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Parents and Advocates Push Back on Attempt to Roll Back Desegregation Efforts in Hartford Public Schools

Parents and education advocates are concerned that progress made to desegregate public schools in Hartford, Connecticut and surrounding suburbs will be reversed, according to a [motion to intervene](#) filed today in the U.S. District Court of Connecticut. The motion is seeking to allow parents and education advocates to intervene in *Robinson v. Wentzell*, a federal lawsuit brought by the Pacific Legal Foundation that challenges Hartford's magnet school lottery system and could diminish racial and ethnic diversity.

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and the Center for Children's Advocacy (CCA) filed the motion on behalf of families and advocates who are plaintiffs in [Sheff v. O'Neill](#) – a landmark, ongoing school desegregation case brought in state court that has reduced racial segregation in Hartford-area public schools, and has become a model for desegregation efforts across the country. The intervening families and advocates argue that the Pacific Legal Foundation's attack on the race-neutral school lottery system will undo the progress that has been made because of the *Sheff* ruling and potentially re-segregate the region's magnet schools.

"All Hartford students deserve the opportunity to attend quality, integrated schools," said [Deuel Ross](#), Assistant Counsel at LDF who represents the intervenors. "The *Robinson* case is an attack on both the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the *Sheff* case. We cannot abandon integration or sacrifice the progress made to desegregate schools in Hartford. We stand with the *Sheff* plaintiffs who want to ensure that Hartford students of color have more integrated educational opportunities, not less."

In the 1996 *Sheff* ruling, the Connecticut Supreme Court ordered the State to take measures to remove the barriers that blocked Black and Latino students in Hartford from access to quality, integrated educational opportunities. A key outcome of *Sheff* was the establishment of a regional school system that serves thousands of Hartford students in 41 magnet schools and dozens of suburban school districts through an inter-district student transfer program.

Due to the high demand for magnet schools that resulted from the *Sheff* settlement, the State Department of Education created a race-neutral lottery to determine enrollment in the magnet schools. The plaintiffs in *Robinson* are challenging both the lottery system, which largely assigns students based on where they live, and the reduced isolation standard – a court-approved tool used to measure progress toward integration, but does not determine student enrollment.

“Our hard-fought win in *Sheff* now permits almost half of the Black and Latino students in Hartford to attend magnet and other schools that are both diverse and high quality,” said Elizabeth Horton Sheff, the original lead *Sheff* plaintiff and a local education advocate. “I fear this new action will upend this progress and derail our ongoing efforts to expand magnet schools to ensure that more children can enjoy their right to equal educational opportunities.”

Prior to the *Sheff* decision, a long history of racial discrimination in housing and education by federal, state and local governments forced Black and Latino families in Hartford to live and learn apart from white families who live in the suburbs. Black and Latino students were concentrated in the all-minority school district in Hartford while white students were concentrated in the suburban school districts surrounding Hartford.

Today, because of *Sheff* and the court-approved remedies that followed, nearly half of all Hartford students of color attend high quality, integrated schools. As of 2016, 18,950 students attended magnet schools. Recent data also shows that Hartford students who participated in the desegregation program are outperforming Hartford students who attend traditional public schools.

“The State’s failure to adequately fund and expand capacity in the magnet schools is the reason that too many students remain on waiting lists,” said [Martha Stone](#), Executive Director of CCA. “The new *Robinson* lawsuit fundamentally misrepresents how the lottery and magnet schools work and threatens to reverse all the gains we’ve made to address the racial inequalities in Hartford.”

“Our clients are families who are proud of *Sheff*’s legacy and are committed to expanding and defending it,” said [Dennis Parker](#), Director of the ACLU’s Racial Justice Project. “School districts around the country use *Sheff* as a model for achieving racial integration, and it’s apparent why. Without this groundbreaking litigation, we wouldn’t have integrated, high-performing magnet schools and the many intangible benefits to learning that come with them.”

Read the [Motion to Intervene](#), the [Legal Brief in support of the motion](#), and the [proposed Answer](#).

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Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation’s first civil and human rights law organization and has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights. LDF’s Thurgood Marshall Institute (TMI) is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF.