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Connecticut's Sheff vs. O'Neill desegregation court ruling led to a spurt in education funding, a \$2 billion expansion of magnet schools and renewed attention to the state's troubled urban districts. But did it help children learn?

Yes, says University of Connecticut researcher Casey Cobb-and not just for inner city students, but for their suburban classmates as well.

Cobb is part of a team of researchers that found that children from Connecticut's poorest cities who attended racially integrated magnet high schools made greater gains in reading and math than did students in traditional city schools.

Magnet schools reach only a small fraction of students in Connecticut's central cities, but "the schools do provide less racially isolated and higher-achieving environments than what most of their students would otherwise encounter," the researchers said in the December issue of the *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis Journal*.

The research is the most comprehensive study so far to examine the academic effects of the voluntary enrollment magnet schools that spread across the state following a court order 14 years ago in the Sheff vs. O'Neill desegregation case.

In related studies, Cobb and his fellow researchers also found that magnet high school students reported less racial tension with classmates, fewer classroom disruptions and greater aspirations for college.

The state Supreme Court in 1996 ordered state officials ^[2] to reduce racial and economic isolation in Hartford's mostly black and Hispanic public schools, then considered one of the state's worst-performing school systems. Magnet schools became the central strategy to comply with the order, as state officials supported the creation of dozens of the popular schools with themes such as science, mathematics and the arts.

In their studies of middle schools and high schools in Hartford, New Haven and Waterbury, the researchers concluded that magnet schools provide an academic climate similar to that of

wealthy suburban schools and produce measurable improvements among low-income and minority students.

"It deserves Connecticut's attention to see what is happening in those schools," said Cobb, who co-authored the studies with researchers from Syracuse University and Educational Testing Service.

Across the nation, earlier studies of the relationship between school desegregation and student achievement have produced mixed results, allowing observers "to draw markedly different conclusions," the researchers said in the newly published journal article.

Some social scientists, such as David Armor of George Mason University, have been skeptics. "There is no evidence of a clear and consistent relationship between desegregation and academic achievement," Armor and social scientists Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom wrote in a brief filed before the U.S. Supreme Court in a case challenging the use of racial quotas in voluntary desegregation programs in Seattle and Louisville.

Others, however, have linked academic improvement with racial and economic integration in schools.

"Overwhelmingly, the research shows that attending racially and socioeconomically diverse schools has positive effects on math and reading and other areas, such as science," said Roslyn Mickelson, a University of North Carolina-Charlotte professor who has reviewed hundreds of studies on racially integrated schools published over the past 20 years.

The findings in the Connecticut study "are consistent with findings elsewhere," she said.

In part of the Connecticut study, the research team compared magnet students with other students who had applied for magnet schools but were denied admission under random lotteries. Here are some of the findings from that study and from earlier reports compiled by Cobb and his research colleagues:

- On statewide achievement tests for 10th-graders, magnet school students from the cities made greater gains than did city students of similar backgrounds in both reading and mathematics.
- City students who attended magnet middle schools made greater gains in reading and marginally more progress in mathematics compared with students in other city middle schools.
- Suburban students, too, made large gains in reading and had slightly better improvement in mathematics at magnet middle schools in comparison to suburban children in traditional schools. In magnet high schools, suburban students improved achievement in reading and math "at least as much as they would in their home district school."
- Compared with their peers in traditional city schools, city students who attended magnets reported more positive influences of adults in their school on college expectations, stronger support for achievement among their classmates, and less social pressure against academic success and effort.
- Magnet school students were less likely to miss school or skip classes than students in traditional city or suburban schools.

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