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Magnet Schools: An Effective Solution to Sheff v. O'Neill?

Sarah Kaminski
Trinity College

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Sarah Kaminski
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Trinity College

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Introduction

Interdistrict magnet schools have developed as a result of the Connecticut Supreme Court case of Sheff v. O'Neill. In the 1996 decision, the Connecticut Supreme Court declared that "segregation-even if it is unintentional-violates the constitutional right of school children to receive an adequate education."[1] The ruling held that students in the Hartford public schools were in fact racially, ethnically, and economically isolated and that, as a result, these students had not been provided a substantially equal educational opportunity under the state constitution.[2]

Interdistrict magnet schools are created by "two or more districts combining their ideas, skills, and resources to create a new school centered around a unique or unusual theme".[3] These schools are designed specifically to foster both excellence in academics and the reduction of racial, ethnic, or economic isolation.

Magnet schools are a primary response chosen by the state to provide voluntary, integrated schooling opportunities to students in Hartford. Derek Douglas of the NAACP

[1] "A Status Report on Sheff: Desegregation, Education, Schools," Hartford Courant, 4 March 1999, sec. Editorial.
[2] "Memorandum of Decision on Sheff v. O'Neill, State of Connecticut, March 3, 1999.

Legal Defense Fund claims that magnet schools, along with the Open Choice Program, "are the two main pillars of the state's response to the court order."[4]

For this reason, it is important to ask whether magnet schools, as they are currently implemented, are an effective solution to Sheff v. O'Neill? This study analyzed Hartford area school enrollment data, and found that interdistrict magnet schools typically are more racially diverse than their sending districts. However, the relatively low percentage of students actually attending these magnet schools is not an effective solution to the Sheff litigation.

Methods and Results

To conduct this analysis, I chose to look at seven of the Capitol Region Education Council's (CREC) interdistrict magnet schools. CREC is the first and largest of Connecticut's six Regional Educational Service Centers. CREC's role in the magnets include planning, developing programs and curriculum, obtaining funding, managing construction, and then managing the day-to-day operations of the schools, including staffing and business services. I used data compiled by CREC for the 2001-2002 school year, *Magnet Schools Racial Breakdown* and *Districts Participating in Magnet Schools*[5], and then compared it to statistics generated from the latest edition of a document published by the State Department of Education in 1999, *Student Enrollment by Race and Gender by District*[6].

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[3] "Milo Sheff et al. v. William A. O'Neill et al.," Connecticut Law Journal, 29 June 1999, 630-667. (Complex Litigation Docket)
[4] "The Iron Sheff," The New Haven Advocate, 27 September 2001, p. 14-19.
[5] Unpublished Reports, Capitol Region Education Council, 2001-2002.
[6] http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/der/index.htm

I began by calculating the racial compositions of each of the seven CREC interdistrict magnets.

Table 1

School	White	Hispanic	Black	Asian
Greater Hartford Academy Of the Arts	70%	12%	18%	1%
Interdistrict Magnet Montessori School	24%	18%	55%	2%
Greater Hartford Academy for Math & Science	55%	16%	18%	1%
East Hartford/Glastonbury Magnet	60%	11%	23%	6%
Metropolitan Learning Center	23%	11%	63%	3%
Tunxis Middle College High School	72%	16%	12%	0%
University of Hartford Magnet	34%	15%	47%	4%

I then proceeded to calculate the racial compositions of enrolled students for each of the districts that send children to these magnet schools.

Table 2

District	White	Hispanic	Black	Asian
Avon	93%	1%	2%	4%
Bloomfield	7%	5%	87%	1%
Bolton	96%	2%	1%	0%
Bristol	83%	9%	6%	2%
Canton	94%	2%	3%	1%
Cromwell	90%	4%	4%	2%
East Granby	92%	1%	5%	2%
East Haddam	97%	1%	1%	1%
East Hampton	98%	1%	1%	1%
East Hartford	39%	24%	31%	5%
East Windsor	87%	3%	7%	3%
Ellington	96%	1%	1%	1%
Enfield	91%	2%	4%	2%
Farmington	89%	2%	4%	5%
Glastonbury	90%	3%	3%	4%
Granby	96%	1%	2%	1%
Hartford	5%	53%	41%	1%
Litchfield	97%	1%	1%	1%
Manchester	68%	11%	17%	4%
Meriden	54%	32%	12%	2%

