Iola collaborated with the iconic Louis Armstrong on a musical called *The Real Ambassadors*. The satire brought to light the hypocrisy of the mid-century government practice of sending black jazz musicians abroad as emissaries while racial discrimination remained rampant back in the United States. Dave Brubeck, who died last year, has said that Louis Armstrong's public calls for the U.S. government to do more to end school segregation had inspired him to write the musical. Though it starred Armstrong himself, *The Real Ambassadors*, performed only twice, has been largely overlooked. Critics now suggest that the musical was likely too far ahead of its time. But in a crowded high-ceilinged room in Hartford, Connecticut's public

*"Who's the real ambassador?
Certain facts we can't ignore
In my humble way I'm the USA
Though I represent the government
The government don't represent some policies I'm for.
Oh we learned to be concerned about the
constitutionality
In our nation segregation isn't a legality..."*
—"The Real Ambassadors" from the musical of the same name by Dave and Iola Brubeck and Louis Armstrong

library, a racially diverse group of teenagers sang the musical's title song and it finally found its perfect audience.

"These young people are incredible," said an exultant Elizabeth Horton Sheff, the lead plaintiff in a long-running legal effort to reduce school segregation in the region. Horton Sheff, with fellow members of a grassroots organization

called The Sheff Movement, had organized the evening's "Celebration of Progress" to help draw attention to the success of the schools and programs created in response to a 1996 court ruling requiring the state to remedy school segregation in and around Hartford.

The young people who sang that night provided a dazzling example of that success. The students, members of the singing group The Real



Education activist Elizabeth Horton Sheff, foreground, speaks at a national conference in Washington, DC

Ambassadors, attend the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts (GHAA). The Academy is one of about three dozen magnet schools that attract a diverse student body by enrolling students from Hartford and more than two dozen cities and towns that surround it.

“They say it all,” Horton Sheff said of the student jazz singers. “They truly represent.”

Two and a half decades ago, in 1989, Elizabeth Horton Sheff, then a single mother of two, signed on as lead plaintiff in the *Sheff v. O’Neill* case. Sheff argued that the racial and class segregation in the region’s schools denied students the equal opportunity granted in the state Constitution. It has been 17 years since the state’s highest court, in 1996, decided in favor of the plaintiffs and ordered lawmakers to fashion a remedy to reduce segregation in public schools in and around Hartford. In this 4-to-3 decision, the Connecticut Supreme Court blamed government-enforced school district borders between municipalities — lines coterminous with racially segregated housing patterns — for creating racial isolation and its attendant inequality. “Every passing day shortchanges these children in their ability to learn and to contribute to their own well-being and to that of this state and nation,” then-Supreme Court Chief Justice Ellen Peters wrote in *Sheff*.

This impressive, unprecedented mix of schools and programs explicitly designed for the purpose of achieving racial, ethnic and economic integration likely never would have come into being or been sustained without the law-

suit that bears Elizabeth Horton Sheff’s name. Even all these years later, a group of local and national civil rights lawyers continues to monitor the remedy and, when necessary, to re-enter negotiations with state officials. But a growing community of parents, stu-

dents, alumni and educators is also working to keep the vision of the case alive. The power of this broad constituency has yet to be fully tapped, but a decade-old network, the Sheff Movement coalition, has worked to bring a diverse group of supporters together around a common aspiration of “quality, integrated education.”

Led by Horton Sheff and former City Councilman Jim Boucher, the coalition organizes, provides public information, conducts research and advocates publicly for the schools and programs. The coalition seeks to give voice to the concerns and aspirations of parents and children enrolled in diverse schools and integration programs across the region.

“What we have accomplished here is incredible. It really is,” Horton Sheff said during the Celebration of Progress. “We need to keep saying that it is not enough. But I also think that tonight, we all deserve a party.”

In 2013, the some three dozen magnet schools sit throughout the Greater Hartford region, enroll about 13,000 students among them. A variety of organizations oversee the schools. The Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), which is similar in operation to a regional school district, operates more than half the schools—most of them in Hartford, but some in nearby communities. Its funding comes from a mix of local



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member school districts that participate in magnets, state funds set aside for the *Sheff* remedy, foundation dollars and federal grants. Enrollment in CREC's magnets is remarkably diverse. Overall, about 33 percent of students in the CREC-run schools are African American, 30 percent are white and 28 percent are Latino. Close to half come from families earning low incomes. CREC's mission is straightforward: "To promote racial integration and reduce racial, ethnic and economic isolation and foster an understanding of and an appreciation for cultural diversity." Hartford Public Schools oversees most of the other interdistrict magnet schools. The small, private Goodwin College in East Hartford also oversees three magnet schools.

