

Assessing Integration A Decade Later

4 A DECADE

"And you better be able to answer that question and produce on it," Douglas said.

By having diverse educational settings and distinct education niches, Douglas can make his case that CREC students are better prepared for an eclectic 21st century work force.

Also, Douglas said, the bureaucracy at CREC is "flat," meaning the response time to concerns or complaints from parents or staff is quicker than in public school systems whose hierarchy requires multiple levels of approval.

As renewed talks between the plaintiffs and the state begin, one of the issues that must be advocated seriously is an agreement to let CREC run all the magnet schools. Hartford can play a role, but CREC, despite funding problems, should take the lead. Certainly politics and egos will get in the way of such a remedy, but the best argument for letting CREC run the show is its track record.

Another solution that would make these magnets more appealing would be to build some in the suburbs or on Hartford's borders. Partnering the magnets with other non-magnet schools and with universities or businesses is an enlightened national trend worth replicating, too.

Better accountability to measure progress needs to be agreed upon. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been pumped into these desegregation initiatives, including money for pre-school and literacy education. Martha Stone, a lead-plaintiff attorney, said a mechanism to measure progress will be among the items the Sheff team will be seeking in its next round of talks.

That lack of measurement has raised the eyebrows of some third-party observers.

"It's surprising to me in all the talk of school accountability lately that there's no legal mechanism to make sure that the quality of the academic achievement is under consideration," said Jack Dougherty, associate professor of education at Trinity College. Dougherty, along with other local professors, has been researching Sheff's impact. He said his research indicates that the state is overstating the percentage of Hartford students who qualify to be counted toward compliance with the Sheff settlement. The state's estimate is 23.5 percent; Dougherty's research shows it's 14 percent.

The negotiations should also talk about significantly increasing the percentage of city students to be integrated. The current 30 percent goal means more than two-thirds of the Hartford kids are left behind. More incentives are also needed for suburban schools to open slots for city kids. If the Sheff goal is to be achieved, Open Choice can't be offered in name only.

While there is a lot of angst about whether white suburban parents can be compelled to send their children to racially diverse magnet schools, there's evidence to show that plenty of parents greatly value diversity.

More than half the students are white at three CREC-run magnets — Two Rivers Magnet Middle School in East Hartford, Greater Hartford Academy of Math and Science in Hartford and the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts, also in the city.

Heidi Caplinger of Manchester sends two of her children, ages 9 and 4, to Hartford's Breakthrough Magnet School. Caplinger wasn't happy with the education her children were getting in Manchester and wanted them exposed to more cultures.

"We're Caucasian, so my son pretty much assumed that all white people stayed together and



HARTFORD COURANT FILE PHOTO

At a 1995 news conference, Milo Sheff, center, surrounded by others involved in the case, discusses a superior court judge's rejection of claims made in the lawsuit. It would be more than a year before the Connecticut Supreme Court overturned that judge's ruling. Milo Sheff now is 27 and a fledgling rap artist.

that we're all from the same neighborhood," she said. "To me, [cultural diversity] is very important."

Caplinger, 28, said she had recruited five more white families, including a relative's, to sign up for the Breakthrough lottery. But oddly, Caplinger says, none were selected.

Then there is Jacob Komar, the Burlington prodigy I met last year when he was 12. At age 2, he was writing computer commands on a laptop. At 5, bored with his teacher's rote teachings of the ABCs, he finally told her she was "insulting my intelligence." His parents sent him off to private school and eventually he was taking classes at Tunxis Community College.

Jacob finally decided to enroll at University High School in Hartford, a magnet school with a science and engineering niche. Soon to be located on the campus of the University of Hartford, it will also give students the opportunity to attend college classes while in high school. Jacob's the kind of kid who could wind up graduating from college before his peers are done with high school.

To see this underage, skinny white kid from the sticks comfortable attending school with older African-American and Latino students speaks to

the mission of Sheff and the writings of Frederick Douglass. Jacob told me that race didn't matter to him. What did matter was that the other kids also shared his interest in math and science.

Jacob's dad, Andy Komar, said the diversity of the school was part of its allure because his son "could grow up being with other children who look like the rest of the world."

Maggie McCarthy of East Hartford is white and a senior at Capital Preparatory School. The Hartford magnet high school has a white population of 18 percent but a mixture of cultures including Asians, West Indians, Russians, African-Americans and Indians.

McCarthy wants to be a teacher. Exposure to a wide array of cultures now, she says, will make her a more productive teacher later. "I know that I'm going to be working with a bunch of different kids, so its good to branch out," she said.

Isaiah Graham, 15, of Hartford is African-American and a sophomore at Capital Prep. He's thinking about a career in law and says the mixture of cultures at school expands his intellectual horizon.

"With all these different people with different backgrounds and different experiences, everything

from your learning experience to your classroom discussion is more unique," he said.

Kimtuyen Tran, 15 and of Asian descent, says her generation is much more "open-minded minded to diversity" than their parents.

She's right. As the world grows more culturally diverse, efforts like Sheff may one day become moot.

The risk in doing an examination on the Sheff verdict 10 years later is that what may look like a simple finding could be misleading. If you probe Sheff and judge it solely on how the Hartford-run magnets are progressing, you could say the patient is dying of neglect. If your assessment is anchored on the CREC-run magnets, you could make the case that the Sheff agreement just needs a management transplant. Together, the findings represent both progress and struggle.

I can almost hear Professor Leach now, quoting Frederick Douglass again.

"There is no progress without struggle."

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