

Crossing the Line and Closing the Gap

Interdistrict Magnet Schools as Remedies for Segregation,
Concentrated Poverty and Inequality

A CHHIRJ Working Paper

by Anita Wadhwa

June 2009

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INSTITUTE FOR
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HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

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Just at the moment that our nation grows more racially, culturally and linguistically diverse, our schools are becoming more segregated. Luckily, some educators have been able to resist this trend. Across the nation, educators, parents and elected leaders are working to create and sustain schools that bring children from varying backgrounds together to learn and prepare for full participation in our democracy. An ever-growing body of social science research demonstrates that racial and economic diversity in schools enhances the learning environment for all groups of students and carries a range of other benefits.

This CHHIRJ working paper focuses on efforts in Connecticut to create and maintain such schools. In this state, a landmark civil rights decision engendered the creation of interdistrict magnet schools that enroll a diverse group of students from several urban and suburban districts. These schools exist in all of the state's major metropolitan areas. This paper focuses on just two such schools in and around the capital city of Hartford. The paper considers both the schools' strengths and their challenges, and also explores the replicable organizational structure in which these schools operate and are sustained.

We hope this paper will offer guidance, ideas and inspiration for people across the country committed to supporting diversity in public education. This working paper is released with a companion Powerpoint presentation that summarizes key findings. We hope people will use this presentation, or slides from this presentation, in their efforts to raise awareness and find solutions to increasing inequality and worsening segregation in America's metropolitan areas.



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This working paper focuses on a remedy put forth by the state of Connecticut to end segregation in Connecticut's schools, and on the efforts of the Capitol Regional Education Council (CREC) to create diversity through a nationally heralded interdistrict magnet school initiative. The interdistrict magnet school effort provides other organizations, individuals and school districts a powerful example of how to integrate students by economic class and race, in spite of recent limitations imposed by the U.S. Supreme Court. This paper begins with a discussion of the legal case that gave rise to the magnet schools and provides the context in which they now operate. It also offers a case study of CREC through a description of its operations and highlights two high-performing magnet schools.¹ It is the second in a series of CHHIRJ papers exploring avenues toward diversity in K-12 public education.

Background

In 2007, the United States Supreme Court issued a 5-4 decision in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1 et al.* This decision made it more difficult for educators to use race as a factor in deciding where to assign students to school. The long-awaited ruling immediately called into question the legality of voluntary school desegregation programs. Such programs, through considering race in the student assignment process, have attempted to diversify schools. The Court recognized that “remediating the effects of past intentional discrimination is a compelling interest,”² which would justify the use of race under some circumstances. However, such interest was likely not present, the Court stated, in cities that were never subjected to court-ordered desegregation or in school districts that had been declared “unitary,” by a lower court, meaning that their desegregation orders had been dissolved. Thirty-three years earlier, in *Milliken v. Bradley*, the Supreme Court (also in a 5-4 decision) made it nearly impossible for lower courts to compel suburbs to participate in cross-district desegregation plans. Under *Milliken*, the High Court said that suburbs would remain untouchable unless it could be proven that the districts had purposely discriminated and had caused the

segregation in the first place. Thus, *Milliken* exacerbated white flight and helped cement in place residential segregation that concentrated African American and, later, Latino students into increasingly overwhelmed, racially and economically isolated urban schools. After *Parents Involved*, many legal experts expressed concern that there was little recourse left to reverse the trend of ever-growing racial isolation and concentrated poverty, two conditions that are linked to a host of school inequalities.

However, the case of Connecticut – by all accounts a segregated state with wide inequalities – demonstrates continuing possibilities for creating diversity in schools. A combination of legal action and educational inventiveness created educational settings that are deliberately advancing toward greater racial and ethnic integration. Local educators characterize this effort as a work in progress.

The Connecticut Context: *Sheff v. O’Neill*

In 1996, Connecticut’s Supreme Court, in the case of *Milo Sheff, et al. v. William O’Neill, et al.*, carved a path around *Milliken v. Bradley*, which had effectively closed off Hartford’s urban students from the well-functioning schools in suburban areas. The closely divided *Sheff* decision held that whether or not suburban governments had contributed to segregation was beside the point. Segregation, intentional or unintentional, existed, engendered inequality and was, the court ruled, appropriately prohibited by the Connecticut State Constitution.