Each of the regional magnet schools has a particular curricular theme or employs a specialized teaching method. Every school is open to students from throughout the region. Transportation is free. In order to retain their status as magnets, which qualifies them for additional state funding, the schools must meet an "integration standard." At least 25 percent of students must be white. Also, about half the students must be from the suburbs, in an effort to bring in a socioeconomic, racial and cultural mix of students. In trying to meet the integration standard, school officials have relied largely upon "affirmative marketing," through which they reach out to parents and families, and recruit and advertise offerings in communities whose demographics might help them reach the diversity standard. No students are selected on the basis of their race or ethnicity. None of the schools impose admission requirements, such as tests or specialized applications or interviews. No student is compelled to attend a magnet school. Another program, called Open Choice, enables about 1,700 students to attend traditional schools outside the communities in which they live. Twenty-eight suburban communities and Hartford participate in that program.

The doubters have been proven wrong. The magnet schools are so popular, among both urban and suburban parents, that demand for them and for Open Choice is not being met.

After the court decision in 1996, the *Sheff* remedy took several years to even begin to materialize. Getting schools up and running and getting the money allocated for them required constant vigilance on the part of the legal team and its supporters. As the state began to increase its investments in *Sheff*, many onlookers speculated that spending hundreds of millions of dollars to promote diversity would not motivate either urban or suburban parents to opt out of the schools in their neighborhoods.

"People are happy in their neighborhood schools," then-Commissioner of Education Ted Sergi said of Hartford parents during a legislative committee hearing in 2001.

Even some *Sheff* supporters had privately expressed worries that white suburbanites, with access to some of the highest performing schools in the state, might not volunteer to put their children on buses to Hartford, no matter how good the new schools there might be. The doubters have been proven wrong. The magnet schools are so popular, among both urban and suburban parents, that demand for them and for Open Choice is not being met. Data show that the state's remedy is meeting only 72 percent of demand just among Hartford families. In 2012, about 34 percent of Hartford's African American and Latino students attended school in "integrated settings" as a result of the *Sheff* remedies. In late April 2013, a state judge approved a year's extension to a prior legal settlement that had required that 41 percent of children of color in Hartford be in diverse schools by 2012. Three more existing Hartford schools reopened as designated interdistrict magnets this fall. Under the extension agreement, state officials also promised to increase financial incentives to encourage suburban districts to make more seats available for students who want to enroll in the Open Choice program.

Sheff Movement members, some of whom had been plaintiffs or had testified for the plaintiffs in the original case, have been meeting formally, usually at least once a month, for 10 years. Among the seven other voluntary interdistrict desegregation programs in the nation, none has a grassroots advocacy counterpart that is as institutionalized and active as the Sheff Movement. The Sheff Movement has a well-established routine of gathering at the Capital Preparatory

Academy Magnet School on Main Street, which sits just beyond Hartford's downtown. Members meet in the school's library, which in 2012 was officially named the Sheff Center, in Elizabeth Horton Sheff's honor. Members organize public forums. They testify at legislative hearings and hold meetings with state legislators. They host informational sessions for local school board members and suburban PTOs. Increasingly, Sheff Movement members speak on panels at national conferences of education scholars and policy experts who are eager to hear the Hartford story. They sit behind tables at local magnet school fairs to provide brochures and answer parents' questions. With assistance from the Washington, DC-based Poverty & Race Research Action Council, they crunch data to demonstrate the strong records of academic achievement of the *Sheff* schools and Open Choice. To increase

parents' knowledge of the educational choices made available through the *Sheff* remedies, the coalition wrote and published a handbook for families in 2009. (They recently updated the handbook in 2012.) The

Sheff Movement also publishes and disseminates short newsletters that announce events, school application deadlines, magnet school fairs and bring readers into the daily life of the region's diverse schools.

"I think we have a great story to tell about what is possible," said



Students at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts performed the musical *Hairspray* in 2013

Sheff Movement member Robert Cotto, a former interdistrict magnet school teacher and a current member of Hartford's Board of Education. Cotto, who is 31 years old, remembers moving from Hartford as a child and being one of just a few Puerto Rican students in his suburban school.

