

Series 2003-04  
Circular Letter: C- 25

TO: Chairpersons of Local and Regional School Boards in the *Sheff v. O'Neill* Region  
Superintendents of Schools in the *Sheff v. O'Neill* Region  
Superintendents Participating in the Open Choice Program

FROM: Dr. Betty J. Sternberg, Commissioner of Education

CC: RESC Directors

DATE: June 4, 2004

SUBJECT: Reducing Racial, Ethnic and Economic Isolation for Connecticut Students  
in the Greater Hartford Region and Expanding Open Choice Program Participation

One of my chief commitments as Commissioner is meeting our mutual obligation to reduce racial, ethnic and economic isolation. This is defined as one of the paramount educational interests of the state in Connecticut General Statutes Section 10-4a(3):

“... 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 and may provide such opportunities with students from other communities...”  
(emphasis added)

We must meet both the letter and the spirit of the law. The Connecticut State Department of Education's Open Choice Program and the Interdistrict Magnet School Program are two of the main vehicles intended to provide school districts with opportunities to meet the ambitious goals of this legislation. The recent agreement reached between the *Sheff* plaintiffs and the State Department of Education adds to the urgency of improving these programs and aggressively increasing participation in them. Your district's contributions to these endeavors have truly supported the state goal to reduce racial, ethnic and economic isolation. **Your continuing and increasing support are critical at this time.**

According to the agreement, by June 30, 2007, at least 30 percent of minority students living in Hartford will be involved in educational experiences with reduced isolation through participation in a variety of programs. A large number of these students are expected to be enrolled in the Open Choice Program or in an Interdistrict Magnet School. Thanks to your efforts, especially through opening new seats midyear, we are close to the goal of having 1000 Hartford minority students participating in the Open Choice program in 2003-04. As of April 28, 2004, 906 Hartford minority students were enrolled.

Hartford students and their families continue to show an interest in the Open Choice program. In 2003-04, 40 or more students in each grade from Grades 4 through 9 were waiting for placement. **Our challenge now is to reach a target of 1200 Hartford minority students participating in Open Choice in 2004-05. As of April 28, 2004, CSDE and CREC projected that a minimum of 366 new seats will need to be opened and filled to achieve the Open Choice goal – an equivalent of approximately 14 new seats in each of the current 27 districts participating in the program. Securing 15 new seats in each district (405 total) will ensure that enough**

**seats will be offered in the event that parents may decline placements in outlying districts. We must reach the 1200 student goal in the coming weeks to adequately prepare for the start of the new academic year.**

**Bruce Douglas and the Open Choice program staff members at CREC have been in contact with you to find the additional seats we need.** I know that you will do everything you can to help. Remember that districts qualify for an additional CSDE disbursement in schools that enroll 10 or more out-of-district Open Choice students.

I have created a new Office of Educational Equity that reports directly to me. It has primary responsibility for the State Department of Education's efforts to reduce racial, ethnic and economic isolation across the state, but with a particular focus now on meeting and exceeding the stipulations in our agreement with the *Sheff* plaintiffs. Jack Hasegawa serves as chief of the new office. He and the staff have been working especially hard, in partnership with the Hartford Public Schools, the City of Hartford and CREC, to address the needs of Open Choice and the developing magnet schools. They will be in contact with you to enlist your continuing assistance, especially with regard to enrollment commitments for these programs.

I am aware of the challenges that many Connecticut districts are facing as they finalize their 2004-05 operating budgets. Current state funding formulas will continue to support districts that participate in these programs. There is, however, a financial commitment needed from participating districts. The Hartford school district, for example, must pay or provide special education services for Hartford students in Open Choice (for expenditures above the \$2000 per pupil allocation that suburban districts receive). Also, there is a magnet tuition commitment for the Hartford Public Schools and its neighboring districts in the *Sheff v. O'Neill* region. We will continue to review with the leadership of the General Assembly legislative proposals that enhance the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of these initiatives.

**You can help by extending and increasing your current commitment to the Open Choice program and by funding magnet tuition costs. In this year, as we celebrate the 50th Anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, we can continue the spirit of that seminal civil rights legislation by doing our best to meet our moral and legal commitments to school desegregation and educational excellence.**

Please contact Jack Hasegawa, Chief, Office of Educational Equity, at 860.713.6545, if you have any questions. Thank you again for your ongoing support.

BJS/mr