Middletown	63%	7%	27%	3%
New Britain	33%	48%	17%	3%
Newington	87%	5%	4%	4%
Plainville	88%	4%	6%	2%
Plymouth	97%	1%	1%	1%
Portland	92%	3%	4%	1%
Putnam	92%	3%	3%	1%
Rocky Hill	91%	3%	3%	3%
RSD#07(Barkhamsted)	99%	0%	0%	0%
RSD#08	96%	2%	1%	0%
RDD#10	97%	1%	1%	1%
RDS#13	97%	1%	1%	1%
RDS#17(Killingworth)	96%	1%	1%	1%
RSD#19	92%	1%	3%	4%
Simsbury	93%	1%	3%	3%
South Windsor	88%	3%	5%	4%
Southington	94%	3%	2%	1%
Stafford	95%	2%	1%	2%
Suffield	95%	1%	3%	1%
Tolland	97%	1%	0%	2%
Torrington	88%	5%	0%	1%
Vernon	82%	5%	7%	4%
West Hartford	73%	11%	8%	7%
Wethersfield	87%	7%	4%	3%
Windsor	48%	7%	41%	4%
Windsor Locks	89%	3%	4%	4%

Finally, I compared the racial composition of the schools to each of its sending districts to determine if the magnet is in fact more racially diverse, less racially diverse, or if it is unclear. I did this comparison based on the highest percentage, containing the most highly represented racial category for both the magnet school and the sending district. Whichever of the two has the lower percentage is considered to be more racially diverse, the lower percentage indicating a less segregated schooling environment.

An example of this would be a comparison between The Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts and the town of Avon, one of its sending districts.

School	White	Hispanic	Black	Asian
Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts	70%	12%	18%	1%

District	White	Hispanic	Black	Asian
Avon	93%	1%	2%	4%

Observe that the highest percentage in the school racial composition breakdown is 70% and the highest percentage in the district racial composition is 93%. So, in this case, I concluded that the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts is more racially diverse, having a less segregated composition, than the sending district of Avon. If the highest percentage of the sending district is lower than that of the magnet school, indicating a more integrated composition, then the school is considered to be less diverse than the district. The cases that I regard as unclear are instances in which both the interdistrict magnet and its sending district have a highest percentage that come within 5% of each other, causing it to be difficult to determine which of the two is more racially diverse. I did this comparison between the seven schools and each of their sending districts.

Table 3

School	More Diverse	Less Diverse	Unclear
Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts	38	7	1
Interdistrict Magnet Montessori School	15	4	1
Greater Hartford Academy for Math and Science	11	2	1
East Hartford/Glastonbury Magnet	1	1	0
Metropolitan Learning Center	4	2	0
Tunxis Middle College High School	6	1	0
University of Hartford Magnet	7	0	0
Total	82	17	3

This table should be read, “in 38 cases, the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts is more racially diverse than its sending districts”; or “the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts is less racially diverse than 7 of its sending districts”.

From the totals seen at the bottom of this third table, comparing the racial compositions of the magnet schools to their sending districts, it becomes apparent that the first component of my thesis has been proven. In most cases, the magnet school is in fact more racially diverse than its sending districts. Numerically, the magnet schools are more racially diverse than the sending districts in 82 out of 102 cases. In comparison, in only 17 cases does it appear that the sending district is more racially diverse than the magnet.

Subsequently, I calculated the percentage of each sending district student population currently participating in CREC interdistrict magnets. I did this to prove the second part of my thesis, that the level of participation of each of the district is not

significant enough for the current implementation of magnets to be an effective solution to Sheff.