"So, I do think I understand," he said, "the really huge potential of diversity, for increasing opportunity....I also think I understand what a welcoming school should be, what a school that strives toward true equality needs to do in order to realize that potential. And I do feel like I've seen that here."

In front of the mirrored walls of a dance studio at the Greater Hartford Academy for the Arts, groups of students took turns swaying, jumping and, at times it seems, flying across the hardwood floor. One member in each of the several dance groups had written choreography

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Robert Cotto, Sheff Movement member and Hartford Board of Education member

for his or her group. In the final dance, with just two students performing, it was clear that Bobby clearly committed to memory the required movements choreographed by fellow senior Rosie. It was a soft, lyrical piece and the dancers' technical skills came through. But the teachers, Deborah Goffe and Leslie Frye-Maietta, and some of the students agreed that something was not working.

"Hmm. Bobby? Try and do it without worrying about whether or not you are getting everything right," Goffe suggested. "Can you guys try it again?"

They did. This time there was a new kind of playfulness to the dance as if Rosie and Bobby were talking to each other, laughing even. "That was so much better," one student said. "So, so, so much better!" Bobby grinned. Rosie and Bobby draped their arms around each other's shoulders. "You guys are a great team," a student told them.

Some GHAA students attend school here all day, taking their required courses in math and English at the 16-acre Learning Corridor complex where GHAA is located. Other students, such as Rosie, take the required courses at a high school in the community where they live and come each afternoon to GHAA for arts classes. Rosie said she sees sharp differences between the high school in the suburb where she lives, and her arts high school.

"I got my hair cut real short. And in my home school people were like, 'What did you do?' and 'Why did you cut your hair?' and they are just looking at me

and shaking their heads like I shouldn't have done this. And then I am feeling kind of weird about it and I come here that afternoon and people are yelling out, 'Yo, I love your hair,' and 'Girl, you really rock that hair.' I know that that is just a story about hair. But it is like that with everything. It is like that with any kind of diversity."

Unlike many other arts or performing arts high schools, GHAA does not require that students audi-

tion or submit portfolios for admission. This means that a wide range of skills and experience will be represented in each classroom. For dance teachers this might mean having one student who has taken private ballet lessons since she was three and others who have never been in a

dance studio before coming to the Academy. The school's Director of the Arts, Kim Stroud, acknowledged that a policy of "being open to all" is not universally beloved by all teachers all the time.

"We have as a core mission valuing diversity and honoring diversity. That is what we do here," Stroud said. I think it would be easier, yes, if we had auditions, if we set some standard in terms of skill levels in the arts. But if we did that, then we just would not be us."

Because of the popularity of the arts high school, educators in 2010 opened a second campus that houses music and theater arts programs on the former site of the former Colt gun factory. Including the two campuses, GHAA, overseen by the regional non-profit, CREC, enrolls about 700 students.

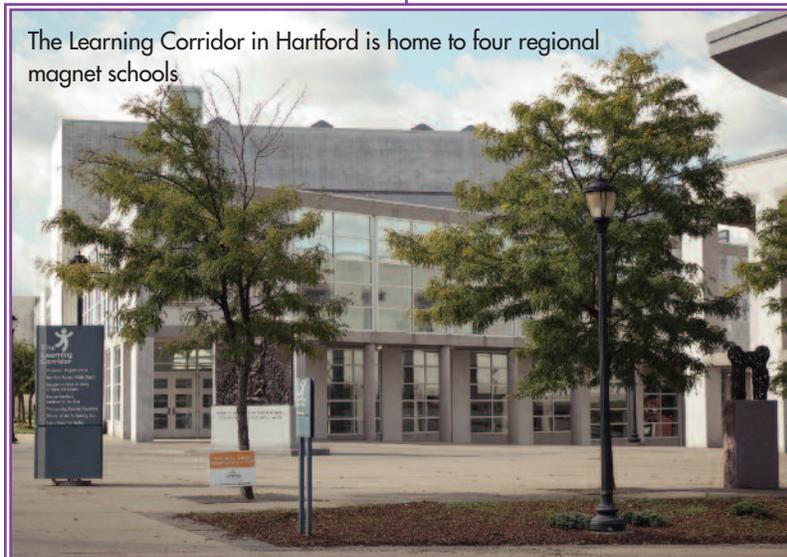
Sheff Movement member Jim Boucher provides updates during a recent Sheff meeting at Capital Preparatory Academy Magnet School



A common complaint among desegregation critics nationally is that even voluntary efforts tend to focus disproportionately upon attracting African American and Latino students from disadvantaged communities to affluent white suburbs where students of color carry the burden of adapting. This has not been the case in Hartford, though, where education planners deliberately spread diverse schools throughout the region. The most popular schools for both urban and suburban families are more likely to be found in Hartford's poor and working class neighborhoods than they are in affluent suburbs.

