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The State's Toughest Problem

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Finding a solution to the Sheff v. O'Neill school segregation dilemma has become the Gordian knot of Connecticut public policy. The state has put \$1.2 billion toward the problem and gotten nowhere.

Lawmakers are now balking at spending another \$112 million, and they have a point. They know they need to do something, but would like to do something that works.

Plaintiffs in the case, which was filed in 1989, asserted that racial and economic segregation in Hartford's public school system created an inferior education for city youngsters in violation of the state constitution. The state Supreme Court, reversing a lower court decision in 1996, agreed with the plaintiffs and ordered the legislature to craft an "appropriate remedy."

The legislature responded with a number of programs in 1997, including charter and magnet schools, an out-of-district school choice program, preschool and reading programs. The package also included the state's takeover of the Hartford school district.

The plaintiffs returned to court five years later, saying these steps had failed. In 2003, both sides reached a settlement in which the state agreed to build eight new magnet schools over the next four years for Hartford students and to increase the regional Open Choice program, among other things. The goal was to have 30 percent of Hartford students in integrated schools by 2007.

Here it is 2007, and Hartford schools are slightly more segregated than they were when the Sheff case was filed. Some nice new magnet schools have been built, but a recent study found that only 9 percent of city youngsters are in integrated schools, well below the goal of 30 percent.

The challenges attendant to reaching the 30 percent goal, modest in itself, are daunting.

Since the Sheff suit was filed in 1989, school systems in the inner suburban towns have become substantially more integrated. This indicates that segregation today is driven more by economics than race. It also makes moving Hartford's 24,000 students into integrated schools more of a logistical challenge. At the same time, there's no consensus on the part of city parents about the way to a better education. Some heartily endorse the magnet concept; some want better neighborhood schools.

At bottom, the problem is geographical. School attendance is related to housing patterns. People with the means often move to towns they believe have strong schools. Poor people tend to stay where the least expensive housing can be found. Sixty years of

postwar suburbanization has left the Hartford school system about 95 percent minority. It is going to take vision and imagination, in addition to new schools, to meet this challenge.

The Sheff remedy needs real incentives. What if Hartford had the best public high school in New England, a Boston Latin or Bronx High School of Science? What if there were more housing opportunities in the city for the middle class? This would require government to stop building so much low-income housing in the city.

One sure way to get low-income people into the middle class is decent jobs. The state should take the lead by putting more of its jobs in the city, and using its economic development programs to encourage companies to do the same.

Some magnet and charter schools have worked well; the need is to find out why and replicate them. If there are enough good choices, a regional school choice program can work.

The most positive sign in Hartford is the bold, no-nonsense approach of school Superintendent Stephen J. Adamowski, who will completely overhaul four failing elementary schools as part of a broader shake-up of the system. As a decade of failure has made abundantly clear, it's going to take time to implement a workable Sheff vision, and most of Hartford's kids need better schools right now.

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