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May 1, 2009

Dr. Mark K. McQuillan
Commissioner of Education
Connecticut State Department of Education
165 Capitol Avenue
Hartford, CT 06145

Dear Commissioner McQuillan:

We have received your letter of April 8, 2009 notifying West Hartford of the racial imbalance that exists at Charter Oak and Smith schools in the 2008-09 school year. At our most recent meeting on March 11, 2009, we indicated that we would provide you, by May 1, 2009, a letter detailing steps the administration and the Board of Education would take to address the racial imbalance at both of those schools.

We have been working diligently throughout the 2008-09 school year to identify issues and options with respect to the racial imbalance at Charter Oak and Smith. We have been working with Ed Linehan, Consultant – Educational Choice, Equity, Excellence, as a result of our September 4, 2008 meeting with Mr. Coleman and Ms. Flanagan. We hope the following analysis and proposed steps indicates to you the commitment that the administration and Board of Education feel towards reducing racial imbalance at Charter Oak and Smith.

In the most recent racial balance report from the State of Connecticut, both Charter Oak and Smith were identified as racially imbalanced. The district average is 35.9% minority at the elementary level and Charter Oak is 80.9% minority and Smith is 70.4% minority. The table on the next page shows the K-5 population count both for neighborhood students and magnet students as well as for the school as whole.

Table 1: 2008-09 Minority Enrollment at Charter Oak and Smith

School	Neighborhood Population/% minority	Magnet Population/% minority	Total Population/% minority
Charter Oak	280 – 82.4%	66 – 74.4%	346 – 80.9% (45.0% above district ave)
Smith	292 – 71.0%	72 – 68.7%	364 – 70.5% (34.6% above district ave)

The causes of the racial imbalance at Charter Oak and Smith are a consequence of two factors. First, too many of the magnet students are minority students. At Charter Oak 74.4% of the magnet students are minority and at Smith 68.7% of the magnet students are minority. Overall the district average is 35.9% minority and if you exclude the populations of Smith and Charter Oak, the rest of the district, from whom magnet students are drawn, is only 28% minority.

If we were able to change the demographics of the magnet students who attend these two schools to be a truer reflection of the demographics of the non-Smith and Charter Oak students, then we could improve the racial imbalance figures substantially. Table 2 shows the calculations. The imbalance at Charter Oak would drop from 45% to 36.1% and the imbalance at Smith would drop from 34.6% to 26.6%.

Table 2: Minority Enrollment at Charter Oak and Smith if the magnet student demographics better reflected the district average

School	Neighborhood Population/% minority	Magnet Population/% minority	Total Population/% minority
Charter Oak	280 – 82.4%	66 – 28%	346 – 72.0% (36.1% above district ave)
Smith	292 – 71.0%	72 – 28%	364 – 62.5% (26.6% above district ave)

The second cause of the racial imbalance at Charter Oak and Smith is the lack of magnet seats available to students from other attendance zones in West Hartford. Getting neighborhood students to leave Charter Oak and Smith to attend other schools in West Hartford while at the same time attracting magnet students from those other schools to attend Charter Oak and Smith is paradoxical at its face. In fact, it has been extraordinarily difficult to achieve. Based on earlier discussions with you and members of your department, we hired a magnet liaison to inform families about our magnet programs and to help

neighborhood families understand about opting out of the magnet schools to create more room for magnet students. We have offered students the option to leave but the students who have chosen to leave has not improved the racial balance at those schools. Budget reductions due to referenda in 2008 resulted in the elimination of the magnet liaison. For the 2008-09 school year, we have a total of 20 students who have opted out of Charter Oak and Smith - only 45% of those students were minority compared to a neighborhood population of 71% to 82% minority. However, if we were to assume that we could get typical 20 neighborhood children to leave and be replaced by 20 magnet students at each school, then Table 3 below shows the impacts on the racial balance at those schools.

Table 3: Minority Enrollment at Charter Oak and Smith if the magnet student demographics better reflected the district average AND we get 20 neighborhood students to leave for other schools in the district

School	Neighborhood Population/% minority	Magnet Population/% minority	Total Population/% minority
Charter Oak	260 -- 82.4%	86 -- 28%	346 -- 68.9% (33.0% above district ave)
Smith	272 -- 71.0%	92 -- 28%	364 -- 60.1% (24.2% above district ave)

Under the scenario outlined in Table 3, Smith is now no longer in racial imbalance while Charter Oak remains racially imbalanced. While Smith is in racial balance, it is just barely so and to ensure longer term stability in the racial balance figures, we will look in our planning to target solutions that aim for a 20-22% difference between the minority percentage at the school and in the district.

While these small shifts in neighborhood and magnet students shows the possibility for solving racial imbalance at Smith (barely), a voluntary solution to solving racial imbalance at Charter Oak will require a substantial increase in the number of magnet seats available. We could construct a new facility that would allow for the significant expansion of the number of magnet seats at Charter Oak. There are two possibilities. Table 4 details the numbers assuming we continue to run Charter Oak as an intradistrict magnet school. In this option magnet students would come from other school attendance zones within the district. We would also set aside 40 seats for Smith neighborhood students to come to Charter Oak and thereby increase the number of magnet student seats available at Smith.