The shiny, modern buildings that make up the Learning Corridor campus, for example, where one of GHAA's campuses is located, materialize just beyond bodegas, storefront churches and vacant commercial spaces in Hartford's Frog Hollow neighborhood. The Learning Corridor alone houses four interdistrict magnet schools. The Arts Academy shares its campus with another high school, the Greater Hartford Academy of Mathematics and Science, and the PK-6 Montessori Magnet School. The Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy (HMTCA), operated by Hartford Public Schools, brings together about 600 students in grades 6 through 11, with a 12th grade class scheduled to start in 2014-15. The students engage in a comprehensive, rigorous college-prep curriculum. In 2011, HMTCA, overseen by the Hartford Public Schools, received the Dr. Ronald P. Simpson Award, which recognizes the top magnet school in the country, from the professional organization Magnet Schools of America. Each morning and afternoon, a caravan of yellow buses circles the

campus, delivering and returning students to and from more than 25 cities and towns in the region.



Just off the interstate highway, on the former site of a housing project, 355 students travel from 24 cities and towns to attend the Breakthrough Magnet Elementary School, also overseen by the Hartford Public Schools. In 2012, Breakthrough was named a "School of Excellence" by Magnet Schools of

America. It is among the highest-achieving and most popular of the magnet schools. The school's recently retired principal Norma Neumann-Johnson testified in the original *Sheff* trial in favor of the plaintiffs and is an active member of the Sheff Movement.

In the hallway at Breakthrough, dots cover a colorful map. Each dot represents one of the more than two dozen nations from which Breakthrough's students trace their immediate families' origins. Neumann-Johnson, who has worked as a teacher and administrator in the city schools for more than 4 decades, describes Breakthrough as a "global community for students of character." Drawing on the rich racial and cultural diversity of the school, Breakthrough includes an intensive focus on geography and culture within a character-based curriculum that emphasizes personal responsibility, integrity and contribution to the school community. A culture of belonging and responsibility permeates Breakthrough. Students set formal tables in their classroom for lunch, help out with the laundry, tend a rooftop garden and staff a school store. Each Friday morning, the entire school assembles in the auditorium for games, interactive presentations or social events.

Different grades take turns hosting. Breakthrough's students can sign up to practice meditation in classes where, as one student explains, "I quiet the negative voices and learn to listen to the positive stories about what I can do and who I am."

To the west, in suburban Avon, where the median family income is about \$109,000 (compared to Hartford's median \$29,000), the Reggio Magnet School of the Arts, a CREC school, enrolls about 300 students from more than a dozen cities and towns in the region. Curriculum here is based on the philosophy of the educator Reggio Emilia who, in ravaged post-World War II Italy, introduced early childhood centers that focused on respect, community exploration and a self-guided curriculum.

Former Avon school board member Barbara Zuras joined the Sheff Movement in 2009. She helped found and has been a leading supporter of the Reggio Magnet School. She is also an outspoken advocate for creating racially diverse learning experiences in children's earliest years.

"Connecticut needs to build on this track record by making quality, integrated preschool education universally available for 3- and 4-year-olds," Zuras testified before the state Legislature in 2012. "This state should avoid creating a segregated preschool education system for low income children of color."

In Bloomfield, a predominantly black suburb just north of Hartford, the more than 700 students in

grades 6 through 12 at the Metropolitan Learning Center graduate with an International Baccalaureate diploma. MLC emphasizes global studies with the aim of helping students develop "caring, inquiring and open-minded perspectives" and "be empowered as agents of change creating a better and more peaceful world." It has been named a "School of Excellence" for the past five consecutive years by Magnet Schools of America. Right on the border of Hartford and suburban West Hartford, on the campus of the University of Hartford, sits the University High School of Science and Engineering with 400

students. In 2012, Magnet Schools of America named it the best secondary school magnet in the nation.

