



## UCLA Hails Connecticut Integration Efforts

By Robert Rader, Executive Director, CABE

As witnessed over the last few months, especially with the difficult budget battles in the Legislature and Connecticut's slow economic progress, there is much negativity across the State. On the subject of desegregating our schools, however, despite obstacles, often financial, we have made some remarkable progress.

In writing about Connecticut success, the UCLA Civil Rights Project stated that, across the country, desegregation has stalled. "Following the Civil Rights revolution of the 50s and 60s, there was major, lasting progress in reducing the segregation of black students, which reached its low point in the late 1980s. For more than three decades since, the country has moved toward deeper segregation in all regions, for both African American and Latino students."

Noted Professor and Co-Director of the UCLA Civil Rights Project Gary Orfield has spoken many times about integration in Connecticut and was a witness in the Sheff v O'Neill desegregation case. In releasing the study, Orfield stated that the Project "is very happy today to point to Connecticut's success and to bring it to the attention of states that are betting their future on doubly segregated schools, where educators struggling against such odds are often blamed for the failings of a separate and unequal society."

### Reasons for Connecticut's

Professor Orfield cited three reasons for Connecticut's growth in efforts to desegregate:

- "Creative educators, under the prodding of civil rights lawyers and a series of court decisions, who have created excellent schools that not only permit students to voluntarily cross... racial lines but are also highly popular with students and families of all races";
- A "path-making State Supreme Court" decision (Sheff v O'Neill), which "recognized that racial segregation in [Hartford] schools violated the state constitution..." The Court stated that segregation was primarily caused by "official school district boundaries, separating children by race and poverty in ways that could not be cured within the boundaries of individual
- municipalities... that resulted in fragmented and separated school districts"; and
- "determined civil rights advocacy". Orfield was probably referring to the legal team that has pushed hard for the State to meet agreed-upon goals for desegregation in a series of settlement agreements.

According to Orfield, what Connecticut has done “shows a fundamentally different, voluntary and educationally creative approach that could become a template for the increasingly diverse multiracial Northeast of the 21st century.” The Project has been focused on the Northeast.

By the use of regional magnet schools and voluntary transfers (“Open Choice”), Hartford, New Haven and Bridgeport “have created possibilities for the students in what had been intensely segregated and deeply impoverished central city school systems.” The schools also draw from suburban schools who want to participate in “excellent and integrated schools of choice.”

As stated in the press release that was disseminated with the report, the research “does not conclude” that Connecticut has eliminated its racial issues, “as there are very dramatic educational gaps still to be addressed”. However, the State “is making significant progress, even as the rest of the Northeast, and the country as a whole, are turning backward, toward deepening racial separation and inequality”.

Orfield said that the “Nutmeg State is a lighthouse for the region.”

From a CAFE standpoint, we are, of course, pleased to hear that we have made recognizable progress in desegregating schools in our biggest cities, according to the UCLA Project. We have long advocated finding voluntary means to desegregate schools across Connecticut. Our Delegate Assembly-endorsed positions encourage districts to enter into inter-district partnerships which create integrated educational excellence and promote social, cultural, ethnic and racial exchange and interaction among diverse groups and that each child must have equal access to effective free, public education and to the services of well-educated and skillful teachers.

In addition, we have encouraged the State to “to address and solve the issues of social and economic isolation in the areas of housing, transportation, employment, access to health care and social services”.

We also encourage educational leaders to discuss the effort, including the large financial investment, Connecticut has made in desegregating our schools. For example, I discussed this specifically with Commissioner Mark McQuillan as he prepared our second application for Race to the Top. He included it, but, just in one small paragraph.

This is something we should be proud of—especially as other states have pulled back. It sets us apart—in a positive way.

I know that sacrifices have been made by many districts in light of State settlement agreements with the Sheff plaintiffs. Over the years, there have been concerns raised about magnets and the effect of these new schools on existing districts—financial, in terms of teachers leaving to work in the magnets and good students leaving districts to attend them.

These concerns must be addressed since those bringing them up are school board members and superintendents working hard in these difficult times to ensure their districts' schools continually provide a high-quality education, even as they help in this important battle.

And, school boards should be credited with making this integration work—some were taking students from the cities for many years before the Sheff decision came down—and have continued to make Open Choice a success.

If we believe, as was the U.S. Supreme Court's central finding in Brown v Board of Education in 1954, that segregated schools are “inherently unequal”, we must continue to find ways to ensure that all of our students have the opportunity to attend schools with those of different races and ethnic backgrounds.

*For the Project's press release and the full report, see*

<http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/connecticut-school--moving-forward-as-the-northeast-retreats/orfield-ee-connecticut-school-integration-2015.pdf>.

*Drop Quote: Connecticut “is the only state in the Northeast that is going in a positive direction and it has created voluntary processes that have clearly reduced severe segregation in a time devoid of national leadership.” (Page 6 of the UCLA report.)*