

Memorandum

To: Education Committee Chairs
From: Achievement First, Sheff Legal Coalition, & Hartford Public Schools
Date: April 15, 2011
Re: Potential for an Achievement First - Sheff Charter High School in Hartford

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us today. Below is a short summary of the work that we would love to do together.

Achievement First (AF) worked in close partnership with the Hartford Public Schools (HPS) to open a high-performing public charter K-8 school in the North End of Hartford in 2008. In fall 2012, when our middle school scholars are ready for high school, we would like to expand gradually to serve grades 9-12 and would especially like for this to be a racially and economically integrated high school program under the terms of the Sheff settlement.

Background on AF Hartford & Results

AF Hartford currently serves 560 scholars in grades K-3, and 5-7; next year, it will have a full K-8 program with 720 students located at the former Lewis Fox Middle School building. Our scholars, who are selected by blind lottery from Hartford applicants in Zones 1 and 2 are 100% African-American and Latino, and 85 percent of them qualify for free or reduced priced lunch. We are very pleased with the significant gains that our Hartford scholars have made in a short time – in fact, last year, the school posted the greatest performance gains of any school in Hartford. After only 2 years at the school, the percentage of 6th graders (the oldest kids in the school last year) who tested “at goal” on the state test increased from 24% to 60%. We expect them to do as well if not better than the students at our other AF-CT schools, which means, as 8th graders, 80-90 percent of them should be “at goal” (with 95+ percent “proficient”). AF is proud to operate the schools with the highest-achieving African-American students in the state – we are #1 at both the elementary and middle school levels according to ConnCAN’s recent Top 10 lists. Our schools are one of only a handful in the state where African-American students are out-performing the statewide average.

Beyond academic preparation, we are equally committed to developing our scholars as well-rounded students and leaders and to making significant investments in character development, enrichment activities, and leadership opportunities. One of the things that we find especially compelling about opening our high school program to suburban students is that we expect that our integrated high school will not have an internal achievement gap – based on their preparation, our Hartford scholars should be able to compete very successfully with white and more affluent peers in a rigorous, college-prep setting.

Our Proposal

Our proposal is that we expand our existing K-8 charter to serve grades 9-12 and, in doing so, that we double the enrollment in 9th grade, allowing for all of our current middle school scholars to attend the school with an equal number of new students coming from Hartford’s surrounding suburban communities (so that the overall split would be 50-50). With this significant suburban enrollment, our goal would be to have white children represent 25-30% of the total high school enrollment. We understand that this would require significant student and family recruitment, and we are committed to working on this aggressively. The school would expand to serve one additional grade every year for a total enrollment of approximately 420 scholars in grades 9-12 by the fourth year of operation.

An AF Sheff Charter would have as its goal high student performance for all students without regard to race or ethnicity in a setting where racial and ethnic diversity, friendships and understanding are central characteristics. AF's current New Haven high school has been very successful – with 100% of the first two graduating classes admitted to 4-year colleges or universities – and we would expect the Hartford school to be equally successful. As committed as we are to our work closing the achievement gap, we also realize how tremendously important it is that our students are prepared to appreciate and deal effectively with the diversity they will encounter later in life. With both diversity and academic excellence, we believe such a school would fully meet the underlying goals of the Sheff litigation.

The Partners

We are fortunate that a number of important groups have come together to try to make this dream a reality for students from Hartford and surrounding towns. Achievement First is fully committed to operating an outstanding school and, for the first time, to do so with an integrated student population. The Sheff legal team has visited AF Hartford and is also enthusiastic about supporting this proposal as a way to help the state meet its legal obligations under Sheff; we are sure you are aware that the State is currently out of compliance with Sheff enrollment targets. Hartford Public Schools, both current superintendent Steven Adamowski and future Superintendent Christina Kishimoto, are committed to continuing to support the growth and success of AF Hartford and, specifically, to trying to help identify a facility for the new high school. We have also spoken about this proposal with Interim Commissioner George Coleman, and he would welcome this school as a part of the state's larger Sheff strategy. Finally, Bruce Douglas from CREC was a founder and founding board chair of AF Hartford and is also happy to support this important effort in any way he can even though we do not anticipate that this school will be a CREC-operated school.