Traditionally, advocacy groups play several roles within communities. They devote time and energy to staying on top of a given problem or area of concern. If they are effective, they keep up a steady drumbeat for the cause. They investigate, document, raise awareness and try to convince more people to join their ranks. Advocacy groups also try to influence people in power—lawmakers, public officials—to take action, make changes. The Sheff Movement does plenty of this, of course, and does it with only one full-time staff member who main-

tains the website, coordinates events and issues occasional newsletters from a small rented room with two desks. The Sheff Movement, though, goes far beyond the common "complain and demand" rut where a lot of advocacy groups get stuck. Perhaps

Dance students at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts



that’s because members can offer an unfailingly optimistic narrative about profound possibility, even triumph. It’s a story about a dream come true, or one that is at least part of the way realized.

“You are only going to get so far with a complaint,” insisted Elizabeth Horton Sheff. “But we can say, ‘Here’s the solution. Let’s do more of this, together now.’ There’s no way to say now that quality, integrated education can’t be achieved. We are achieving it.”

The two interconnected messages of the Sheff Movement might seem at odds. One message is that government leaders must fund and create even more programs and schools so that every child in the Hartford region who wants that “quality, integrated education” can have it. This requires coming up with inventive ways to bring to light the harm of segregation and the injustice of inequality and to continually point out that despite the progress made, demand is still not being met. The second message, delivered with just as much enthusiasm, is that what is manifest in Hartford is quite something to behold. It is an accomplishment that coalition members wish state officials, including the governor, lawmakers and education leaders, would publicly celebrate or at least talk about with their counterparts across the country.

“We have a lot of amazing things happening here. It’s true. But just locally, it always feels like there is so much more that can be done. There are still so many people who send their children to magnet schools and love them and are not aware of how this battle started and why it’s so important,” said Liz Dupont-Diehl, a Sheff Movement member who lives in suburban Windsor and sent her daughters to Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy. “And even though there’s not the awareness that we’d like to see, there is still so much more demand than is being met! That’s both good news because you see this desire for high-quality integrated schools and it’s bad news because people are getting left out.”

“There’s no way to say now that quality, integrated education can’t be achieved. We are achieving it.”
—Elizabeth Horton Sheff



Students at Breakthrough Magnet's weekly school-wide assembly

This apparent dimming awareness of *Sheff* among ordinary people, Dupont-Diehl explained, was the impetus for institutionalizing an advocacy group. “There was a feeling that we had something special here and that knowledge about it was going to get lost if someone wasn’t working to keep the values that this case represents alive,” she said. “We are starting to see some young people beginning to

get involved and I think that’s a very important voice that needs to be heard: Young people from diverse schools who can speak to the larger public. That’s something that we are hoping to develop.”

The Sheff Movement has played more than an advocacy role. It also has been a reliable provider of crucial

public information as the remedy expanded and more choices became available to families, said *Sheff* attorney Dennis Parker, who is director of the Racial Justice Program at the American Civil Liberties Union. With an array of organizations operating the magnet schools, the choices were often confounding even the savviest parents.

“The *Sheff* Movement has been incredibly important in this success because unlike a lot of traditional desegregation cases, where you might have a court ordering a school district to do this or do that, the remedy in this case is based entirely on parents volunteering to send their children to particular schools,” Parker said. “The state has to make the programs available, but it’s up to parents to make those choices. In a context like that, in order for a remedy to be effective, parents need to have accurate information about what their choices are. And someone needs to provide that information. That did not exist in the beginning. The *Sheff* Movement was an early leader in recognizing that gap and acting on it.”

Sheff Movement members, while touting the success of the magnets and of Open Choice, continue to face challenges. It is not easy to keep the nearly 25-year-old *Sheff* effort on crowded political agendas. Some magnet schools have been far more successful than others in attracting a diverse student body and several struggle each year to meet the integration standard. Complicating matters is that the relationships between *Sheff* proponents and some public school officials in Hartford have been downright adversarial in recent years. In 2011, a public schools’ marketing campaign implored city parents not to “risk” their children’s “future on a lottery and then a waiting list,” in obvious reference to the *Sheff* magnet schools, which fill seats through lottery. If children are not selected for the magnets, they can still attend the schools to which they are zoned in Hartford or

else select another Hartford public school. Thus, there is really no “risk” involved. A former Hartford superintendent frequently disparaged the *Sheff* effort in public. After he repeatedly questioned the utility of school diversity, *Sheff* lawyers sent him a box of papers and reports demonstrating that students from all racial groups tend to perform better in diverse schools.

