

SERIES: 2001-2002
Circular Letter: C – 25

TO: Superintendents of Schools

FROM: Theodore S. Sergi
Commissioner of Education

DATE: May 22, 2002

SUBJECT: School District Efforts to Reduce Racial, Ethnic and Economic Isolation of Students.

It has been five years since the Governor and General Assembly responded to the Connecticut Supreme Court's decision in *Sheff vs. O'Neill*, setting in motion a series of policies and programs designed to reduce the racial, ethnic and economic isolation of Connecticut's students (June 1997). The starting point of the State's response to *Sheff* was the amendment to the legal definition of the educational interests of the state adding the requirement that "in order to reduce racial, ethnic and economic isolation, each school district shall provide educational opportunities for its students to interact with students and teachers from other racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds". The legislature has enacted a range of programs and policies to support school districts' efforts to address this legislative mandate. These programs and policies include a greatly expanded set of interdistrict magnet schools, replacing Project Concern with the OPEN CHOICE program that now serves four urban centers and their suburbs, expansion of the Interdistrict Cooperative Grant program and efforts coordinated through the RESCs to increase the number of minority teachers working in Connecticut's public schools. Each school district now has in place a plan to recruit minority teachers.

In order to assess the success of its directive to reduce student isolation, state law requires that the State Board of Education monitor the efforts and activities of local school districts. The State Board of Education is required to report biennially on local efforts to reduce isolation, on "evidence of progress over time" in reducing student isolation and to make recommendations for any legislative changes that would assist in the expansion of local programs and activities.

The State Board of Education reported to the Governor and General Assembly on the initial status of these efforts in February 1998 and January 1999. These reports have become our baseline data in assessing our progress over time. In January 2001, the State

Board issued its first biennial report. This report outlined all the programs put into place to reduce student isolation.

We have attached our April 3, 2002 report to the State Board of Education that updates our previous summaries. We urge you to review this report.

As you review the activities of your district this year and plan activities for your students for next year, I urge you to ask yourself the following questions.

- **How much progress have we made so far?**
- **How can we improve both the quantity and the quality of our efforts to reduce isolation next year?**

I continue to hope that we are not motivated solely by the statutory requirement but are acting from the knowledge that there is a clear educational benefit to students to learn with and about students from other racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds. Any district failing to take action and failing to make progress is not meeting its legal and educational obligations. We defined “progress” two years ago as “reasonable and significant efforts to establish and annually expand your programs to include more students, more time, in quality learning experiences.”

In January 2003, the State Board of Education must present its next biennial report to the General Assembly on “activities and programs designed to reduce the racial, ethnic and economic isolation of students”, analysis of the growth and success of such programs over time and recommendations for further action. Your ED539 reports, submitted in July 2002, will serve as the core of that state report. In addition, Department staff will be looking at each district’s efforts in 2001-2002 compared to 1997-98.

We look forward to your continued support of these efforts.

Attachments: ED539 forms for school year 2001-2002

Commissioner’s April 3, 2002 Report to the State Board of Education on Reducing Student Isolation