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NAACP Legal Defense Fund Argues Against Attempt to Reverse Integrated Education in Hartford

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF), the Center for Children’s Advocacy, and the American Civil Liberties Union argued in federal court yesterday on behalf of Black and Latino students in Hartford, Connecticut to protect magnet schools from a lawsuit that seeks to reverse decades of progress in expanding integrated educational opportunities in Hartford.

The case is *Robinson v. Wentzell*, brought by the Pacific Legal Foundation (PLF), an ultra conservative California legal organization, on behalf of several Hartford parents. PLF’s suit threatens more than twenty years of progress made through a historic Connecticut Supreme Court ruling in the school desegregation case, *Sheff v. O’Neill*.

“The *Sheff* plaintiffs agree that more needs to be done to ensure that every interested Hartford student receives an integrated education,” said LDF attorney and Skadden Fellow Cara McClellan. “But under the guise of seeking to help Hartford families, the Pacific Legal Foundation has brought a suit which, if successful, would erase the hard-won gains of *Sheff* and set the city and its suburbs back decades.”

Sheff v. O’Neill is a lawsuit that the Connecticut Supreme Court decided in 1996. It was filed by Elizabeth Horton Sheff and seven other parents of Black, white, and Latino children who felt the State had a responsibility to increase racial diversity in Hartford public schools and schools in surrounding cities. As a result, the *Sheff* Plaintiffs and the State agreed to numerous reforms and new programs designed to increase racial diversity. Today, over 20,000 suburban and Hartford students attend the over 40 magnet schools and related programs created because of *Sheff*. In *Robinson*, the Pacific Legal Foundation is challenging the lottery system, where families apply to magnet or suburban schools for a chance to attend an integrated school, and the reduced isolation standard, which is a standard that the *Sheff* parties use after the lottery is completed to determine whether a school is integrated or not.

The plaintiffs in *Robinson* take issue with these remedies. The *Robinson* plaintiffs applied to attend magnet schools via the lottery system. They claim that the reduced isolation standard and

the lottery discriminate against Hartford's students of color. This is false. The reduced isolation standard plays no role in who is admitted to the magnets and the lottery does not discriminate based on race. Rather, the lottery contains many preferences that give Hartford minority students a *better chance* of getting into magnet schools than suburban students. A recent analysis by the Connecticut Mirror found that 49% of Hartford students who applied to a magnet were offered a seat, as compared to only 36% of suburban applicants.

“I understand how frustrating it is to know your child deserves better,” said Elizabeth Horton Sheff, an intervenor-defendant in *Robinson* and the lead plaintiff in *Sheff*. “But the Pacific Legal Foundation’s suit serves only to harm students of color. If successful, this case would end Connecticut’s efforts to integrate schools, close the racial achievement gap, and expose children of different races to one another. We all want our kids to have access to better schools. But undermining integration in the magnet schools is not the answer.”

To read an op-ed in The Hartford Courant by two plaintiffs about what’s at stake, click [here](#).

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Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation’s first civil and human rights law organization and has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights. LDF’s Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF.