

FAIRFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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The Education Center

September 21, 2012

Mr. Stefan Pryor
Commissioner of Education
Connecticut State Department of Education
165 Capitol Avenue
Hartford, CT 06106

Dear Commissioner Pryor:

I am writing in response to your letter of August 2012 in which you asked the Fairfield Public Schools to present to the State Board of Education its plan to remedy the racial imbalance in the Fairfield Public Schools. As of April 2012 the absolute imbalance at McKinley Elementary School stands at 26.81 percentage points, or 1.89 points above the maximum.

The State Board last reviewed and approved amendments to Fairfield's Plan on February 2, 2011. After this approval, Fairfield implemented the changes for the 2011-2012 school year. These changes, and the background on Fairfield's Racial Imbalance Plan, are summarized in a February 2, 2011 memo to the State Board of Education from Acting Commissioner George Coleman (attached). This memo includes the racial imbalance history at McKinley Elementary School from 2005 to the present.

Proposal to Add Preschool

Our data suggests that increasing the number of McKinley families attending preschool at Burr Elementary School, a school with approximately 15 percent minority students, is having a positive impact on the racial composition at McKinley. In September 2011, six students from McKinley opted to stay at Burr for their elementary years, one of whom is White. Our preliminary information from September 2012 is similar. There are a total of 36 children at the Burr preschool, half of whom are three-year-olds, and some of whom come from elementary schools other than McKinley. We project that we can raise the number of families opting into Burr from McKinley from 6 to 10 over the next two years as word spreads that McKinley families are welcome at Burr.

Therefore, we propose to add another preschool program for McKinley families at Dwight Elementary School (15 percent minority), a 2012 National Blue Ribbon School recipient. This new program will be modeled after the Burr program which has 36 students, 3 and 4 years of age, in two classrooms. This will serve the dual purpose of bringing a high quality preschool program to an underserved population and enhancing our ability to bring McKinley School into racial balance. If 10 of these preschool families opt to stay at Dwight over the next two years, we would bring McKinley School well under the 25 percentage point threshold.

Review of Other Components of the Plan

We successfully moved the preschool program at McKinley to Fairfield Warde High School not only to help achieve racial balance, but to also enhance the educational experience of our Warde preschool students. Previously, this program had predominantly served students with special needs. The net effect on the racial composition at McKinley was negligible; the impact on the educational experiences at Warde was significant and positive in many ways.

We surveyed elementary parents in our district on whether they would enroll their children outside their home school if a specialized school existed at McKinley. The result of this survey was that no program would be attractive enough to draw students to McKinley. It is also not feasible to expand McKinley School. Even with generous State funding, the site is already at maximum use and parking is extremely limited for the existing student population.

Since the 2009-2010 school year, our Plan has called for families at McKinley to be able to opt-out of that school. Of the 53 children who have taken this option, 25 are White and 28 are non-White. Therefore, this option has had little impact on racial imbalance, as these figures mirror the racial composition of the school as a whole.

Since the 2010-2011 school year, students from other schools in Fairfield have had the ability to opt-in to McKinley. During these three years (including September 2012), a total of 29 students have opted in to McKinley, 18 of whom are White. This option has had a positive impact on the racial balance at McKinley.

The Racial Diversity Task Force did receive technical assistance from the State. However, the responsibility for changes to Fairfield's Racial Imbalance Plan lies with the Board of Education. The task force, therefore, has shifted gears toward a community focus, sponsoring two "Community Conversations on Diversity" in Fairfield over the past two years. While this has been a positive development in view of the Town's changing demographics, our view is that the task force does not play a major role in recommending changes to Fairfield's Plan.

Recommended Changes

We recommend that the opt-out provision for families at McKinley be eliminated and the opt-in provision be retained for families wishing to send their children to McKinley. We recommend the elimination of the Racial Diversity Task Force and lodge the responsibility for Fairfield's Racial Imbalance Plan directly with the Fairfield Board of Education.

Fairfield's racial imbalance is just slightly over the statutory limit. We believe these additional steps will help to correct the problem.

Sincerely,



David G. Title

Attachment