

**ANDREW S. JULIEN,**  
PUBLISHER & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF  
ajulien@courant.com

**LESLIE D. CORY**  
SENIOR EDITOR, OPINION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT  
lcory@courant.com

# OPINION

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## EDITORIAL

# State reopening should not be dictated by date

A little more than a week ago, Gov. Ned Lamont offered a list of “criteria” that the state would have to meet by May 20 if it could begin to reopen.

At the time, the criteria were unacceptably vague. The words “increased,” “sufficient” and “adequate” were used to describe quantifiable things such as testing rates and hospital capacity.

By contrast, on Monday, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo laid out a plan for reopening our neighboring state region-by-region. The plan did not include a specific date but instead included quantifiable criteria that would have to be met before reopening could commence.

On Thursday, Gov. Lamont finally provided more details about what the mystery criteria are and how we are meeting them.

Although the details came late, to Connecticut’s credit, we seem to be coming close to meeting many of them, and a May 20 partial reopening might be warranted. At the same time, Gov. Lamont has said he would push back that date if the standards are not met, and he needs to hold firm to the promise.

One of the most encouraging of the seven criteria is that hospitals now appear to have the capacity to accept more patients. Early worst-case worries that there wouldn’t be enough beds or medical treatment to go around have ebbed, and that is a great relief. Less than 20 percent of hospital beds are now occupied by COVID-19 patients, one of Mr. Lamont’s seven criteria, and hospitals are now at 40% capacity.

Of more concern is the state’s ability to sufficiently increase testing. The goal, Mr. Lamont said Thursday, is a rate of 42,000 tests per week. We are only half-way to that point. A Harvard study indicates that Connecticut needs even more than that. The path to meeting that goal is far from clear.

Mr. Lamont did issue an executive order on Thursday removing the requirement that people get approval from a medical provider before getting a test, and that could help — especially in urban communities where the virus appears to be hitting harder.

But just opening the doors to testing isn’t enough. Mr. Lamont spoke of the need to “take the tests to them,” and he’s right — but three mobile testing vans might not be enough. The state needs to double down on testing, both to get medical treatment to the right people and to better model the spread of the disease.

On Wednesday, the Reopen Connecticut Advisory Committee released a plan to reopen the state’s colleges and universities. It provides sensible guidance and could be a blueprint for how best to open campuses down the road.

But while it spoke of “gating conditions,” the reopening criteria suffer from the same vagueness — words like “low enough” and “adequate” replace specific rates of infection and prevention efforts that university administrators and state officials need to know.

“For residential undergraduate programs, public health experts recommend a sustained low and non-increasing rate of new hospitalizations in the state and in the community surrounding each college; this standard should be clearly articulated by the State,” the plan reads. It goes on: “Institutions want clarity about what public health preconditions need to be in place before they can go about implementing their specific institutional plans.”

Clearly articulated standards are exactly what we need at this point. While it might have been beyond the scope of the committee to nail down specific numbers, public health officials should make every effort to spell out exactly what criteria we need to meet — for schools and businesses alike.

Having a plan to reopen anything must come with clear criteria, arrived at by public health professionals who don’t have a political or economic dog in the fight. Public health must be the priority.

Connecticut has made good progress in fighting the coronavirus threat so far. But that doesn’t mean we should be announcing an arbitrary end date for all of this. Pandemics don’t come with deadlines. We have to keep the pressure on.



## CORONAVIRUS LETTERS

# High school seniors display mettle

*Patrice McCarthy, deputy director and general counsel of the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, and Michelle Embree Ku, chairman of the Newtown Board of Education, write a joint letter of explanation about the complexities of celebrating high school graduations against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic.*

Boards of education, superintendents and communities are committed to honoring the Class of 2020 in a safe and meaningful way. They recognize that high school graduation is a major milestone that provides well deserved recognition for years of work and accomplishment. Public recognition of the milestone is important to students and their families. It is a time of celebration and provides closure to a significant piece of a young person’s life. While the uncertainty created by the COVID-19 pandemic makes it impossible to plan a traditional ceremony at this time, creative ideas are being raised and explored.

As school boards explore ways in which to honor the Class of 2020, the health and safety of students, staff and the community must be the primary consideration. The risk of COVID-19 transmission to vulnerable individuals, including parents and grandparents, by young people who display no symptoms, is still too great to allow student gatherings. Not to mention, Gov. Ned Lamont’s executive

order limiting the size of gatherings to no more than five people remains in effect.

Boards of education, based on recommendations from the superintendent and high school principal in each district, are consulting with public health officials to determine an appropriate way to officially honor the Class of 2020. Thus far, a few facts have become very clear.

Any event held must comply with the governor’s executive orders and must be approved by the local health department or health district. The feasibility of any event will vary by community, and be dependent on public health conditions, size of graduating class, availability of suitable facilities, and capacity to enforce health protocols. It is equally important to note that conditions may change, and that any reported increase in COVID-19 cases in any community would mean that plans would be required to change. An understanding of contingency plans and when they would be necessary should be discussed with the health officials.

Boards of education are seeking input from representatives of the senior class to determine what recognition options would be meaningful to the graduates. Some boards have asked their student representatives to survey the senior class to provide broad input. The voices of students are always important, but especially on issues

that evoke strong emotions and impact them directly.

Districts are still continuing to explore creative ways of honoring students through virtual experiences, including a compilation of video tributes to the graduates, virtual speeches and musical performances. Other ideas still being explored include a drive-up photo station where families would drive to a designated location and have a local photographer take a graduation photo, as well as car parades. The creativity of our students will help to generate new approaches that are meaningful to students and families.

School boards and staff recognize that closures are impacting all students and teachers. In addition to honoring the 2020 graduates, they are developing ways to make a personal connection between students and their teachers as the academic year closes in June. This is particularly important for students that will not return to the same school building in the 2020-21 school year. Despite the difficulties this public health crisis has created for schools, it has also clearly demonstrated the strong bond between teachers and students.

School board members, administrators and educators remain committed to supporting their students in these challenging times. Like most aspects of our lives, the end of this academic year will look different, but it may create new traditions for our students.

## Tell Us Your Story

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**First Person:** In which you explain a deeply private issue against the backdrop of social and economic forces.



**Why I ...** In which you explain why you feel so strongly about something in Connecticut.



**Living Here:** What is it really like to live in Connecticut?

*We welcome all submissions and will publish the best. We especially look for younger writers and those whose voices aren't heard often enough. Essays should be 600-700 words, written in the first person and emailed to [oped@courant.com](mailto:oped@courant.com).*

## OP-ED

# Apply regional virus approach to urban schools

**BY ELIZABETH HORTON SHEFF, MARTHA STONE, DENNIS D. PARKER AND DEUEL ROSS**

As the plaintiffs and attorneys in the school desegregation case of *Sheff v. O'Neill*, we have witnessed too many instances in which the state’s failure to solve the problem of unequal educational access results in lost opportunities for greater educational equality for everyone. For 30 years, we have maintained that when the state denies one child their right to a quality, integrated education, we all lose.

Long before COVID-19 and the lack of Chromebooks and internet access exposed fundamental educational inequities, the state’s failure to create more opportunities at high quality, integrated schools has sustained a pattern in which the districts with the poorest students and the least empowered parents go without.

This situation would be unimaginable were it regarding students from Glastonbury, Westport or Simsbury. A good part of the failure is the result of the state’s reluctance, for the last 25 years since the Connecticut Supreme Court mandate, to pursue regional solutions that would benefit thousands more students.

Such solutions have been adopted in other inter- and intra-state initiatives. In the health care arena, Connecticut, New Jersey and New York governors have worked together across state lines to combat the spread of the

COVID-19 virus. Within Connecticut, testing sites and mask giveaways have been regionalized. Even those distributing food at Rentschler Field in East Hartford did not ask for proof of residency.

In these instances, we have been able to look beyond our own cities to the greater good.

Why can’t similar steps be taken to provide safety and educational benefits — particularly for the thousands of students in Connecticut’s urban centers who have lost out on three months of quality education? These are often the same students who were behind even before the virus forced them home.

While the state has taken steps to address disparities in internet and computer access for distance learning, the reality is that some rich suburban families are providing their children with tutoring or additional enrichment learning opportunities. These are options that many low-income parents in our cities simply cannot afford.

One means of addressing both persistent inequalities and new inequalities arising out of the pandemic is to see the opportunity amid this crisis. For example, many of our urban districts are overcrowded, even though many of our suburban districts have extra spaces due to population decline.

The governor and the state Department of Education have the ability to incentivize regional efforts in the short term: They can provide districts with blueprints and funding

for regional summer schools to assist children in need of additional educational enrichment because of the COVID-19 related school closures, and they can develop regional pre-K centers so the youngest gain the skills they need before they start kindergarten

And what an opportunity! Under the current *Sheff* stipulation, the state is required to produce a plan by June 2021 to meet the “demand” of all Hartford students who want a quality, integrated setting. The lottery application process through the end of April yielded almost 17,000 applications, including 6,000 from Hartford.

The stipulation requires the plan to consider numerous regional solutions that the plaintiffs have been pushing for years. They include, among others:

- \* Incentives and strategies to increase participation by suburban districts in Open Choice;
- \* Dual language schools;
- \* Expansion of regional pre-K centers in Hartford and suburban towns with themes that would attract students across the region; cooperative arrangements with local colleges or universities with early college programs;
- \* Identification of school facilities that are underutilized or slated to close in Hartford or the *Sheff* region suburban districts and repurpose them as regional Open Choice schools, regional interdistrict magnet schools or regional *Sheff* CTEC schools.

The initiatives need not be confined to the Hartford area. They could and should benefit the thousands of young vibrant minds who year after year struggle in some of our poorest performing, racially and economically isolated schools in Bridgeport, New Haven and Waterbury. The solutions shouldn’t have to wait for another *Sheff* lawsuit to be brought in those districts.

And, although they respond to circumstances resulting from the pandemic, they provide an incentive and a pathway to broader, long-lasting educational gains. What an opportune time for the state to provide for quality integrated education and incentivize all districts to deliver education in a different way.

We all gain from building an education system that supports the next generation and results in a better educated workforce and increased economic stability for families.

It’s a win-win for everyone. As we reimagine education in these times of social distancing, let’s not let the opportunity to finally desegregate our schools in Connecticut pass us by.

*Elizabeth Horton Sheff is the original plaintiff in the landmark Sheff v. O'Neill education lawsuit. Martha Stone is executive director for the Center for Children's Advocacy. Dennis D. Parker is executive director of the National Center for Law and Economic Justice. Deuel Ross is senior counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund Inc.*