

The National Coalition *on* *School Diversity*

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On behalf of the National Coalition on School Diversity (NCSD),¹ we respectfully submit input to the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) as it develops a Comprehensive School Choice Plan to help the state meet its obligations under the *Sheff v. O'Neill* ruling. We trust that [CSDE's recent forum](#) signals the state's commitment to meaningful, sustained community engagement and public dialogue around issues of integration moving forward.

At the onset, it is important to acknowledge a simple truth that should consistently drive the discourse on this issue: **students benefit from attending integrated schools.**²

Sixty-seven years after *Brown v. Board of Education* recognized public education as “the very foundation of good citizenship,” and declared that “separate but equal has no place” in public education, our nation is still struggling to confront its legacy of white supremacy and to reorient and reimagine its systems toward justice and equity. Connecticut's *Sheff v. O'Neill* decision, decided nearly 25 years ago, stands in contrast to how most of the country has swept issues of segregation and systemic racial injustice under the proverbial rug.³ Although much progress has been made in Metro Hartford, the concept of “quality, integrated education” has not yet become a cornerstone of the state's approach to education. As a result, thousands of students in Greater Hartford have not directly benefited from the ruling, and statewide, segregation and systemic racial injustice persist.

The *Sheff* plaintiffs brought this lawsuit against the state “to vindicate their personal rights under the Constitution and laws of [Connecticut].”⁴ They believed that segregation in Metro Hartford schools was “infringing on [students'] fundamental right to education and their right to equal protection of the laws.”⁵ In 1996, the Connecticut Supreme Court agreed, holding that racial isolation across the region constituted “a denial of students' constitutionally protected rights,”⁶ deserving of judicial protection. Rather than dictating a specific course of action, the Supreme Court “direct[ed] the legislature and the executive branch to put the search for appropriate remedial measures at the top of their respective agendas.”⁷ The plaintiffs' original vision for implementation--worth revisiting--was bold and multi-faceted.⁸

¹ Founded in 2009, NCSD is a network of 50+ national civil rights organizations, university-based research centers, and state and local coalitions working to expand support for government policies that promote integration in elementary and secondary schools. Our work is informed by an advisory panel of scholars and academic researchers whose work relates to issues of equity, diversity, and desegregation/integration.

² See, e.g. Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, The National Coalition on School Diversity, [School Integration and K-12 Outcomes: An Updated Quick Synthesis of the Social Science Evidence](#) (2016).

³ Gary Orfield and Jongyeon Ee, The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA, [Connecticut School Integration: Moving Forward as the Northeast Retreats](#) (2015).

⁴ Plaintiff's Post-Trial Brief at 3, *Sheff v. O'Neill*, No. CV-89-0360977S (1993).

⁵ *Id.* The [Connecticut Constitution](#), article first, § 20 (as amended) provides: “No person shall be denied the equal protection of the law nor be subjected to segregation or discrimination in the exercise or enjoyment of his civil or political rights because of religion, race, color, ancestry or national origin.”

⁶ *Sheff v. O'Neill*, 238 Conn. 1, 46-47 (1996).

⁷ *Sheff v. O'Neill*, 238 Conn. 1, 46 (1996).

⁸ See, e.g. The *Sheff* Plaintiffs, [Improving Our Schools: Guidelines for an Effective Plan for Quality Integrated Schools](#) (1996).

As you know, Hartford has served as a national exemplar for school integration for many years.⁹ Our coalition often points to Hartford as a place of promise and inspiration for advocates across the country looking to create and sustain integration. Understandably and importantly, people closer to the work in Connecticut often identify areas of concern and needed improvement. Two things are true: meaningful and notable progress has been made, and much work remains. We encourage CSDE to do all that it can to help people maintain perspective while also engaging in honest dialogue and constructive action. The task at hand may seem monumental, but by staying the course, fostering engagement, and making needed corrections along the way, CSDE can and will reach new levels of integration and systemic equity in partnership with the communities it serves.

We appreciated CSDE's willingness to take a vocal stand in response to the murder of George Floyd, recognizing great urgency in addressing the harms of racial injustice. Specifically, then-Commissioner Miguel Cardona's statement read: "If we are to prepare our students to become productive members of a diverse society who embrace diversity and foster school communities in which all members feel valued, respected and safe, remaining silent on these current events is not an option."¹⁰ We are eager to see CSDE take steps to make its stated commitments real, in the form of concrete policies, resources, and support for educators and communities working to advance racial justice. As part of its work, NCSD urges CSDE to openly acknowledge that "segregation is about more than the separation of people from each other. It is about separating historically marginalized people from resources, power, opportunity, and self-determination. It is about the proliferation of racial and economic stratification."¹¹ Importantly, in combatting racial injustice, "social science research demonstrates the importance of fostering sustained interracial contact between youth in order to prepare them to thrive in a multiracial society."¹² A clear, unequivocal commitment to holistic integration can help CSDE advance its broader racial justice goals.

Many of the challenges associated with the adversarial process of litigation have surfaced over the last 25 years of *Sheff v. O'Neill* enforcement and implementation.¹³ For far too long, the goals of achieving quality, integrated education in Hartford have been put into unnecessary conflict with goals to achieve systemic educational equity across the state. **We ask that the CSDE focus on proactively creating structures and processes that demonstrate a longer-term commitment to holistic¹⁴ school integration that goes beyond mere compliance with the *Sheff v. O'Neill* legal mandate and that are rooted in decades of research that confirms that students directly benefit from school integration.**

To this end, we offer three specific recommendations:

1. CSDE should formally incorporate integration into its accountability framework,¹⁵ which was established to conform with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).¹⁶ In addition, CSDE should

⁹ See, e.g. The Abell Report, [Years After a Landmark Court Decision, Connecticut's Solution to School Segregation Shows Promise: Can It Inform Action in Baltimore?](#) (June 2013); Bill Ferguson & Sarah McLean, [Next Generation Schools](#) in Poverty and Race 6 (2015).

¹⁰ Connecticut State Department of Education, [Press Release: Moving Forward Together](#) (June 6, 2020).

¹¹ Territorial Empathy, [Segregation is Killing Us](#) (2021).

¹² Linda R. Tropp and Suchi Saxena, National Coalition on School Diversity, [Re-Weaving the Social Fabric through Integrated Schools: How Intergroup Contact Prepares Youth to Thrive in a Multiracial Society](#) (2018).

¹³ Importantly, we note that Senator Richard Blumenthal has demonstrated support for school integration, including endorsing the federal [Strength in Diversity Act](#). While Attorney General of Connecticut, Blumenthal defended the state in the *Sheff* lawsuit. See, e.g. Jacqueline Rabe Thomas, [Leaders Struggle with Next Steps in Desegregating Schools](#) in CT Mirror (Aug. 18, 2016) ("Sen. Richard Blumenthal, who defended the state against the *Sheff* lawsuit when he was the state's attorney general, said several areas need to be addressed to promote diversity. 'We know in Connecticut that separate is never equal,' said Blumenthal. 'Students must be in diverse classrooms and issues including jobs, housing, transportation, and health care must all be addressed when talking about diversity.'").

¹⁴ Several of our coalition members have established frameworks to help educators organize integration work. Two of the more well known integration frameworks, which may prove helpful to CSDE, are the "5Rs of Real Integration" (created by IntegrateNYC students) and the "ABCDs of Integration" (created by the Reimagining Integration: Diverse and Equitable Schools, or "RIDES" project at Harvard Graduate School of Education). These frameworks are outlined on pg. 6 and 7 of NCSD's 2020 brief: [Including Racial and Socioeconomic Diversity in ESSA District Plans](#).

¹⁵ New York's ESSA plan provides one example. See, e.g. David Tipson, The State of Integration in New York in [The State of Integration 2018](#), The National Coalition on School Diversity 36-39 (2019).

¹⁶ The National Coalition on School Diversity, [Including Racial and Socioeconomic Diversity in ESSA District Plans](#) (2020).

consider ways to use ESSA set-aside funds¹⁷ for the creation of state-level integration programs that are carefully aligned with the state’s overall education goals.¹⁸

2. Create clear pathways to foster inter-agency collaboration around housing, schools, and transportation that will lead to a more equitable distribution of resources and power across interconnected systems. In doing so, CSDE can draw from 2016 guidance issued by the U.S. Departments of Education, Housing and Urban Development, and Transportation “calling on local education, transportation, and housing leaders to work together on issues at the intersection of our respective missions in helping to guarantee full access of opportunity....”¹⁹ More specifically, CSDE should undertake efforts to:
 - Replicate federal agencies’ past efforts to convene “educators, researchers and community leaders with policy experts and [agency] leaders...to discuss voluntary, community-led strategies to promote increased diversity in our schools and neighborhoods.”²⁰
 - Institute programs that build awareness (both within CSDE and beyond) about housing policy and how it relates to educational inequity. A recent report, *A Steady Habit of Segregation*,²¹ describes relevant history in detail. The Othering and Belonging Institute at the University of California-Berkeley’s *Summer Fellowship for Teachers on Race and Housing in the Bay Area* may provide a helpful frame of reference in these efforts.²²
 - CSDE should undertake efforts to better understand the extent to which local boards of education are representative--racially, socioeconomically, and linguistically--of Connecticut’s student populations. Drastic mismatches between the composition of local boards of education and that of the state’s student population may contribute to concentrations of political power that make it difficult to achieve equity.
3. Institute a permanent, state-wide advisory council whose work is explicitly focused on school integration and commit to sufficient levels of dedicated staffing within CSDE. As part of this, prioritize meaningful, sustained community engagement moving forward.

Sheff v. O’Neill represents a hopeful path forward--for Connecticut and the country. It epitomizes what Heather McGhee describes in *The Sum of Us*: “a new story of who we could be to one another, and [a glimpse into] the new America we must create for the sum of us.”²³ The CSDE is in a position to truly develop a blueprint for what a strong, long-term commitment to holistic school integration looks like. We hope that you will eagerly seize the opportunity.

We welcome the opportunity to meet with members of the CSDE team to discuss the ideas mentioned herein. We can be reached at gchirichigno@prrac.org and ptegeler@prrac.org.

Sincerely,

/s/
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/s/
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¹⁷ *Id.* at 13 (“ESSA requires SEAs to set aside at least 7% of their Title I funds for School Improvement purposes to provide additional support for districts and schools identified as underperforming.”).

¹⁸ The National Coalition on School Diversity, [Model State School Integration Policies](#) (2020).

¹⁹ This letter can be found at <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/press-releases/06032016-dear-colleagues-letter.pdf>.

²⁰ U.S. Dep’t of Education, Press Release: [Federal Agencies Team-Up to Promote Diversity in Schools and Communities, and Narrow Opportunity Gaps. Will Hold Listening Session in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday](#) (June 8, 2016).

²¹ Susan Eaton, NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Poverty and Race Research Action Council, Open Communities Alliance, Sillerman Center, [A Steady Habit of Segregation](#) (2020).

²² For more information, see <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/2021-summer-fellowship-teachers-race-and-housing-bay-area>.

²³ Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (2021).