The court turned the case over to the Legislature to devise a remedy. Legal experts would later concur that the *Parents Involved* decision, which came 11 years after the *Sheff* ruling, would not apply to Connecticut’s desegregation efforts, since Connecticut used place of residence, not race or ethnicity, to integrate students. Students are chosen in a blind lottery from *communities* long segregated along racial lines.³ In other words, the *Parents Involved* ruling does not impact Connecticut’s desegregation efforts, in part because the state does not give preference to *individual* students based on race. Rather, educators use geographically targeted marketing and recruitment to achieve the plan’s goals for racial and ethnic diversity.

¹ CREC administers one part of the remedy in *Sheff*. The responsibility for desegregation in the region is shared with the Hartford Public Schools (which also operate magnets) and with the state of Connecticut. We focus on the CREC schools, however, because of the organization’s track record, its longtime regional focus and its positive national reputation.

² *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1 et al.*, No. 05-908. Argued December 4, 2006—Decided June 28, 2007.

³ Personal Communication with Dr. Bruce Douglas, October 20, 2008. Transcript available upon request.

Following the *Sheff* ruling, the state Legislature made some progress in creating more opportunities for diverse learning environments. However, the pattern of segregation and inequality first detailed by the *Sheff* plaintiff lawyers in 1989 would continue after the court ruled in their favor in 1996. In 2007, in Hartford's schools, 70 percent of students were poor and 94 percent of students were children of color, largely African American or Latino.⁴ Meanwhile, even as many inner-ring, older working class communities near Hartford grow more diverse, African American and/or Latino students or low-income students still make up less than twenty-five percent of the enrollment in many of Hartford's nearby suburbs in 2008.⁵

Connecticut records one of the largest wealth gaps in the nation. Hourly wages for earners at the 90th percentile are 4.8 times the wages of earners at the 10th percentile.⁶ This gap is likely reflected in the polar performances of the state's suburban and urban districts. In 2007, National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reported that Connecticut registered the largest achievement gap in the nation between poor and non-poor students.⁷ In the 4th grade reading test, the gap between poor students and non-poor students was 3.8 grade levels. The gap in math was 3 grade levels. Hartford is the state's capital and the third largest city in Connecticut. Forty-two percent of residents are poor, making it one of the poorest large cities in the nation.⁸

The 1996 *Sheff* decision did not specify the measures by which desegregation would be attained. Rather, it turned the job of finding a remedy over to a suburban-dominated state Legislature. (In subsequent years, plaintiffs repeatedly filed motions declaring the state's efforts to integrate Hartford students inadequate.⁹) In April 2008, plaintiffs and the state agreed in a stipulated order that, by 2013, the

share of Hartford students in integrated schools¹⁰ should increase from 11 percent to 41 percent.

The state Legislature originally proposed three avenues toward integration (consolidation of school districts, as had been accomplished in other regions in the nation, was never seriously considered):

1. Interdistrict magnet schools, which draw students in with specialized curriculum and themes;
2. Project Choice, a program that allowed Hartford students to attend suburban schools; and
3. Interdistrict grants to pay for small, part-time projects that bring students from different schools together into diverse educational settings.

This paper focuses on the interdistrict magnet school remedy. It explores the mechanisms by which the Capitol Regional Educational Council (CREC), which serves Hartford and surrounding districts and is charged with developing and operating integration programs, has created diversity through its nationally-heralded interdistrict magnet schools. It examines two CREC schools in particular. The paper ends with a brief exploration of the challenges that have accompanied the establishment of these schools. The aim of this paper is to provide other communities with a hopeful example of a well-functioning system of interdistrict desegregation, while facing up to the challenges inherent in a perpetual work in progress. The hope is that a focus on the particulars of the Connecticut experience will provide similarly situated communities, legal advocates and educators with information on both the benefits of, and real challenges related to, creating diverse schools by crossing school district boundary lines.

Capitol Regional Education Council

CREC has existed since 1966. It began simply as a non-profit provider of programs and services which it delivers to school districts at reduced cost. CREC is one of six so

⁴ Connecticut State Department of Education, Strategic School Profiles District Data Table, 2006-07. (<http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/cedar/districts/index.htm?sdePNavCtr=|#45480>)

⁵ http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/cedar/profiles/ssp_data_tables/SSP_DISTRICT_TABLE_0708.xls. See also page 2 of *Missing the Goal: A Visual Guide to Sheff vs. O'Neill School Desegregation* at http://www.hartfordinfo.org/issues/wsd/Education/Missing_the_Goal.pdf for a visual guide of minority enrollment in and surrounding Hartford.