Actions to take in 2009-10:

1) Status of Magnet School Themes:

In a district such as West Hartford where there are excellent neighborhood schools and families are very content with their neighborhood options, the challenge we face is in creating compelling enough themes at Charter Oak and Smith to attract families to leave the neighborhood and apply to Smith or Charter Oak. The offerings in the magnet schools have to be significantly different from what is offered in the neighborhood schools. Charter Oak is becoming an International Baccalaureate school. Charter Oak is completing the Consideration Phase and will enter the Candidate Phase in July 2009. We anticipate authorization in 2010. Funding continues to be allocated to meet the requirements for IB authorization, even in these difficult budgetary times. The IB approach is a proven one that offers significant differences to attract magnet students. Smith has successfully implemented a math, science and technology theme. The approach at Smith to math has now been largely replicated at the other elementary schools. Technology has been enhanced, but needs to remain cutting edge and Science remains the one differentiating factor.

We will review the programs and themes at both these schools and recommend any changes to the Board of Education in early spring of 2010, in time for inclusion in the 2010-11 budgeting process. This has been an extraordinarily difficult budget year, with a 0% increase for 2009-10 so funding is limited next year.

2) Review of Magnet School Lottery Process:

In addition to the review of magnet themes to ensure they are attractive to students from throughout West Hartford, we need to review the magnet lottery process. Currently we operate a totally open lottery for Smith and Charter Oak in which all applicants have an equal chance to get in to the school. We let students who move out of the Charter Oak and Smith neighborhoods stay in the school while they apply to the schools as magnet students. Both of these practices have contributed in part to result that the demographic profile of the magnet students is much closer to the demographic profile of the Charter Oak and Smith neighborhoods than it is of the whole school district.

During the 2009-10 school year, the administration will explore and make recommendations to the Board of Education in time for the 2010-11 lottery for changes in the lottery procedures. Some of the options include establishing a weighting system where students with certain characteristics would get a greater weight in the lottery and a better chance of getting a lower number. These characteristics could include:

- Not eligible for free or reduced lunch
- At or above grade level proficiency in reading and/or math
- Not eligible for ELL services
- Residence zone

3) Increasing number of magnet seats – short term options.

The administration will explore and report to the Board of Education on options to encourage neighborhood students at Smith and Charter Oak to attend schools in other parts of the district. Currently we offer a preschool at Smith and Charter Oak for which parents contribute on a sliding scale. We would explore the option to expand the preschool offerings at other schools in other parts of the district and perhaps offer both free preschool and free wraparound care (e.g. 7:30 to 5:30) to residents of Smith and Charter Oak neighborhoods. Once we get the students to attend these schools away from the neighborhood, we would work to get them to continue at those schools providing the same welcoming atmosphere we have established at our magnet schools.

4) Increasing number of magnet seats – longer term options.

As detailed earlier in the letter, we can not solve the racial imbalance at Charter Oak with the small enrollment shifts discussed in the preceding section. Thus we are looking to significantly expand the capacity at Charter Oak through the construction of a new school facility designed from the ground up based on the IB theme at Charter Oak. As the school needs to be significantly larger than the current facility, a new school would be the best option. The new school would provide for space for additional magnet students from either the district or from other districts if it were to operate as a host interdistrict magnet school. In either scenario, a number of slots would be reserved for Smith neighborhood students to free up space for additional magnet students at that school.

The administration would explore and report to the Board of Education on options to build a 450 to 550 student facility in place of the existing Charter Oak facility. The report would include costs and financing options. In these very tight fiscal times, the costs of the building a new facility under the traditional school construction formulas with the 40-42% reimbursement rates would be difficult to absorb within currently available town finances. The report would also look at options for financing and operating the school as an interdistrict host magnet school.

Summary

To improve the racial balance at Smith and Charter Oak magnet schools, actions need to be taken to both improve the racial balance of magnet students at each school and to increase the physical capacity at Charter Oak. To this end the administration will study and report to the Board on the following items during the 2009-10 school year.

- Status of magnet school themes – December 2009
- Options for changing the magnet lottery – December 2009
- Short term options for increasing seats at Charter Oak/Smith – December 2009
- Long term options for increasing seats at Charter Oak – February 2010

Depending on the findings of the study, the Board will be able to take actions in the following areas prior to the 2010-11 magnet school lottery.

- Revise magnet lottery procedures – January 2010
- Implement revision to magnet themes if necessary – April 2010 – part of budget process
- Implement short term options for increasing seats at Smith and Charter students – April 2010 – part of budget process

Upon receipt of the reports for longer term options to solve the racial imbalance at Charter Oak, the Board will review the financing options with the Town Council to determine how best to fit the proposed new school project into the Town's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). The better the reimbursement rate for school construction, the easier the new facility will fit within the CIP.

We are optimistic that these steps will ultimately be the first of several stages that will result in the elimination of the racial imbalance at Charter Oak and Smith over the long term through the use of primarily voluntary measures. Clearly there are significant funding issues to address with respect to the proposed long term solution at Charter Oak, but we hope that working together we can find options to address those funding issues.

We are available for additional meetings at your request.

Sincerely,



David P. Sklarz
Superintendent



Karen L. List
Assistant Superintendent
Superintendent (effective 7/1/09)