Table 4

Sending District	Percentage of Participation by District	Number of Students Participating out of District Student Population
Avon	0.48%	13 out of 2,695
Bloomfield	5.05%	135 out of 2,673
Bolton	0%	4 out of 935
Bristol	0%	20 out of 8,563
Canton	0%	2 out of 1,530
Cromwell	0%	4 out of 1,783
East Granby	0%	2 out of 841
East Haddam	0%	2 out of 1,358
East Hampton	0%	3 out of 1,987
East Windsor	2%	25 out of 1,464
Ellington	0%	5 out of 2,176
Enfield	0%	26 out of 6,716
Farmington	1%	48 out of 4,035)
Granby	1%	14 out of 1,921
Hartford	2%	501 out of 21,663)
Litchfield	0%	1 out of 1,381
Manchester	1%	46 out of 7,546
Meriden	0%	3 out of 8,670
Middletown	0%	10 out of 4,734
New Britain	1%	61 out of 10,052
Newington	0%	18 out of 4,293
Plainville	0%	12 out of 2,689
Plymouth	0%	2 out of 1,962
Portland	0%	1 out of 1,375
Putnam	0%	1 out of 1,349
Rocky Hill	1%	27 out of 2,353
RSD#07(Barkhamsted)	0%	1 out of 987
RSD#08	0%	1 out of 1,368
RDD#10	1%	15 out of 2,509
RDS#13	0%	4 out of 1,949
RDS#17(Killingworth)	0%	2 out of 2,323
RSD#19	1%	10 out of 1,102
Simsbury	1%	43 out of 4,751
South Windsor	0%	7 out of 4,895
Southington	0%	22 out of 6,526

Stafford	0%	1 out of 1,901
Suffield	0%	2 out of 2,156
Tolland	0%	2 out of 2,604
Torrington	0%	7 out of 4,836
Vernon	0%	4 out of 4,100
West Hartford	1%	60 out of 8,964
Wethersfield	1%	37 out of 3,422
Windsor	4%	159 out of 4,451
Windsor Locks	3%	56 out of 1,994

In this table, cells that indicate a 0% participation rate do so because the number of students from the district who participate in the magnet program is not numerically significant enough to comprise a percent. In these cases, I have added the actual number of students out of the total sending district population who participate in a CREC interdistrict magnet school to counter the misinterpretation that the 0% indicates that there are no students in that district that participate in a magnet school.

Through the analysis of this table, it becomes clear that the level of participation of the sending district population is for the most part insignificant. To get a better idea of just how little of the total population actually benefits from the magnet program, I calculated the percentage of the total sending districts population in interdistrict magnets.

Total Enrollment of Sending Districts	180854
Total Enrollment of Interdistrict Magnet Schools	1743
Percentage of Total Sending Districts Participation in Interdistrict Magnets	1%

This calculation indicates that only 1% of the total enrollment of the sending districts participate in a CREC magnet.

From these tables, one can see that my findings directly support my thesis, that although in most cases the magnet schools have a more diverse racial composition than

its sending districts (Table 1: 82 versus 20), the level of participation is such a small percentage of the total enrollment of the districts (Table 4: 1%), that not a significant enough number of students are benefited by the magnet school program to allow it to be an effective solution to Sheff v. O'Neill.

Discussion

This research question is both significant in and relevant to current education policy. In December of 2000, the Plaintiffs in the Sheff v. O'Neill case filed a motion for order regarding the implementation of the project choice program and the interdistrict magnet school program in the Hartford region. The purpose of the motion was to address deficiencies in the Project Choice Program and the Interdistrict Magnet School program, which, as noted, are key elements of the state's remedial response to the Supreme Court's July, 1996 decision in Sheff v. O'Neill.[7] The Plaintiffs state in the motion that, "The Interdistrict Magnet School Program, although it provides a quality educational program to a relatively small number of students, has been wholly inadequate to address the constitutional deficiencies set out in the 1996 Sheff ruling."[8] They go on to list several specific deficiencies of the program:

- *the program has not been adequately funded, and provides integrated school opportunities to less than 2% of Hartford schoolchildren;*
- *the program is not large enough to accommodate demand and potential demand among Hartford and suburban schoolchildren and parents;*
- *the state limits participation in the interdistrict magnet school program by permitting local school superintendents and boards to decide whether to participate in a*

[7] "Motion For Order Regarding the Implementation of the Project Choice Program and the Interdistrict Magnet School Program in the Hartford Region," State of Connecticut, December 28, 2000.

particular interdistrict magnet, and if such participation is authorized, to decide how many schoolchildren living in their town will be permitted to attend each such magnet school without the payment of private tuition;