⁶ Hero, J., Hall, D.J., & Geballe, S. (2007, Sept.). *The state of working Connecticut, 2007, V-3*. New Haven: Connecticut Voices for Children.

⁷ http://www.conncan.org/matriarch/MultiPiecePage.asp_Q_PageID_E_176_A_PageName_E_NewsReleas392507

⁸ http://www.ed.gov/admins/comm/choice/magnets/report_pg22.html

⁹ <http://www.acluct.org/downloads/SheffvONeillPhaseII.pdf>

¹⁰ As defined by the "Stipulation and Proposed Order" associated with the *Sheff* case, "integrated schools" are those that meet the "desegregation standard" of the "Sheff Region's aggregate minority percentage enrollment plus thirty percentage points or seventy-five percent (75%)" (p. 3). In other words, an integrated school's minority enrollment must not exceed 75%.

termed Regional Educational Service Centers (RESCs) in Connecticut, created under law.¹¹

CREC Executive Director Bruce Douglas has worked with the organization since 1998. He compares CREC to a co-op, or a “farmer’s market for educational services.”¹² The organization provides educational and human services to thirty-five school districts in the Greater Hartford region. School districts pay twenty cents a student to belong to the co-op. CREC provides an infrastructure and high quality services – e.g., leadership training, intensive professional development for teachers and administrators, curriculum writing – at below market costs. Of the thirty-five districts CREC serves, twenty-two are so-called “Sheff” towns that participate in activities to desegregate Hartford schools. CREC has always had a regional focus, but began focusing on desegregation following Sheff.

CREC Magnet Schools: From Design to Realization

In a recent report, Bifulco, Cobb and Bell found that Connecticut’s interdistrict magnet schools “on average, provide their students more diverse peer environments than they would encounter in their home districts.”¹³

Hartford has two types of magnet schools: “host” magnets, which are run by the Hartford Public Schools (HPS), and CREC magnets. This paper focuses upon the efforts of CREC, with less attention given to the HPS magnets. For a variety of reasons, the CREC magnets have proven more successful at achieving integration. One reason for CREC’s higher relative success may be that it has the power to establish schools located between the urban center of Hartford and its surrounding suburbs. As of 2007-08, only two out of Hartford’s twelve “host” magnets met the desegregation standard of no more than 75 percent of minority student enrollment. In contrast, five of CREC’s eight magnets met the standard.¹⁴ Connecticut interdistrict magnet schools are funded publicly through management by a local district, by a RESC, or by agreement between two or more districts. CREC has the power and ability to conceive of, construct and manage the magnet schools. Bruce Douglas explains that his organization can do

everything from design to realization in school construction. If a client approaches CREC to build a school, CREC staff works collaboratively with the client to develop a coherent theme and coordinate the construction process. The organization will also map all the educational specifications. For example, Douglas explains:

[I]f it’s a math/science magnet, we’ll help determine how many labs are necessary; we will write the application to the state for the funding; we’ll design the curriculum, we’ll hire the teachers and the administrators; supply the furniture, fixtures and equipment...and, if they so desire, we will also operate the school for the client.

Prior to Sheff, CREC owned two magnet schools: the East Hartford-Glastonbury Elementary School, which houses a language and global studies magnet school and a half-day Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts. As of 2008, CREC managed 12 magnet schools. The demand for more magnets is growing among parents. Also, the Sheff goal of integrating 41 percent of Hartford students by 2013 likely increases the demand for such schools. The stipulated order mandates annual benchmarks, and the first for the 2008-09 school year states that 19 percent of Hartford-resident minority students must attend integrated schools. Thus, the state asked CREC to build four magnet schools in the summer of 2008—an “immense undertaking,” according to Douglas. It increased the share of Hartford students attending integrated schools from 11 percent to the benchmark 19 percent.

By 2009, the stipulated order calls for 27 percent of Hartford students to be in integrated settings. However, Douglas worries as to whether this is a realistic goal since at this writing, a comprehensive strategic plan had yet to be developed. Also, the strategic planning required to meet the goal has not been adequate. Still, by all accounts, CREC magnet schools have provided quality education and reduced the racial and socioeconomic isolation for a portion of Hartford students. Douglas credits the organization’s “entrepreneurial” spirit:

In our magnet schools, we found that parents would say, what’s going to happen at your school that isn’t going to happen at my fine suburban school? Until recently, Hartford children came [to the magnet schools] because many of their parents were seeking an alternative to a school in crisis.... Many of the children who came to the [magnet] schools from suburban communities came from some of the wealthiest [suburban] communities and most successful high schools in the state.... We saw that the whole idea of a school being

¹¹ <http://www.ctrescalliance.org>. As CREC literature states, “CREC helps school districts to work together to do things better and/or more cost effectively than they could alone.”

