

# Sheff Movement



Quality Integrated Education for All Children

January 9, 2012,

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you.

My name is Barbara Zuras, and I am here as a member of the Sheff Movement coalition.

I have for the last four years served as an elected member of the Avon Board of Education. Avon has one of this state's highest performing school districts.

As a member of the Sheff coalition, I have acquired a sobering awareness that many children in our state are in public schools that do not provide them with an equal opportunity to achieve their potential. That is the tragic inequity that you have been asked to address.

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 State Supreme Court declared that the isolation of Hartford children in high poverty segregated public schools violated the Connecticut Constitution.

As a result of the Court's order to end that isolation, entities such as CREC, the Hartford Public Schools and neighboring suburban school districts in the Hartford area have joined together to create a growing regional system of quality integrated education that now includes almost 30% of Hartford's children. And, these *Sheff* school programs are closing the Achievement Gap. Many of the magnet schools established through *Sheff* have been nationally recognized for their excellence and success.

Our hope today is to impress upon you the important role that economic and racial integration in our public schools can play in reducing the achievement gap.

In arriving at your recommendations, we ask that you consider the following:

1. You have here in the Capitol Region a proven model for success – study what CREC has accomplished, what Hartford's magnet schools have achieved and what success the Open Choice program has facilitated toward closing the achievement gap. It has all been done through quality integrated public education.
2. Expansion of early education was one of the legislature's original responses to the *Sheff v. O'Neill* ruling. Connecticut needs to build on this track record by making quality, integrated preschool education universally available for 3- and 4-year olds. This state should avoid creating a segregated preschool education system for low income children of color.

3. Educational studies have substantiated that low income children's levels of achievement in Math, Reading and Critical Thinking Skills are higher when they are taught in diverse student settings that offer more advantaged peers and higher expectations. Educators in diverse schools also have an increased capacity to intervene and counteract non school-related challenges. Segregated schools face far more non-school related challenges.

Just as important, by creating integrated learning opportunities for more advantaged suburban students, we reduce their own isolation and give them access to the multi-cultural world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Diverse student enrollments promote cross-cultural competency and cooperation skills. They help reduce racial stereotyping on all sides.

4. Our state's ability to win Race to the Top funds may be enhanced by highlighting our success in and commitment to providing **diverse, inclusive** public education to our children. Recently, the United States Department of Education and the Justice Department issued guidance on how, consistent with existing law, elementary and secondary schools can achieve diversity and avoid racial and economic isolation of children. The Department stated that "providing students with **diverse, inclusive** educational opportunities from an early age is crucial to achieving the nation's educational and civic goals." Connecticut's application would be aligned with those crucial goals.

5. Closing the Achievement Gap will take sustained political will to accomplish. In a time of budget restraints, one thing is evident: Closing the Achievement Gap for low income children is best secured in the long term through programs that promote a diverse community of support made up of families from different socio-economic and racial backgrounds. A diverse community of support is more likely to have the capacity to garner sufficient political influence to ensure continued necessary funding.

Few people find themselves in a position that you occupy – in a position to benefit the lives of so many children – in a position to better the future of all of Connecticut.

We thank you and the Governor for your commitment to this critical task.