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Magnet Schools Stand By Admissions

At Least 41 Students Were Admitted Without Going Through Lottery In 2016-17 School Year

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One was a bullying victim in a town with only one high school. Others were foster children shuttling in and out of school districts. Several were international students landing in foreign-exchange programs.

And all of them ended up at Greater Hartford magnet schools without winning seats through the blind lottery that is supposed to be the sole means of admission.

After the enrollment scandal at Capital Prep, state officials reviewed student logs at all 42 regional magnet schools created in response to the Sheff v. O'Neill desegregation lawsuit. They found at least 41 students who were not selected through the state-run lottery this past school year — 24 at schools in the Hartford school system and the rest at other magnet operators, raising concerns about fairness in a high-stakes system where city families despair after striking out in the lottery.

The state has withdrawn hundreds of thousands of dollars in tuition payments for students enrolled outside the lottery, and put magnet schools on notice that it will routinely audit their enrollments from now on — warning of additional financial penalties for schools that breach the lottery protocols.

Hartford school leaders say they are investigating why students were allowed to bypass the lottery, and have instructed principals to halt the practice unless they have permission from the state for “special circumstances.”

But other magnet operators, including the Capitol Region Education Council, stand by nearly all of their enrollment decisions. And like Hartford, they say they want to work with the state to develop a formal process that would allow them to take in students who are in extraordinary situations.

CREC Superintendent Tim Sullivan said that of the 11 CREC students found to be improperly enrolled in the past year, he considered just two to be unjustified, when a staff member with computer access to student-enrollment records admitted her foster child and an unrelated student at the magnet school where she worked. That employee, who had “a long track record of doing the right thing,” was reprimanded with a verbal warning, Sullivan said.

“The understanding is that it’ll never happen again,” said Greg Florio, CREC’s executive director.

But CREC officials defended the other enrollment decisions. Two were foreign-exchange students attending the Metropolitan Learning Center for Global and International Studies, which has a long history of hosting international students. And the others, they said, were either victims of bullying or hardship cases involving children in foster care, including at least one student who had previously attended a CREC school and wanted to return. Those placements were approved by CREC’s central office.

“We want to give them that educational stability,” Florio said.

In the CREC hardship cases, administrators said those students were placed months after the magnet schools’ fall deadline for new enrollees. They also acknowledged the dilemma of granting special admissions, if it means taking the spot of a waitlisted student who entered the lottery with hopes for a high-quality education.

“Ultimately, we have to have some empathy,” Sullivan said. “It’s tough. Every kid deserves a seat, but there are not enough seats. We wish every kid who wanted a seat in a magnet school could get one.”

In East Hartford, four students were accepted outside the lottery at the Connecticut International Baccalaureate Academy: three foreign-exchange students, and one student with a sibling at the school who was admitted midyear because of what school officials described as “personal extenuating circumstances.” East Hartford did not receive state tuition money for any of the students, school officials said.

At Bloomfield’s Global Experience Magnet School, two students were enrolled outside the lottery for what Superintendent James Thompson Jr. called “humanitarian reasons.” Many school officials declined to get into the specific scenarios, citing privacy concerns.

Although Hartford officials have declined to describe the results of their ongoing investigation, documents obtained from the state Department of Education show some of the reasons the district gave for allowing students to bypass the lottery.

City school officials said at least 11 children were placed outside the lottery because they were the siblings of students already attending the school — a questionable reason because, at many magnets, siblings receive preference in the lottery but are not guaranteed a seat. Other students were enrolled for safety reasons, the district said, or because they were the children of newly hired school employees, who would have received a preference in the lottery had they applied.

Capital Prep was not among the Hartford magnets found to have enrolled students outside the lottery this past school year, although an earlier review found 15 students were improperly enrolled during the 2015-16 school year. State education officials, however, did not ask Capital Prep to explain each admission, saying the state had not developed a formal process for the school to verify or dispute the findings.