¹² Personal Communication, October 20, 2008. Transcript available upon request.

¹³ *Can Interdistrict Choice Boost Student Achievement? The Case of Connecticut’s Interdistrict Magnet School Program*, National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Teacher’s College, Columbia University, p. 4.

¹⁴ <http://www.acluct.org/downloads/SheffvONeillPhaseII.pdf>

entrepreneurial, and having to create a market and maintain that market, greatly elevated the performance of the teachers and the administrators. If they didn't rise to competitive standards, they realized they'd be looking for new jobs.

Two magnet schools – the Metropolitan Learning Center in the inner-ring suburb of Bloomfield, and the Montessori Magnet School in Hartford's Frog Hollow neighborhood – are windows into CREC's magnet schools. Both have garnered multiple accolades locally and nationally. Both maintain long waiting lists. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement named the Metropolitan Learning Center as one of the nation's eight best magnet schools.

The Metropolitan Learning Center

Desegregation sounds like an initial effort to prohibit the separation of groups. Integration, to me, has to go well beyond that, because it's not just eliminating that barrier to people being together physically, but to work, learn, and grow together, so they become part of a community where they all have a stake in that community, not just a physical presence, but a real stake in that community. That's what we're trying to do through all of our programming, is to get everyone to have a sense of this school community. I think that's one of the reasons why interdistrict magnets might have a unique role in this effort.¹⁵

– Anne McKernan
Metropolitan Learning Center Principal

The Metropolitan Learning Center, or MLC, enrolls students in grades 6 through 12. It opened in 1998 with about ninety 6th graders.¹⁶ Each year, it has grown by 100 students, adding one grade level. MLC's first senior class graduated in 2005. In 2007, the student population was 61.7 percent African-American, 24.1 percent White, 11.1 percent Latino, 3 percent Asian-American, and .1 percent Native American.¹⁷ Because of its global studies theme, planners purposely built the school in the racially diverse

¹⁵ Personal Communication, November 17, 2008. Transcript available upon request.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement. (2008). *Successful magnet schools: Innovations in education*. No. ED004444P.

¹⁷ <http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/der/ssp/sch0708/sr162.pdf>, p. 4.

suburb of Bloomfield, which is close to several international businesses. Principal Anne McKernan began her career at MLC in 2001 as a social studies teacher. She became principal in 2004. At that time, six school districts had committed seats to MLC. These were official "participating districts" that agreed to pay for a given number of seats each year. However, not all the seats were filled. Then, in 2007, state lawmakers passed student choice legislation¹⁸ that opened seats to non-participating school districts. Since then, MLC has enrolled students from 15 districts in the Greater Hartford region.

At its inception, MLC hired a specialist in international education from Yale to integrate global studies into its curriculum. Each MLC student is expected to participate in the following: study abroad, enrollment in at least one Advancement Placement (AP) course and one online course at the Virtual High School,¹⁹ visit colleges annually, and take three years of either Chinese or Spanish. McKernan says MLC benefits from being a CREC magnet because the school does not belong to any one district or locale. This means that both urban and suburban students can claim the school as their own:

The choice program gives students from Hartford the opportunity to go to school in the suburbs, but I fear they may feel like outsiders. At MLC no one feels like they own this building. The Bloomfield students don't walk around thinking this is Bloomfield and everyone's a visitor...and no students come to this building and kind of have an attitude like this is our place, you're not welcome. I think is an important nuance of bringing kids together. The school must feel like home to every child.

