

Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee

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STUDY SCOPE

Hartford Region Public School Choice Programs

Focus

This study will describe the current rules, governance structures, enrollment, and funding for public school choice programs in the Hartford region, with an emphasis on interdistrict magnet schools. Public school choice programs, which also include charter schools and “Open Choice” placements, will be compared and contrasted with other public schools. The study will also discuss the role of the 1996 *Sheff v. O’Neill*ⁱ decision by the Connecticut Supreme Court, and subsequent agreements, on the establishment, operation, and enrollment trends of public school choice programs in the area.

Background

Public school choice programs, where certain students are able to enroll in public schools other than their local neighborhood schools, have been used by the state in an attempt to “reduce racial, ethnic and economic isolation” for Connecticut students, as described in the 1997 Enhancing Education Choices and Opportunities Act (Public Act 97-290). The 1996 *Sheff v. O’Neill* ruling required that the state take action to reduce such isolation. As the case involved Hartford-area students, some program requirements are specific and limited to the region. (The program review committee is currently studying a related topic, regional cooperation between local boards of education. Some educational regional cooperation efforts have been put in place as part of the state’s efforts to reduce racial isolation.) As a result of the 1997 act, the state education commissioner is required to report on the growth and effectiveness of programs designed to reduce racial isolation, with the assistance of school districts through similar district-level reporting requirements (C.G.S. Sec. 10-226h).

Since the late 1990s, enrollment in and availability of public school choice programs has expanded. Some students can now choose from a variety of public school choice programs, including: magnet schools; charter schools; technical schools; regional agricultural science centers; or neighborhood schools outside of their local area through the “Open Choice” program. Over 50,000 students (approximately 9 percent of all public school students in the state) were enrolled in some type of public school choice program statewide as of October 2014.

The statutory authorizations and requirements for each category of public school choice program differ, and can also vary by or because of the program operator. A wide range of groups is authorized to operate these programs, such as local boards of education, the state board of education, regional educational services centers, and private non-profit organizations, among others.

Areas of Analysis

1. Summarize statutorily authorized public school choice programs.
 - a. Compare and contrast statutory structures for all public school programs in the region, choice-based and not, with emphasis on:
 - i. governance structures;
 - ii. administration; and
 - iii. funding mechanisms.
2. Identify public school choice programs that are currently available to Hartford-area students.
 - a. Describe the enrollment and funding levels of current Hartford-area school choice programs.
3. Describe the student enrollment process for each type of school choice program.
 - a. To the extent possible, determine if students enrolled in each type of choice program differ from students in non-choice public schools, by:
 - i. demographics
 - ii. indicators of need (e.g., socioeconomic, special education, and gifted status); and
 - iii. prior academic achievement.
4. Discuss the *Sheff v. O'Neill* case.
 - a. Describe the history of the case.
 - b. Examine the role of the case in shaping school choice program policy in the region.
 - c. Compare and contrast the requirements and opportunities of *Sheff*-related choice programs to non-*Sheff* choice programs in the state.
 - d. Review the requirements of the *Sheff v. O'Neill* court order and subsequent agreements.
 - a. Identify changes in *Sheff* requirements and goals since 1996.
5. Analyze enrollment trends at public school choice programs.
 - a. Compare enrollment trends to *Sheff*-related goals.
6. Identify major policy changes, besides those related to the *Sheff* case, at the state and federal level that may have affected choice programs in the Hartford region.

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ⁱ *Sheff v. O'Neill*, 238 Conn. 1, 678 A2d. 1267 (1996)