- *the funding formula used in the program discourages local district participation by deducting a substantial sum from local school district budgets for each student who participates in an interdistrict magnet school;*
- *the program includes no racial or economic criteria for placement as permitted by federal law, further diminishing its effectiveness as a voluntary desegregation program;*
- *upon information and belief, future growth in the interdistrict magnet program has been further restricted by a moratorium or cessation of planning for new magnet schools, beginning shortly after this Court's decision in March 1999, and continuing in effect at least until mid-2000. No new magnet schools are currently being developed in the Hartford region, other than the schools discussed at the September 1998 hearing in Superior Court.*[9]

More than eleven years after the original action brought by the Plaintiffs in 1989, racial and ethnic segregation and isolation in Hartford area schools continues to deprive plaintiffs' right to equal educational opportunity. As of the date of the motion, December 28, 2000, fewer than 400 (2%) of Hartford's schoolchildren were participating in the

[8] Ibid.
[9] "Motion For Order Regarding the Implementation of the Project Choice Program and the Interdistrict Magnet School Program in the Hartford Region," State of Connecticut, December 28, 2000.

Interdistrict Magnet Program. Also, the Hartford schools have become increasingly racially isolated with a 1999-2000 school population that was 95% Black and Latino.[10]

Given these statistics and the aforementioned information that the Interdistrict Magnet Program is considered a primary component to the response chosen by the state, it becomes obvious that additional research, comparable to that which is seen in this paper, must be conducted on the program to ascertain that the state must commence immediate planning for a substantial number of additional interdistrict magnet schools, to bring the state further into compliance with the Supreme Court's 1996 ruling.

I have been able to prove quantitatively, for the vast majority of cases, that magnet schools have a more integrated and less isolated racial composition than their sending districts. Because the establishment of integrated learning opportunities is a primary area of concern for the state's compliance with Sheff, one would have to assume that if presented with such data, the State would not be able to refute the effectiveness of the interdistrict magnets in integrating the students of Hartford and its surrounding districts.

Also, in regards to the second component of my thesis, if the State is presented with the analysis that only 1% of the sending district population has access to magnet school participation in addition to the fact that the new CREC elementary magnet on the University of Hartford campus received over 1,400 applications for only 276 slots[11], they can not contest the allegation that the program is not large enough to accommodate demand among Hartford schoolchildren.

[10] Ibid.
[11] Attorneys for Plaintiffs, letter to Honorable Moira K. Lyons, 3 May 2001.

In addition to the implications that this data would have on the State's defense, the importance of this research was further indicated to me during an interview I conducted with Phil Tegeler, an attorney for the Sheff Plaintiffs. After reviewing the data analysis that I had done for the racial composition of one of the magnet schools and its sending districts, he became very interested in my findings and conveyed to me that he had not seen these statistics compared in this way. I am hopeful, that this data will assist Mr. Tegeler's efforts when the Plaintiffs return back to court in April to cause the state to increase funding and action in magnet school efforts, allowing them to be a more effective and large scale solution to Sheff.

Altogether, I believe that my finding serve as a quantitative compliment to the arguments that are currently being employed by the Plaintiffs in the Sheff case. My findings prove that for the most part, magnet schools have a more diverse racial composition than its sending districts. It also indicates that the level of participation of the sending district enrollment is by no means significant enough for the Interdistrict Magnet School Program to be warranted as a *pillar* in desegregation efforts. A much larger percentage of that population would have to be benefit from the program for it to be deemed as such.

Overall, my data is in agreement with Phil Tegeler's argument that "the state needs to be more aggressive in its funding and expansion of magnet programs" in order for the Program to be considered a resolution to Sheff v. O'Neill. I also concur, that "we need a plan for the number of kids we want to see have access to these voluntary programs, what the scale should be, over what time period, for how much integration will

result, and how much it will cost"[12]. I am optimistic about the Plaintiffs' return to court in April of 2002 for the fact that they will be armed with both a comprehensive plan and quantitative data, similar to the analysis seen in this paper, that will have a more impacting voice in their efforts to cause the state to act in compliance with the 1996 decision.

[12] Phil Tegeler (head Attorney for Sheff Plaintiffs), interview by Sarah Kaminski, 13 November 2001.

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