MLC must ensure that its school grounds and programming appeal to both Hartford parents and

¹⁸ A section of *An Act Concerning Implementing the Provisions of the Budget Concerning Education* reads, "After accommodating students from participating districts in accordance with the approved enrollment agreement, an interdistrict magnet school that has unused student capacity may enroll directly into its program any interested student. A student from a district that is not participating in the interdistrict magnet school shall be given preference." (<http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/circ/circ07-08/C12.pdf>)

¹⁹ Virtual High School is an online consortium of internet courses that provide instruction for students and professional development for teachers. Courses that are not necessarily offered in high schools, such as statistics, can be accessed online, and run on a semester schedule much like other courses in high school. (<http://www.govhs.org/>)

suburban parents. McKernan says MLC accomplishes this, in part, by providing uncommon features. These include:

- *Facilities.* A state of the art facility.
- *Technology.* MLC gives every high school student a laptop computer. Educators require students to email assignments to teachers and conduct research on laptops.
- *The international theme.* Students have the opportunity to take annual trips abroad. Curriculum is rigorous. Last year, 22 percent of students who traveled internationally were Hartford students, and that number has grown each year.
- *Size.* With 80-90 students in the senior class and two guidance counselors for the seniors, “We can almost hand walk each child through the college application process,” McKernan says.
- *Diversity.* McKernan states that parents often tell her that their children “need to be among a lot of different kinds of people” before entering the workforce.

To recruit students and maintain diversity, McKernan attends magnet school fairs and open houses at suburban schools, speaks on Spanish and English radio programs, and buys advertisements in towns from which MLC is seeking more representation. In the past, students had to apply to individual magnets in Hartford. Now, students apply to MLC through the Regional School Choice Office (RSCO), which has a common application for Hartford host magnets, CREC magnets, and vocational schools. In 2009, 2,000 students were on MLC’s waiting list. McKernan does not advertise as much in Hartford, as more than half of the students on the waiting list live in Hartford. Because the application consists of a blind lottery, McKernan and her staff never know if they are achieving *Sheff* standards of racial desegregation until students are accepted into the school. In fact, last year, MLC needed seven more White students in order to meet the *Sheff* requirement of having only 74 percent of the student body be students of color. She explains:

You look at many of these suburban towns and there are few good reasons to leave their well-established public schools. By having a great deal of value-added features, you are able to cast a wide net for potential families. This effort takes creativity, widespread advertising, and word of mouth.... Of course, when the program is successful, it's easier to spread the message.

The state pays for about three-fourths of the costs for each student at the school, or \$6,250.²⁰ Participating cities and towns of Windsor, Windsor Locks, East Windsor, Enfield, Hartford and Bloomfield pay \$2,000 for each student they send to MLC. According to Bifulco, Cobb and Bell, the state of Connecticut provides a financial incentive for local districts to send students to interdistrict magnet schools: “...if a district sends children to an interdistrict magnet school, it receives the same amount in Education Cost Sharing funds from the state as it would if the students remained in the district’s regular schools. In effect, interdistrict magnet school students generate state aid funding twice.”²¹ The per-pupil costs at MLC are higher than they are at most public schools. Douglas states that per-pupil costs at CREC schools can be as high as \$13,000. Recently, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Innovation and Improvement selected MLC as one of the nation’s top eight magnet schools in the country. It profiled MLC in the 2008 publication, “Successful Magnet High Schools: Innovations in Education.”²² MLC has garnered numerous other awards, including the Goldman Sachs Award for Excellence in International Education (2004), and a Magnet School of Excellence Award (2008) from Magnet Schools of America. According to the school’s data, 98 to 100 percent of MLC graduates say they will go on to college after graduation. McKernan believes MLC’s success stems from the common language and procedures of all the classrooms, and the teaming of teachers by grade level and content. McKernan also attributes the success of her students to the school’s relatively small size. This allows her to periodically check in on the progress of every student. She holds meetings with other teachers to talk about each student’s progress and performance. In these meetings, McKernan can see data on each student, any intervention he/she may be receiving (such as push-in or pull-out models of learning, after school help, or participation in a Saturday Academy, which provides extra help and enrichment on weekends), recent

²⁰ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement. (2008). *Successful magnet schools: Innovations in education*. No. ED004444P. p. 51.

²¹ *Can Interdistrict Choice Boost Student Achievement? The Case of Connecticut’s Interdistrict Magnet School Program*, National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Teacher’s College, Columbia University, p. 6.

²² In the foreword to the publication, U.S. Department of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings says the eight schools chosen showed five strategies: “Each school innovates for excellence; provides rigorous course work; promotes equity by holding high expectations for all students; builds a culture of high-quality teaching where educators feel connected through an integrated curriculum; and forges partnerships with families, communities, universities, and businesses.” See p. v.

test scores and written observations of the student by the teacher.

