

Getting the Options and Opportunities Right

How Listening, Learning, and Revising Can Increase the Impact of *Sheff*

As Hartford has steadily increased the percentage of its students enrolled in racially and socio-economically integrated schools, the gap between high-quality and chronically low-performing schools has emerged as a defining issue for the city and regional futures. To address it, we believe, stipulations in the *Sheff v. O'Neill* case over quality integrated education in Greater Hartford ought to be re-adjusted to better address verifiable needs among the city's students and families. One result would be to return the perception of *Sheff* among Hartford families to where it started: a landmark case and catalyst for educational quality in Hartford. This is important. In recent years, last-minute magnet school designations have sprung suddenly upon families and significantly undermined grassroots support. With all of this in mind, Achieve Hartford! recommends eight improvements for the 2014-15 *Sheff* negotiations between the State and the plaintiffs.

In the past, the negotiations have both expanded – and led to unintended consequences that curtail – parent options. To get those options and opportunities right, a fine-grain reconsideration is timely. Here are our eight recommendations:

1. Expand the number of magnet and open choice seats for Hartford residents

- a. **Identify opportunities to create new magnet schools**, representing Hartford's most successful reform strategy to date
- b. **Expand grade size** in those current magnet schools where there is a potential to expand the number of students enrolled
- c. **Increase Hartford resident enrollment at magnet schools that have yet to reach 50 percent residents**
- d. Devise a system that allows for **greater than 50 percent of Hartford resident enrollment at magnet schools consistently failing to fill 50 percent suburban seats**
- e. For Open Choice, increase the subsidy paid by the State for each Hartford student to encourage suburban districts to open more seats for Hartford students

2. Revise the magnet school application "weights" to help ensure Hartford seats do not go unfilled as a result of racial balance compliance, and to increase access to magnet schools for Hartford's neediest students

- a. **Increase the weight that underrepresented suburban towns have in the lottery** to make it easier to achieve racial balance compliance and thus increase the number of Hartford students able to fill seats
- b. Establish a **target goal of Hartford Special Education and English Language Learner (ELL) students** at each magnet school to mirror the HPS District average – and increase the weight that Special Education and ELL carry in the lottery
- c. Identify a **common indicator for student-level poverty**, establish a target minimum and maximum consistent with national research, publish the poverty percentage at each magnet school, and increase the weight that poverty carries in the lottery for Hartford-resident students

3. Increase transparency and inform consumers by publishing useful data on each magnet and open choice school

- a. **Market new grade openings at each magnet school heavily** to ensure consumers are informed of where their best chances to win the lottery exist
- b. **Publish current Special Education and English Language Learner data on each magnet and open choice school**, including suburban open choice schools and Hartford neighborhood schools participating in reverse open choice
- c. **Calculate and publish the academic and retention results of Hartford students at suburban open choice schools** for the previous three years
- d. **Publish data on filled and unfilled seats as well as racial-balance compliance** for each magnet and open choice school

4. Promote integration as a two-way street by allocating marketing dollars towards the promotion of certain Hartford neighborhood schools and investing in the improvement of those neighborhood schools

- a. **Fund marketing efforts to encourage more middle class suburban families to consider promising neighborhood schools in Hartford** that are already close to achieving racial and economic integration standards and/or that have reached a consistently high base of academic proficiency
- b. **Provide financial support for improvement plans at Hartford neighborhood schools** that have the potential of going from "good" to "great" and in a span of a few years attract middle class suburban families to participate in reverse open choice and growth in other key indicators

5. Build stronger connections between neighborhood and magnet schools

- a. Create formal pathways that **interconnect neighborhood elementary schools with magnet secondary schools to build neighborhood stability and school collaborations**
- b. **Help more Hartford students from surrounding neighborhoods, by increasing the weight that residential location has in the lottery for magnet schools within the city limits**, so that students from the surrounding neighborhood can attend schools of their choice

6. Improve the application process in ways that make it easier for Hartford families to participate

- a. **Combine all choice applications into a single application** (while maintaining two separate lotteries) in an effort to decrease Hartford parent confusion
- b. **Include a new magnet school selection option in the application, allowing for Hartford parents to select "any open magnet seat"**

7. Enrich the pairing of magnet and neighborhood schools, following national best practices, to stretch the impact of *Sheff* dollars

- a. **Pair** the magnet and neighborhood schools in close proximity to each other (and with similar grade configurations) for the sharing of resources related to teacher professional development, sports and after-school opportunities, and building principal collaboration
- b. **Fund opportunities to share best practices among magnet and neighborhood schools** that maintain similar **academic and industry themes**

8. Fund transportation for Hartford families who win a seat in a magnet Pre-K

- a. **Fund transportation for Hartford residents**, with children filling magnet Pre-K seats, as a way to ensure those families applying are among the most needy in Hartford