The challenge of Sheff vs. O'Neill ruling

By Josiah Brown

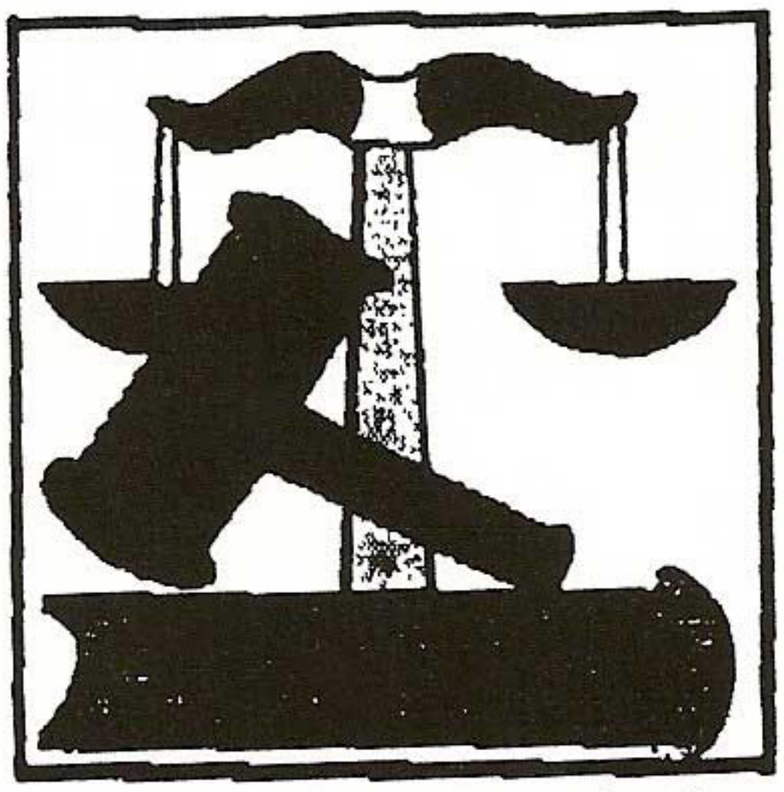
The state Supreme Court's ruling in Sheff vs. O'Neill has prompted uncertainty and political ferment about how Connecticut is to establish "substantially equal educational opportunity" among its public schools. The immediate concerns relate to Hartford and the directly surrounding towns. There are also issues of statewide consequence, such as the structure of school districts and property taxes.

One question is the extent to which the court's ruling will affect outlying suburban and rural areas. Many of these communities are just as segregated, *de facto*, as the cities. Segregation in these outer regions is sometimes economic: concentrations of wealth that mirror the poverty of urban centers. More often, the segregation is simply racial: towns composed overwhelmingly of rich and poor, middle- and upper-middle-class white citizens.

I grew up in one such Connecticut town. For years, there was just a single African-American family in Hampton. The family's two children were — along with an adopted boy of African-American descent — the only black students in the local K-6 elementary school. There were one or two Latino households. Eventually, an Asian-American boy moved to town. Everyone else was white. The story was similar at regional Parish Hill High School.

What were the effects of this isolation, both for the few members of minority groups and for the vast majority of whites? The minority children experienced some prejudice and loneliness, along with a shortage of role models. While these kids were not by any means outcasts, they confronted significant ignorance, insensitivity, even racial animus on the part of many white students.

The Puerto Rican residents of nearby Willimantic — rarely known personally — were frequently referred to in derogatory terms. Similarly, any classmates often formed superficial, stereotypical impressions of black people through television images and occasional trips to Hartford. There was virtually no appreciation of differences, say, between an immigrant from China and a Korean-American born in the United States



The problem was that kids had very few opportunities to test the assumptions, however flawed, that we all tend to harbor about those perceived as "other." Complacent about what they didn't know, students held opinions that might have changed had personal interaction introduced them to the facts.

My own awareness was aided by parents' deeply sympathetic to the civil rights movement. Still, there was room for my understanding to advance after junior high. Ironically, four years at prep school exposed me to a more diverse environment than could be found in nine years of public school. Summer jobs and volunteer activities helped too. More recently, working in New York has offered further chances for meaningful contact with colleagues and friends of various backgrounds.

Regrettably, such contact remains exceptional in Connecticut. As decent as most of its citizens are, as generally well-educated and prosperous as the population is, it is a state divided by class and by color. We are not alone in that respect, of course; socio-economic inequality and inadequate racial integration are failures of national (even international) scope. But those failures are especially salient here because of our relative wealth.

Fortunately, thanks to that wealth and to other virtues including the basic tolerance of its people, Connecticut has great potential to lead in the search for solutions. Charter and magnet schools that bridge neighborhoods are a positive step. Expanding school-based community resource centers, so that education can be complemented by health-care, recreational, family planning, and parenting services, is also important. Real change, though, will clearly come at a price.

More ambitious regionalism is part of that price. Those of us who cherish small-town life must recognize that local control, if pursued to an extreme, can be an obstacle not only to efficiency but to the quality of — for example — public education. Forced busing cannot work. But enhancing cooperation across town lines is essential.

In eastern Connecticut, appealing afterschool, weekend, and summer programs might be provided in Willimantic for kids from throughout the area. Spanish-language classes, field trips, drama, athletic and other extra-curricular events could be made available at a modest fee, according to students' ability to pay. College counseling and job preparation could be included.

With multiple communities contributing to subsidize the offerings, economies of scale would be achieved. Such programs would bring kids from different backgrounds together and, in fact, would supply a kind of economic development, creating dozens of useful jobs. Children would be more likely to grow up broad-minded and aware, not only of differences but of commonalities: the need for loving families, caring teachers, healthy peer groups. Mutual respect and friendship would more often cross ethnic boundaries.

This picture sounds idealistic, and it is. But it's only impossible as long as Connecticut's rigidly segregated community structures remain entrenched. Change must come — why not sooner than later? In places like Hampton as well as Hartford, the education of another generation hangs in the balance.

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