McKernan takes particular pride in her efforts to make MLC welcoming to all students, from the most enfranchised, to the least enfranchised:

The most disenfranchised student is a challenge to reach at any school. I feel we have the best resources to reach that disenfranchised student. So I think we should be talking to all kinds of people – churches, boy scouts, police, and other organizations – who have relationships with students who are on the margin so they get these children...into our school system.

Montessori Magnet School

...it's naturally an intrinsic part of the Montessori setting, that social development of the child is equally as important as their academic skills, and so I think that's very appealing to a lot of people that you want to develop not only good readers, writers, and mathematicians, which certainly they should be, but kids that know how to get along with each other, that can do conflict resolution, that understand differences and respect among different kinds of people from different types of community and economic groups and racial groups....I think [Montessori] appeals to a lot of different people that are looking for an alternative to a more conventional kind of an education.²³

–Tim Nee, former principal of the CREC Montessori School, and current Director of CREC Montessori Initiatives

Dr. Maria Montessori, the first female practicing doctor in Italy, used scientific observation and her knowledge of psychology to develop her principles on learning. After achieving success with mentally disabled children and street children in Italy, she developed the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) in 1929 to promote her ideas about human development. In Montessori schools, students learn in multi-age classrooms where older children share experiences with younger children.

At the CREC Montessori School, students aged 3-5 are the primary students, students aged 6-9 are the lower elementary students, and students aged 9-12 are the upper

elementary students. Students engage in a three hour work cycle each morning. During this time, the teacher conducts individual and small group lessons as the rest of the students choose to work on lessons to which they have already been introduced. “Manipulatives,” such as puzzles and blocks, are essential parts of a Montessori education. Classrooms at the CREC Montessori School are filled with shelves of books, blocks, and other materials that are self-selected by students. The idea is to capitalize on the intrinsic curiosity of children to learn, rather than to teach didactic lessons. There are kitchens in classrooms as well, so children can help themselves to snacks. After the work cycle, students eat lunch, have recess and then spend time in a “Special Area,” consisting of a different elective each day, such as Art, Music, P.E. and Spanish. After the elective, students have another two-hour work cycle.

CREC's Montessori Magnet School was the first and only public Montessori magnet school in Connecticut until this year, when one more opened in Hartford. Initially a classroom cooperative between West Hartford Public Schools and Hartford Public Schools, the Montessori magnet opened up in the basement of a YMCA in 1990 as a primary classroom. After West Hartford pulled out of the regional agreement, Hartford Public Schools brought in CREC to help with the difficulties facing the school, both financial and administrative. CREC took over and the school broke away from Hartford Public Schools.

In 2008, Dr. Jacqueline Cossentino was hired as principal. Previously, Tim Nee had been principal for eight years. Nee says he was hired in 1999 to grow the school and organize it. He said he worked on four priorities:

1. Ensuring the integrity of the lottery: Nee says, “There were lots of holes in the way that they were bringing children into the program.” He made sure that there was no favoritism when it came to who would actually get chosen to attend the school.
2. Strengthening the financial foundation of the school: CREC worked to shore up the financial resources necessary for the school to flourish.
3. Finding a new facility: The old Montessori facilities were in bad condition, and “not necessarily an attractive place for our suburban parents in particular coming into a city environment.” In order to “attract a variety of people,” the school was moved to the new state of the art Learning Corridor in 2000, a 16-acre, \$110 million campus that holds four magnet schools from both CREC and the Hartford

²³ Personal Communication, October 20, 2008. Transcript available upon request.

Public Schools: the Montessori Magnet School, the Hartford Magnet School (grades 6-8), and two high schools, the Greater Hartford Academy of Mathematics and Science and the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts. The school is called a “corridor” because it acts as a gateway connecting students to one another, to the neighborhood, and to local institutions.²⁴ Created by the Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance,²⁵ the Learning Corridor is a non-profit organization that serves students from Hartford and from 40 other regions. In addition to the four schools, the Learning Corridor houses a Boys and Girls Club, the Connecticut Valley Girl Scouts Council and a 650-seat theater.

4. Developing the elementary program: Montessori’s primary program was strong, but parents tended to pull their children from the school after age 6, seeing it as “a free pre-school.” Nee made sure that parents would instead see the school as a “continuum” so they would remain long after the primary ages.

