



January, 2011

LEGISLATIVE AGENDA – 2011

Background: In response to the 1996 Connecticut Supreme Court ruling in *Sheff v. O'Neill*, the General Assembly adopted a two-way voluntary school integration program that includes both interdistrict magnet schools (bringing suburban children into the urban center) and a suburban “Open Choice” program that enrolls city children in suburban schools. This system was originally implemented in all of Connecticut’s major cities, but in recent years, for budgetary reasons, growth in the interdistrict programs has been limited to the Hartford region.

Because of the slow implementation of the Sheff remedies following in the 1996 decision, the plaintiffs returned to Superior Court several times, and as a result goals and timetables are now set by court order. The current settlement agreement requires the state to ensure that at least 35% of Hartford minority children have access to racially integrated schools by 2010-11, rising to 41% by 2013 (racially integrated schools are defined as schools with at least 25% white enrollment). The state is currently failing to meet these goals, largely due to the reluctance of suburban towns to take additional children at the low reimbursement rate offered by the state. Current funding formulas provide state payments of \$10,000-\$13,000 per student for out of district students enrolled in interdistrict magnet schools, and payments of \$2500 for out of district students enrolled in Open Choice.

Priority legislative goals: To meet the Sheff goals for quality, integrated education, it is urgent that we focus on expansion and improvement of the Open Choice program, through legislative initiatives advanced by the CT Department of Education designed to expand suburban participation.

1. Revising reimbursement rates to suburban districts to provide financial incentives for increased participation in Open Choice (\$6000 per student for 3% of total enrollment or greater; \$4000 per student for >2%; \$3000 for 2% or less).
2. Resubmission of the bill granting the Commissioner the authority to require districts to accept minimum percentage of Open Choice students.
3. Ensure that expansion of Open Choice is accompanied by sufficient support services to make the program successful for all Hartford children – including professional development for suburban teachers and staff; adequate transportation; provision of adequate number of counselors and intervention specialists; and concrete steps to more fully integrate children into their new schools (such as provision of late buses for sports and extracurricular activities).

Key points – Open Choice is the most cost effective way of meeting the state’s school integration obligations over the next three years – and will result in significant long-term savings for the state; Recent national research has demonstrated how school integration can benefit both Hartford children and suburban children; The system of interdistrict magnet schools we have developed is a national model, but does not reach enough children; We need to consolidate these important gains in the magnet schools by expanding the other part of the Hartford voluntary integration plan – Open Choice – which has been lagging behind; There is ample capacity in most suburban school districts to meet the Sheff goals over the next few years, but we need to compensate suburban districts fairly if we are going to ask them to take additional children; Thousands of children have benefited from Sheff programs over the past ten years, but thousands more have languished on waitlists and we owe it to these children and families to expand integrated education options.

Additional legislative goals: support other school integration legislation; and seek to block destructive amendments and legislation that would undermine progress on integration.

3. protection of the interests of magnet schools and Open Choice in any revision of the state funding formula – and incentivizing racial and economic integration in the funding formula (see our initial statement on this issue, attached).
4. State financial support for Charter Schools that are inclusive and racially integrated and meet the Sheff goals.
5. Revising the "Innovative Schools" statute to provide school districts in the Sheff region financial incentives to reopen closed school buildings to expand the Open Choice program, both within Hartford and in suburban towns.
6. Implement one level of adequate transportation reimbursement for school choice programs in the Sheff region.
7. Technical revision to the Open Choice statute to allow a city student who previously attended a private school to participate in Open Choice.
8. Monitor and support legislation that improves all Hartford public schools – not just interdistrict magnets (for example, legislation to increase state reimbursement for special education costs to 50%, full funding of the ECS grant program; etc)

DRAFT 10-27-10

**SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR REFORM OF THE
CONNECTICUT SCHOOL FINANCE SYSTEM**

As educators and policymakers explore options for a more fair and efficient school funding system in Connecticut, we urge the state to avoid changes that might undermine the ongoing constitutional mandate to address the racial and economic isolation of students in our major cities. Any changes in the current school finance system should create strong incentives for school districts to participate in school integration programs, and to avoid expansion of school programs that have the effect of segregating children by race or income. Here are some considerations for discussion:

- ¶ Per student reimbursement to suburban school districts for Open Choice students should be substantially increased to more than cover the marginal additional cost of educating Hartford children in suburban schools. The current \$2500 per student grant is totally inadequate and acts as a disincentive to adding additional suburban seats for Hartford children. The necessary funding level should be calculated based on a target 4% enrollment level in eligible suburban districts.
- ¶ Magnet and Open Choice transportation should continue to be funded by the state, with a continuation of the process of consolidating interdistrict transportation management and increased efficiency of routes to lower the overall cost of transportation.
- ¶ Any funding for *new* charter schools in Connecticut must require racial and economic integration, consistent with the goals of the Sheff settlement order. Ongoing funding for *existing* charter schools should be adjusted to strongly incentivize racial integration in these schools.
- ¶ Annual funding deficits for interdistrict magnets must be eliminated – whether for magnets run by the Hartford public schools, CREC, or other entities. The uncertainty of annual deficits undermines magnet program and parent confidence in the system.
- ¶ The state should explore financial incentives to reward school districts that enact policies or practices that promote school diversity, and/or decrease the concentration of poverty in high poverty schools from one year to the next.
- ¶ Any funding reforms must be phased in and protect Hartford and other urban districts from precipitous cuts that could jeopardize educational quality.