

SEGREGATION HAS TO END

By Elizabeth Horton Sheff and Eugene Leach

Eleven years ago, the Connecticut Supreme Court stated an urgent truth: "It is crucial for a democratic society to provide all of its schoolchildren with fair access to an unsegregated education." Progress has been fragmentary and slow, but a great many parents, educators and other citizens remain dedicated to achieving the goal.

That's why it is so troubling to learn that Hartford's school superintendent, Steven Adamowski, apparently doubts the validity of the court's mandate.

Adamowski appeared before the State Board of Education last week to seek much needed leadership in providing quality education for Hartford's children. Unfortunately, he laced his remarks with unfounded assertions questioning the benefits of desegregation, such as "There is no research to suggest that minority students will do better by sitting next to a white student." He also expressed a lack of confidence in the ability of inter-district magnet schools to counter racial isolation.

Adamowski's comments miss the mark. It is far too late in the day to question the validity of the desegregation mandate. Connecticut's highest court has settled the matter. As the court ruled in *Sheff v. O'Neill*, the constitution's promise of an adequate public education, coupled with its prohibition against racial segregation, require the state to undo the racial isolation suffered by Hartford's schoolchildren. The question for Connecticut officials is how, not whether, to achieve desegregation.

Adamowski also got the social science wrong. Decades of research shows that minority students who attend integrated schools are far more likely to succeed in integrated settings throughout life -- which means significantly better prospects in higher education and careers.

Not only minority students benefit. White students are also far better equipped to navigate integrated settings later on because they are less likely to carry the baggage of prejudice.

This is not news. The Sheff court found that segregation exacts a toll on "the entire state and its economy -- not only on its social and cultural fabric, but on its material well-being." Segregation hinders students in an integrated economy.

Experience in Connecticut shows that desegregation works. For example, more than half of Project Choice students (city students who transfer to suburban schools) are performing at or above proficiency on state tests in mathematics and reading -- rates significantly higher than their Hartford public school peers and black and Latino students statewide.

Adamowski fixated on certain magnet schools that have not lived up to expectations. This ignores the success of many other magnets. Instead of scrapping them wholesale, the state should ask how magnet schools, along with other tools of desegregation, can be enhanced.

Many proposals are already on the table. The state should expand Project Choice by increasing the number of transfers and pairing specific urban and suburban districts to make those transfers more efficient. It should invest in better, smarter means for transporting kids who want to take advantage of Project Choice. The state should learn by example from the highly successful magnets and apply those lessons in planning future magnets, while investing in recruiting students.

Adamowski got some things right. He's absolutely correct that the state must play a leadership role. It's ultimately the state's job to satisfy the demands of Connecticut's constitution. It was the state, not Hartford, that was sued in *Sheff*.

He got one other thing 100 percent right. He told the board: "Fifty years after Brown [vs. Board of Education], we are running a dual system of schools in Hartford."

The number of Hartford students stuck in schools segregated by race and economic status is still distressingly high. Back in 1996, the Sheff court held "that the needy schoolchildren of Hartford have waited long enough." The state must end that wait.

From the Hartford Courant's Sunday Commentary section on October 7. Elizabeth Horton Sheff is a member of the Hartford city council. Eugene Leach is a professor of history and American studies at Trinity College. The authors are parents of plaintiffs in the Sheff v. O'Neill school desegregation case.