The school maintains a waitlist of more than 500 children and has been recognized as both the Outstanding Montessori School in the United States (twice) and as a School of Excellence by the Magnet Schools of America. Nee says the “real draw” of the school is the fact that it is “an authentic Montessori program in a public setting.” The school has made Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind Act every year for the past eight years until last year, when it missed because of reading scores. Nee says he measures the success of the school by several different components:

I think success is measured in a variety of ways...in the variety of children it brings in, so meeting the *Sheff* agreement which is to reduce racial, ethnic and economic isolation. This school...just has a gorgeous blend of children of different racial backgrounds, different economic backgrounds, so it was almost meeting its (desegregation goals) and pulling from up to 27 different school districts.

²⁴ Its mission statement reads, “The Learning Corridor, a campus of four inter-district public magnet schools, a performing arts center, and community programs, is committed to providing a unique educational model for a diverse body of youth, while contributing to the revitalization of Hartford.” See <http://www.learningcorridor.org/about/aboutus.htm>.

²⁵ Members include: the Connecticut Children’s Medical Center, Connecticut Public Television and Radio, Hartford Hospital and the Institute of Living, and Trinity College.

Some of the magnet schools in Hartford didn’t have that kind of draw...

Last year, the student population was 42 percent African-American and Caribbean-American, 36.6 percent Latino, 19.9 percent White, and 1.5 percent Asian-American.²⁶ Nee says the school has much socioeconomic diversity, from “kids that live in cars” to “two kids that live in mansions in the west end of Hartford”; last year, 27-30 percent of students were on free or reduced lunch. Initially, Nee said, the school was not reaching out adequately to the Latino population, “even though we were in the heart of a Latino/Hispanic neighborhood.” He began visiting churches and promoting the school on Spanish radio programs: “You make an assertive effort to start recruiting for populations that maybe you’re not seeing in your application pool.”

In 2008, Nee became Director of CREC Montessori Initiatives, an effort to open up more public Montessori schools in and around Hartford. Sixty percent of Nee’s contract includes working with the Hartford Public Schools to open more Montessori schools. He plans to open up one more elementary school in 2010, and a middle school and high school within three to six years.

Challenges to Crossing Boundary Lines

Bruce Douglas, the CREC Director, lists several challenges to meeting the *Sheff* mandate and sustaining high quality interdistrict magnets. This includes shoring up finances and political will from legislators, and challenges associated with recruiting disenfranchised students and helping their reach their full potential.

Finances and political will

According to Douglas, there has been a lack of political will and proper financing by the state. The funding formula, he said, “was inadequate for the schools.” The state committed, he said, “minimal funding so every year we would inevitably face a deficit and have to lobby the General Assembly for the deficit funds. We were successful in securing an additional 60 million dollars over the past ten years in supplemental funding.”

Because CREC cannot tax, Douglas has had to lobby for the shortfall that comes from insufficient state funding. Twenty percent of tuition is sent to CREC by participating districts, and the state is supposed to pay for the remaining

²⁶ <http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/det/ssp/sch0708/elema508.pdf>, p.4.

80 percent. The state charges \$6,000 per child, and participating districts send \$2,000 with each child. However, the actual cost per pupil can be as high as \$12,000 to \$14,000. Douglas has had to lobby the General Assembly for funds, often in the waning hours of legislative sessions. Usually, he has been able to win the necessary funds. For example, in 2007, CREC received \$7.9 million. In addition, Project Choice students, who go to suburban schools from Hartford, also come with a subsidy of \$2,000—that is, their district pays CREC \$2,000, since “all students generate the same amount of state funding, and the local district where the student resides is expected to make payments to the RESC to supplement state funding.”²⁷ According to Douglas, the \$2,000, which comes with students from Hartford, is inadequate to counteract the “deprivations of poverty” that may affect achievement and create the need for emotional or social support to deal with the instability of life outside of school. Douglas said he believes that, until recently, the state has acted as a “reluctant partner” in enforcing the *Sheff* mandate. As a result, there was a lack of strategic, long term planning about how magnet schools would achieve desegregation:

Some good ideas were developed, but there was no scope and sequence...supporting the best interest of Hartford and the children who would be left behind. Would all the magnet schools partner with Hartford Public Schools so we could share curriculum and educational philosophy? Would we have sister schools?