In meetings and conferences beyond Connecticut, *Sheff* Movement members frequently talk with education activists in other communities who marvel at the opportunities in Connecticut. They raise the question: Would national civil rights organizations ever again pour millions into fighting another civil rights case on the scale of *Sheff*? That’s a legitimate

concern, Horton *Sheff* conceded. And the answer, she said, is probably no. But, she said, that is no excuse to give up.

“[A lawsuit] is not the only way to create integrated schools...You don’t need 20 schools tomorrow. At first maybe you need one. But you know what you need first? You need to have a conversation.”

To the *Sheff* lawyers, the *Sheff* Movement is a natural evolution of the conversations lawyers engaged with the Greater Hartford community both before and after the lawsuit was filed. From the beginning, the *Sheff* case earned much of its credibility and its large, multicultural, multiracial base of support through old-fashioned community organizing that raised awareness, kept urging people to have those difficult conversations and built alliances in places where ordinary people live, work and worship. Prior to even articulating a legal theory, local and national civil rights lawyers who believed there might be a case to bring in Hartford had spent two years gathering information and seeking a clear mandate from leaders in the African American and Latino communities, from Hartford’s educators and from parents with kids in both suburban and urban public schools.

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– Liz Dupont-Diehl,
parent, and *Sheff*
Movement member

In 1987—this was a full two years before *Sheff* was filed—the now well-known local civil rights lawyer John Brittain was a law professor at the University of Connecticut. He worked with community-based advocates, and with the American Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund to organize a meeting between civil rights lawyers, parents, teachers, union activists, ministers, priests and rabbis. The meeting was called to talk about a report recently issued by the state’s very own Department of Education. The report had detailed and lamented the intensifying racial segregation of the state’s schools and called segregation “educationally, morally and legally wrong.” Brittain, who would go on to become dean of the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University in Houston and Senior Deputy Director of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, that day laid out the history of the construction and maintenance of segregation. After that, he and his colleagues contemplated some plausible legal options. For Brittain, that meeting brought back memories of his days organizing African American voters in Mississippi.

“People in the North were conditioned to living separately,” Brittain recalled years later. Inequality, he added, “was something everyone knew about. But once we got people talking, right under the surface was a feeling that we could do better, that it didn’t have to be this way.”

Racial segregation came to characterize Greater Hartford in much the same way it did many other northern metros. A confluence of economic trends, government housing policy, banking and insurance practices and racial discrimination encouraged, exacerbated and then cemented in place intense race and class isolation here. Connecticut’s government officials may not have written laws mandating segregation like the ones in the Jim Crow South. But they surely did aid and abet the creation of segregated education by siting and building schools in accordance with a racially and economically separate setup that decades of racial discrimination had brought into

being. Race and class separation remains such an embedded part of the landscape here that it might have escaped all notice if not for the *Sheff* case and the Sheff Movement whose gatherings, public testimony and letters to the editor keep the concerns of this 25-year effort timely.

“I always keep in mind that segregation was created by people,” Horton Sheff said recently while at her day job with the Community Renewal Team, a social services agency for the poor in Hartford. “And that doesn’t make me depressed. It reminds me that it can be undone by people.”

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that by the end of the decade no single racial or ethnic group will constitute a majority among children under 18. In about three decades, no single racial or ethnic group will have a majority in the country as a whole. The way Sheff Movement member Robert Cotto sees it, the some 15,000 young people participating in the Hartford region’s integration efforts will be particularly well-prepared for this transformed nation. What’s more, he suggests, those young people will become the men and women best qualified to be “leaders in a society that will look very different from the ones their parents knew.” The “quality” part of the Sheff Movement’s “quality and integrated education” mantra is best measured, Cotto said, by the satisfaction level among parents and students; the level of engagement in the classrooms and dance studios, during recitals and in robotics competitions; the low teacher turnover rates; the constructive, welcoming climates; the collaboration among students and the positive social relationships that break down stereotypes. He and other Sheff Movement members understand, though, that test scores are important to most policymakers and opinion leaders. By that measure, magnets and the Open Choice program have shown some promising results.

