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Many Connecticut School Choice Programs Miss the Mark on Integration and Equal Access

A new analysis of enrollment in Connecticut's school choice programs raises concerns about their relative compliance with established goals of racial and ethnic integration and equal access for all students. According to the report by Connecticut Voices for Children, many of Connecticut's school choice programs fall short in advancing the goal of racial and ethnic integration. In spite of state laws requiring charter and magnet schools to reduce racial and ethnic isolation of students, only interdistrict magnet schools are typically integrated, and a majority of the state's charter schools are highly segregated. The report also raises concerns about the underrepresentation in school choice programs of students who do not speak English as a first language and students with special education needs.

"State laws require that all students in our state have an equal educational opportunity, including access to integrated learning environments," said Ellen Shemitz, Executive Director of Connecticut Voices for Children. "Given the nearly 50,000 students attending school choice programs and the millions of dollars the state spends on those programs above and beyond funding for local public schools, the data raise troubling questions about equal access and opportunity."

The report examines the demographics of students in Connecticut's interdistrict school choice programs – programs that permit parents to enroll their children in schools outside their local school districts. It focuses on magnet, charter, and technical schools. Among the key findings:

- While both charter and interdistrict magnet schools are required by state law to reduce racial and ethnic segregation of students, only magnet schools are held to a measurable standard – a student body between 25% and 75% students of color. A majority of interdistrict magnet schools (62%) meet this standard. By contrast, a majority of charter schools (65%) are highly segregated, enrolling over 90% students of color. While technical schools have no measurable integration standard, a majority (56%) would meet the requirement for magnet schools.
- Students who do not speak English as a first language are under-represented in Connecticut's school choice programs, compared to the school districts of the towns in which the programs are located. A majority of all interdistrict magnet, charter, and technical schools enroll students identified as being English Language Learners (ELL) at a substantially lower rate (five percentage points lower) than the local school districts of the towns in which they are located.

- Over one-third of magnet and charter schools and a majority of technical schools enroll students identified as requiring special education at a substantially lower rate (five percentage points lower) than the local school districts of the towns in which they are located.

To promote integration and equity in school choice programs, Connecticut Voices recommends that state policymakers:

- Take into account the demographic differences between choice programs and local public schools when drawing comparisons between them,
- Establish measurable desegregation standards for all choice programs, since these standards appear to be effective in integrating magnet schools, and
- Investigate barriers to enrolling English Language Learners and special education students in school choice programs, and take action to eliminate any such barriers.

“With limited exceptions, Connecticut’s school choice programs successfully promote racial and ethnic integration only when they have clear, enforced, and measurable standards,” said Robert Cotto, co-author of the report and a consultant for Connecticut Voices for Children. “By setting standards for all school choice programs and exploring barriers to broader access, we can ensure that more children have equal educational opportunities in an integrated environment.”

Connecticut Voices for Children is a research-based think tank that works to advance policies that benefit the state’s children, youth and families. The report, “Choice Watch: Diversity and Access in Connecticut’s School Choice Programs,” is available on the Connecticut Voices website at www.ctvoices.org.

[Note to reporters: See the appendix of the report for school-level data on enrollment of English Language Learners, special education students and minorities in interdistrict magnet, charter and technical schools throughout the state.]

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