Those types of questions, Douglas said, did not factor into early planning. A series of schools were eventually developed, he said, “but they did not grow from a grand, bigger idea or master design,” but came up “randomly – tactically, if you will.” Douglas believes that the lack of planning has resulted in a loss for the children of Hartford. After having spent nearly a billion and a half dollars in school construction and other fees associated with magnet schools, Douglas says:

...on the one hand you might say, well, great things have happened in the magnet schools, but on the other hand you can say for over the 12 or 13 years, a whole generation of Hartford children went through the school system and didn’t significantly benefit from reform. If you have command of a billion and a half dollars and you’re thinking strategically, you can accomplish a great deal more than we did. The state could have

incentivized the towns to address the *Sheff* agenda from a regional perspective.

Seeking the disenfranchised child

A dilemma that Douglas struggles with is ensuring that CREC magnets consistently recruit disenfranchised students to ensure the integrity of the lottery. Often, says Douglas, if a child acts out through negative or disruptive behavior in the classroom, does not have an adult who advocates for him/her and is not already a high achiever, then that student is too often at risk of not being entered into the lottery for admission to a charter school or magnet school. Thus, CREC looks to social services, churches, police officers and other neighborhood groups to find the most disenfranchised children. However, magnets must ensure that they are academically successful, and it is difficult to reach disenfranchised students without significant resources and extra interventions and programs such as counseling, extended school days or after school programs. Douglas struggles with trying to balance *Sheff*’s and CREC’s mission of reaching disenfranchised children with preventing burnout of staff and teachers.

In addition, some CREC schools have experimented with tracking students—that is, temporarily sorting students into small academic groups based upon their performance and skill levels. This happens most often, Douglas says, in the short term, though his goal is to use the practice sparingly and as a way to work in small groups with students who are struggling:

Yes, it does happen. You know, there are choices you have to make; we’re having that debate right now. I’m a very strong believer in making immediate impacts on student achievement, for numerous reasons, but most of all, for the sake of the child.... For example, how do we immediately improve reading skills? It follows that, in some cases, in order to support children, we would need to resort to intense support.... Ideally, four years later the child will read at or above grade level, you are going to see the same SAT scores, and the child will be taking the same AP courses as their more affluent peers. If we don’t pursue some immediate improvements now, then those other things won’t be there for the child. We approach student learning with a sense of urgency and immediacy.

²⁷ Bifulco, Cobb and Bell (2008), p. 6.

Conclusion

Addressing the Opportunity Gap

Douglas said he feels that, rather than focusing solely on the *Sheff* goals of desegregation, educators in the Hartford Public Schools are, understandably, focusing attention on creating high quality magnet schools and schools of choice primarily for Hartford Students. He likens the educational crisis in the city to addressing injuries from a car accident: “Do you first set the bone or stop the bleeding? You stop the bleeding.” Literacy is the emergency, and for Douglas, that trumps everything else: “*Sheff* is first and foremost about desegregation, but if you believe that it doesn’t matter if a white children and a child of color sit together in order for the child of color to be able to read, and the emergency is reading, then you have a good argument, too.”

Douglas feels the best solution would have been to regionalize the *Sheff* effort over ten years. In the meantime, CREC’s model is, according to Douglas, replicable, because it acts as a neutral and is “not a political agency.” CREC does not propose what schools to build— rather, participating districts and agencies come to CREC to dictate the agenda. CREC’s magnet schools work to achieve a precarious balance between meeting the needs of suburban and urban students and parents, a balance that is not often easy to manage:

An exceptional challenge faced by magnet school teachers and administrators is addressing the achievement gap manifested in the ten inches that separate the desks between two children in the same school, but who are in radically different life situations. In such a scenario, one student would be attending a magnet school to benefit from its aerospace and engineering curriculum, while the other is there because he or she is escaping a school district in crisis. The affluent student has all the opportunities implied by affluence while the other student is struggling to overcome the deprivations of poverty. How do you approach that situation?

CREC’s response has been to stick to a mission of serving children, and in particular of being inclusive of disenfranchised children. Douglas says magnet schools should be careful and conscious of the subtle “messages” they send to prospective students, through promotional materials or public presentation of a school. Educators, Douglas stresses, should deliberately encourage students of all types of socioeconomic, family, and educational

backgrounds. For Douglas, it goes back to having a mission, something he believes CREC, the state and its partners, must maintain in order to serve Hartford’s children:

When I looked at my staff and said that we are going to open up four [magnet] schools and bring in some 1,500 students in three months, they looked at me pretty skeptically. But we discussed the mission...and I told them that I know that we could achieve this goal. If we really believe in the mission and we’re all emotionally and socially in the same place, then it must be done...

About the Author

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