

DISCUSSION DRAFT 12-31-14

**SHEFF MOVEMENT COALITION
LEGISLATIVE AND ADVOCACY AGENDA 2014-15**

Hartford is home to one of the most successful voluntary school integration programs in the United States. The regional system that was developed to implement the *Sheff v. O’Neill* ruling has brought quality integrated education to thousands of city and suburban students, and has helped to transform the Hartford Public Schools. But much more needs to be done to improve and expand this excellent system, which is reaching less than half of Hartford students this year, leaving thousands of children on long waitlists. Most federal school desegregation cases have taken 20-30 years to fully implement a remedy, but the court ordered school integration remedies in *Sheff v. O’Neill* are barely ten years old, with most of the significant growth in the system occurring after 2007. Now is the time to build on our success and recommit for the next decade.

ISSUES FOR LEGISLATIVE ACTION

Support full funding for *Sheff v. O’Neill* implementation: The upcoming settlement agreement (“Phase 4”) should be fully supported in the legislature so that more Hartford children have access to high quality magnet schools and suburban Open Choice schools. Last year roughly 20,000 children applied for fewer than 7,000 magnet school and Open Choice seats.

Increase state reimbursement rates for regional magnet schools: State per pupil payments for our regional magnet schools have not been increased for several years. For magnet schools run by Regional Education Service Centers (like CREC), this has required shifting excess costs of this state obligation to participating towns. For “host” magnet schools run by the Hartford Public Schools (and other host districts), this has forced cities to cover an increasing share of state magnet costs out of local education budgets. In both cases, the failure of the state to fund magnet school cost increases represents an unfair shift of constitutionally mandated education costs from the state to local governments.

Support the continued expansion of pre-K magnet school programs:

- **The state should continue to cover the costs of pre-K magnet school tuition.** The integrated pre-K network in the Hartford region has been one of the successes of *Sheff* implementation, but it is undermined by the continuing uncertainty over pre-K tuition. This uncertainty should be eliminated – there is no justification to bill sending towns for pre-K tuition if they do not provide it to their own residents, and it would undermine growth in our magnet school system to charge tuition to families, even using a sliding scale.

- **The state should provide pre-K magnet transportation to low income Hartford families.** Currently city children attending pre-K magnet classes outside the city receive free transportation, but there is no transportation provided for Hartford children attending magnet school pre-K programs inside the city. The state's failure to provide transportation effectively excludes the 35% of Hartford families who do not have a car from participating in pre-K magnet programs within the city of Hartford.

Support the State Board of Education recommendation to lift the “moratorium” on interdistrict magnet school development outside of the Hartford region: At the height of the state's fiscal crisis in 2009, the legislature passed a temporary moratorium on development of interdistrict magnet schools *outside* of the Hartford area. The SBOE has proposed to lift the moratorium and begin funding new magnet schools, which would bring quality, integrated education to more children in other segregated school districts.

Support the continued expansion of Open Choice: Increase the per student tuition for districts enrolling more than 6% Open Choice students to \$9,000 and provide school infrastructure incentives.

ISSUES FOR ADMINISTRATIVE ACTION (CT Department of Education, RSCO, and Department of Housing)

Expand and enhance Open Choice: The suburban Open Choice program is playing an important supporting role in the regional integration system – but some suburban school boards are not participating fully. It is time for the state to become much more aggressive in its demands for fair participation by all suburban districts. We are all part of this region, and every school district needs to do its fair share.

At the same, the state and local districts need to create a supportive environment in suburban districts to ensure that Hartford students succeed. The state and local districts should create Open Choice liaison positions, and fully fund teacher training programs focused on cultural proficiency skills. Local districts should be accountable for performance and retention of their Hartford resident students.

Improve rates of inclusion in regional magnet schools: Each regional magnet school should be reviewed to ensure that its Hartford resident student population reasonably reflects the income and special needs profile of Hartford students overall; to the extent that it does not, remedial steps should be put in place to improve rates of access by low income families, English language learners and children with special needs. Such steps may include affirmative recruitment efforts by HPS and community partners, and better weighting of the magnet school lottery.

Balance Hartford and suburban enrollment in the regional magnet schools: The state should strive to maintain a roughly equal balance of Hartford and suburban students in each interdistrict magnet school. This balance has worked well in the past, but needs to be monitored. In some of the magnet schools, there is now pressure to exceed 50% Hartford enrollment, which runs the risk of undermining the positive economic diversity that helps make these schools successful. At the same time, some other magnet schools have substantially fewer than 50% of their seats filled with Hartford students – and these schools should do a better job of marketing so that more Hartford children can benefit.

Balance enrollment across suburban districts: Many of our suburban towns are underrepresented in the regional magnets, while there are 3-4 towns that are sending a disproportionate number of children into the system. We recommend that the magnet school lottery be adjusted to balance suburban enrollment across districts, so that children from underrepresented districts have a better chance of getting in, and overrepresented suburban districts can retain more of their students.

Require any new charter schools to provide inclusive and integrated education: Any new or expanded charter schools approved by the state should comply with the statutory mandate, consistent with *Sheff*, to serve a racially and economically diverse student body. The state should not be spending its limited state education funds to create new racially isolated schools.

Reduce confusion in the application process and the lottery system: The current RSCO lottery and application process is confusing and difficult to figure out. This is especially true of the system of published preferences for admission to each school. As a starting point, RSCO needs to make magnet school waitlist preferences (sibling, staff, zone, pathway, neighborhood, etc) more uniform and transparent.

Expand magnet school pathways: Establish secure magnet school pathways for all magnet schools, to stabilize fifth grade magnet school enrollment.

Marketing: The state should emphasize *Sheff v. O'Neill* and the social justice roots of the two-way interdistrict system in its marketing materials to parents.

Align school construction spending with school integration goals: Significant school construction commitments are being considered in a number of Hartford area districts. State school construction funds should be prioritized for schools that will help to reduce racial isolation and promote diversity. The state should also work with suburban districts considering school closing and consolidation to find solutions to advance Sheff goals.

Align state housing and education policy to promote integration: In spite of longstanding federal and state fair housing obligations, Connecticut's state housing agencies continue to make affordable housing investments that perpetuate or increase school segregation, undermining the Sheff mandate and the efforts of the state Department of Education to reduce racial and economic isolation in the public schools. These agencies should do a better job of talking to each other and aligning their mutual civil rights policy goals.

The Sheff Movement coalition works to educate parents and concerned residents about Connecticut's successful voluntary two-way interdistrict school integration programs and to promote improvement and expansion of these programs. Our goal is to promote quality, integrated education for all children. To see a full list of our 2014 legislative and advocacy goals, go to www.sheffmovement.org.