

February 22, 2012

**Testimony of the Sheff Movement coalition on SB 24, “An Act Concerning Educational Competitiveness”**

My name is Barbara Zuras, and I am testifying today on behalf of the Sheff Movement coalition. I have also served as an elected member of the Avon Board of Education. Avon has one of the highest performing school districts in this state. While our children in Avon have excellent educational opportunities, so many children in our state are in public schools that do not provide them with an equal opportunity to achieve their potential.

The Sheff Movement is an independent parent and community advocacy group. We provide grass roots support for the expansion and integrity of the two-way voluntary school integration programs created as part of the remedy in the 1996 *Sheff v. O’Neill* case. As you are aware, in *Sheff*, the Connecticut Supreme Court declared that the isolation of Hartford children in high poverty segregated public schools violated the Connecticut Constitution. We also support the expansion of quality, integrated education beyond the Hartford region.

The Sheff Movement’s overall goal is to include racial and economic school integration as a core educational priority for the State of Connecticut, as a crucial component of a “quality, integrated education.” We believe that school diversity and reduction of racial isolation should be required and incentivized in all state education programs – not just the minimum legal requirement by the *Sheff v. O’Neill* court order. This principle applies to any state supported early childhood education program, any new or expanded charter school, the ECS funding system, and all state school construction funding.

SB 24, “An Act Concerning Educational Competitiveness”

Overall, we support the Governor’s aggressive efforts to improve education for low income children in our state, and to close the state’s gaping achievement gap. We also support increases in the funding levels and incentives for Open Choice and Interdistrict Magnet Schools included in the bill (and in the Governor’s budget). However, we have a continuing concern that the state is pursuing other elements of school reform in a manner that will continue to separate low income children of color from the rest of our schools and society. There is no reason that “school reform” needs to be separate from school integration. School integration improves student achievement, increases racial tolerance and understanding, improves long term education outcomes, and better prepares students to participate effectively in a diverse society. Connecticut is already recognized nationally for its school integration programs in the Hartford region – it should build on this strength and continue to expand quality, integrated education programs in Hartford and across the state. It is from this perspective that we approach SB 24.

Section 18 (state intervention in low achieving schools and districts): We support the provisions in Section 18(d), creating a system of “Commissioner’s Network Schools” to implement a school turnaround strategy for failing schools, but we urge the legislature to direct SDE to include interdistrict magnet schools as a preferred school turnaround strategy in appropriate cases. We have seen magnets succeed as school turnaround models in the Hartford region (for example, at the Annie Fisher STEM school, now a thriving Hartford Public School magnet attracting students from across the region).

Section 23 (Open Choice): In addition to the amendments to C.G.S. 10-266aa (Open Choice) included in the Governor’s bill, we recommend that the General Assembly include two additional amendments to the Open Choice statute to expand the effectiveness of the Open Choice program in the Hartford area, increase fairness to Hartford families, and help the State to reach its ongoing integration goals under the Sheff v. O’Neill:

¶ Establish a deadline of March 1 for Hartford-area superintendents to declare available Open Choice seats, and require SDE to fill all seats by June 1. This change is needed so that Hartford families will know if they have been admitted to the program, and know where their children will attend school within a reasonable time after the lottery is run. This will increase Open Choice enrollment and will ensure that families have the information they need to plan for their children’s future. The current system, which recently left many families in limbo until the summer (and fall), is unfair to Hartford parents and their children, and led to a number of unfilled seats in suburban districts.

¶ Give the Commissioner of Education authority to mandate additional Open Choice seats in specific grade levels to meet unmet demand – based upon SDE analysis of space availability in eligible towns. This power is needed to match Open Choice applicants with available suburban space, which will expand choices for city parents and help the state reach its integration goals.

Section 36 (access and information about interdistrict schools): The required inclusion of interdistrict magnets, Open Choice, and other educational options on local district websites is a welcome addition to parent information and education. We urge the legislature to go further in this section, and require all local districts to inform all parents by mail, at least two months before the end of the open application period, of the full range of interdistrict education options available to their children.

Section 52 (charter schools): We support efforts to ensure that Connecticut charter schools are more inclusive of students with special education needs, English Language Learners, and other disadvantaged students, and we also urge the legislature to prioritize school diversity and reduction of racial isolation in this section. The Connecticut General Statutes already include provisions that appear to require or prioritize charter schools that promote racial and economic integration,<sup>1</sup> but for some reason, these have not been followed by the State Department of Education or the State Board of Education. For this reason, we urge the legislature to include a preference in §52(c)(3) for charter schools that provide racially and economically integrated

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<sup>1</sup> See C.G.S. § 10-66bb, C.G.S. § 10-66bb, C.G.S. § 10-66cc. Charter schools are also included in the 2008 Sheff settlement, but new and existing charters funded since 2008 have not been able to avail themselves of the opportunity to contribute to the Sheff goals.

educational opportunities to students. For charter schools in the Hartford region, a preference should be given to schools that meet Sheff integration standards and contribute to the Sheff integration goals. In addition, all newly state funded charter schools should be required to meet and report on diversity goals. Similarly, the lottery waiver provisions in section 52(j) should include lottery adjustments to promote racial and economic integration.

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The full legislative agenda of the Sheff Movement, including recommendations on incorporating school diversity goals in early childhood education policy, can be found at [http://www.sheffmovement.org/pdf/Sheff\\_Movement\\_2012\\_legislative\\_agenda-Feb2012.pdf](http://www.sheffmovement.org/pdf/Sheff_Movement_2012_legislative_agenda-Feb2012.pdf).

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony.