

Series 2006-07

Circular Letter: C-1

TO: Chairpersons of Local and Regional School Boards in the *Sheff v. O'Neill* Region
Superintendents of Schools in the *Sheff v. O'Neill* Region
Superintendents Participating in the Open Choice Program

FROM: Dr. Betty J. Sternberg, Commissioner of Education

CC: Dr. Bruce E. Douglas, Executive Director, Capitol Region Education Council (CREC)
Dr. Jacqueline Jacoby, Interim Superintendent, Hartford Public Schools

DATE: July 19, 2006

SUBJECT: Expanding 2006-07 Open Choice Program Participation

Thank you for opening 178 new seats in 2005-06 to accommodate more Hartford students in the Open Choice program in the greater Hartford region. Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) final data for 2005-06 show that 1,062 Hartford minority students were participating in the Open Choice program. Last year, 1,020 Hartford minority students were enrolled. Although the increase in Hartford minority student enrollment between 2004-05 and 2005-06 is 42 students, it should be noted that the program lost 123 seats to graduation and attrition between these two years. The Open Choice team at CREC filled 166 of its 178 new seats to achieve this net gain of 42 Hartford minority students.

In an effort to *secure* additional seats and to *expand* student enrollment in Open Choice, an innovative full-day kindergarten option was offered to Hartford parents in 2004-05 and again in 2005-06. The Project Choice Early Beginnings (PCEB) program, administered by the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC) in partnership with CSDE, resulted in *14 districts* in 2005-06 either adding seats to existing full-day kindergarten classrooms, starting new full-day kindergarten classrooms, or working in collaboration with community programs to offer a full-day experience for Hartford and suburban students. The 14 towns are Avon, Bolton, Cromwell, East Windsor, Enfield, Farmington, Glastonbury, Granby, Newington, Plainville, Simsbury, Suffield, West Hartford and Windsor Locks.

I have received encouraging reports about the support that CREC's early childhood facilitators have offered all kindergarten students and teachers in these classrooms and by the preliminary student assessment data. The gains when comparing the fall, winter and spring 2005-06 assessment data show Hartford Open Choice students and their suburban peers better prepared to enter Grade 1 at or above grade level.

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The Sheff goal in 2006-07 is 1,600 Hartford minority students enrolled in Open Choice. As of June 6, 2006, Hartford minority enrollment in Open Choice according to the CREC database was 985 students (a result of an anticipated 43 graduates in June and a total of 35 students that have left the program). If Hartford minority candidates fill the 146 new seats offered to date, and there is no other attrition of current students, then **we will need a minimum of 469 additional new seats – an equivalent of approximately 18 new seats in each of the 27 districts currently participating in the program. We need to reach the 1,600 student goal in the coming weeks to adequately prepare students for their transition to a new academic year in a new school district.**

As of June 6, 2006, two districts have offered 18 or more new seats. Many seats have been offered in kindergarten (61); Project Choice Early Beginnings can serve up to 100 kindergarten students. **Now that the school year has ended, I ask that you take another look at your enrollment projections for next year, and see if you can find some additional seats for our Open Choice students. We have a long way to go if we are to meet our court-ordered obligation to place 1,600 Hartford students in suburban districts next year.**

Receiving districts are awarded a grant of \$2,000 per pupil. They also qualify for an additional CSDE disbursement of approximately \$350 per pupil in schools that enroll 10 or more out-of-district Open Choice students. Districts that open full-day kindergarten seats receive an additional \$3,600 per Open Choice student to support instruction in the classroom. Certified teachers from CREC also provide additional assistance to Grade K students in the PCEB program described above. For Hartford students with disabilities enrolled in Open Choice, the Hartford school district is responsible for special education expenditures above the \$2,000 per pupil allocation received by suburban districts. Marcus Rivera, the CSDE Open Choice Program Manager, has worked with Nessa Oram at CREC to plan for additional support services to districts in 2005-06, and again for 2006-07.

Dr. Bruce Douglas and both CREC and CSDE Open Choice program staff members will continue to be in contact with you to review your Open Choice data as we try to secure the additional seats we need. Please feel free to contact Marcus Rivera at 860.713.6547, if you have any questions regarding this request to expand Open Choice seats – or if you would like to discuss the success of the program in your district. **Please ensure that Dr. Douglas receives your revised projections no later than July 28, 2006.** Thank you again for your strong and enduring commitment to the Open Choice program.

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