

Sheff Movement



Quality Integrated Education for All Children

Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Committee,

I, Liz Dupont-Diehl, am here to testify on behalf of the Sheff Movement coalition on Raised Bills 438 and 5487.

Connecticut should be proud of the nationally recognized two-way voluntary integration program that has grown out of the 1996 Sheff v. O'Neill mandate. Although many parts of the country are now becoming increasingly racially and economically segregated, Connecticut is moving slowly but surely in a better direction – bringing children together through a combination of high quality interdistrict magnet schools and opening up suburban schools to children in segregated urban districts. Providing these choices improves education for all children, and responds directly to the heart of the Sheff decision.

Connecticut has developed an outstanding voluntary, two-way integration program that is fostering excellence and providing a first-rate education to its students. We are succeeding in fulfilling the Sheff mandate, in closing the achievement gap, and in creating graduates who will go on to become the creative and productive workers our state needs.

In the past 4 years, Connecticut has made good progress in developing a system of regional magnet schools that foster racial and economic integration. There are now more than 60 of these schools statewide serving many thousands of children, and they represent some of the best schools in the state and are successfully closing the achievement gap..

Augmenting the magnet school system, the Open Choice program was intended to give city children a second option – the ability to attend a suburban school. Although Open Choice has been successful for the children it serves, it has not opened enough seats to meet demand. There are two reasons for this: first, the rate of reimbursement to suburban districts has been too low to fairly support new children coming into the suburban districts, and second, in 1997, the state legislature gave the suburban districts the discretion to set the number of city children who would be permitted to attend schools in their town. Both of these recognized impediments to the growth of the Open Choice program must be removed if we are to make progress in reducing racial and economic isolation for students in our major cities.

Raised Bill 438, "An Act Concerning Charter Schools and Open Choice Program Funding," takes an important step forward by increasing the reimbursement rate for suburban towns that increase the percentage of students they accept from urban school districts. For districts that accept at least 3% of their total enrollment from the Open Choice program, the per-student reimbursement would increase from the current \$2500 level up to \$6000 per student. While this reimbursement level does not come close to covering the full cost of educating a child in the suburban district, it is a much fairer rate which will remove most financial objections to the program in suburban towns. For towns that increase participation to at least 5% of their enrollment (as a number of Boston suburbs do in a similar program), the per pupil reimbursement rate would increase to \$9000, which would create strong incentives to expand the program in those towns.

Unfortunately, Raised Bill 438 fails to give the state commissioner of education the power to require minimum enrollment levels in the Open Choice program, assuming that adequate space exists in suburban schools. Without this power, the Open Choice program will not be able to

grow to its full potential, and children from Hartford and other cities will linger on the waitlist indefinitely. Once the financial impediment is removed towns should not be given the discretion to close their doors to out-of-district children.

Raised Bill 5487, "An Act Concerning the Open Choice Bill," is an extremely weak bill that would not provide real incentives for suburban school districts to welcome additional Hartford students into their schools. Unless the per pupil reimbursement suggested in this bill is doubled or tripled, it should be rejected by the Committee.

On a related note, we'd like to address Charter Schools. Charter Schools are getting a lot of attention with stories of accomplishment and achievement. But we must be careful that our public investment doesn't further deepen segregation, as charter schools can do without the proper care and safeguards. Some Connecticut magnet schools have willingly agree to meet standards for racial and economic integration, and have been shown in Connecticut to close the achievement gap between white and minority children. We urge you to work with the state's Education Department to require charters to meet integration standards and become part of the solution to move towards quality, integrated education for all of our children.