A 2009 study in the peer-reviewed journal *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* compared academic results between students who had applied to interdistrict magnets in the state (including those

outside of Hartford) and were not selected through the blind lottery and students who were selected for and attended a magnet school. The magnet school students who lived in urban zip codes (these students were mostly Latino or black) made greater gains and did significantly better in math and reading in high school and on reading tests in middle school than students who were not selected. What's more, the suburban students—this group being largely white—who attended magnets outdid their peers at traditional suburban (and generally much whiter and more affluent) schools, too.

The study also showed that students in magnet high schools and regular high schools stated similar racial attitudes, but students of color in magnet schools were significantly more likely to say they felt close to white students and had white friends than did students of color who did not attend magnets. Similarly, white students in magnets were significantly more likely than students in non-magnet schools to say they were close to students of color and had students of color as friends. This study is particularly informative because it avoids the common methodological challenge of “self-selection bias” embedded in simple comparisons between students who choose a school and students who attend a school to which they are assigned. Self-selection bias refers to the fact that qualities that plausibly cause a family to purposefully choose a given school—say, perseverance, foresight, drive and ambition—might themselves be factors contributing to higher relative academic performance. But the 2009 study avoided that pitfall by using as a control group students who applied to magnets but who were not selected in the lottery.

More recent data from the state show that, on average, the region's seven interdistrict magnet high schools record far higher graduation rates than even some of the more affluent suburban districts in the Hartford region. Perhaps most revealing, interdistrict magnets do a far better job at graduating students from low-income families than even several far more affluent school districts. The graduation rate for low-income students at magnet schools ranges from about

85 percent to higher than 90 percent. (By comparison, the graduation rate for low-income students in Hartford's regular schools was about 60 percent in 2011 and 53 percent in 2010.) In 2012, achievement data showed that students who live in Hartford and either attend a magnet school or are enrolled in the Open Choice program tend to outperform their counterparts in the Hartford Public Schools. These simple comparisons do not control for potential self-selection bias. However, the size of the differences makes the data informative. The share of Hartford resident students meeting or exceeding state goals on mandated tests was typically 20 to 40 percentage points higher in magnets or Open Choice.

An analysis of state test scores conducted by CREC shows that in the CREC magnets, the “achievement gap” between black and white students and between Latino and white students was eliminated in 3rd grade reading in recent years. It was also eliminated between Latino and white students in 5th grade reading. By 10th grade, the achievement gap between students from low-income families and other students shrunk to 4.9 percentage points in reading in CREC magnets, compared to 28 percentage points at the state level.

As Martha Stone, one of the original plaintiffs' lawyers in the *Sheff* case told to *Hartford Courant* newspaper, “the money being spent for *Sheff* is not only reaching integration goals, but it's also a major contributor to closing the achievement gap.”

Sheff Movement members this year discussed the merits and challenges of a two-way immersion school, which would bring Spanish-speaking students together with native English speakers to educate young people in two languages. Hartford has a long-standing, sizable Puerto Rican population and, like in many regions of the nation, Latino immigration has grown substantially throughout the region in recent decades. At a recent meeting, Sheff Movement members seemed intrigued and excited by the possibility. But there was still a lot to learn about the political practicality, the costs and whether there would be

enough money to invest in the specialized teacher training or recruiting efforts necessary for such a school to be successful.

“So okay, let’s learn more,” Horton Sheff said during the meeting. “But I would say we should aim for an opening of a school like this in...when? September 2014?” No one responded at first. She got one or two faint OK’s. There was some nodding. But no one laughed, perhaps because they knew she was completely serious and anything but naïve about the still unanswered questions, the snafus, the arguments



Sheff Movement member Robert Cotto presents at a forum on two-way bilingual education

and the potential political controversies that will have to be faced and overcome before any doors to any school will open anywhere.

“I know we are at the beginning here but I like to have a vision, you know? A goal in mind,” she told her fellow Sheff Movement members. “I think it’s good to have that.”

Horton Sheff exhaled. She pushed her shoulders back.

“Okay,” she asked. “What’s next?”

Susan Eaton and **Gina Chirichigno** are co-directors of the documentation and mobilization project, One Nation Indivisible www.onenationindivisible.org. Susan is also Research Director at the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School. Gina is also Outreach Coordinator for the National Coalition on School Diversity www.school-diversity.org.



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