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## **Alternative Education Programs: School Choice & Student Benefit**

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Senior Research Project

Educational Studies

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This study discusses the experiences of students enrolled in the Hartford Region Open Choice program. This research looks at the experience of students of color that navigate the schools participating in the Open Choice program and what benefits or disadvantages are perceived as a result of their enrollment. Students responded to questionnaires, administrators from the Hartford Region Open Choice program also responded to short questionnaires. Supplemental interviews conducted by the Sheff Movement Coalition were analyzed. Administrators reported that student success could be attributed to the support services offered through the program. 80% of students surveyed reported that the race relations in their school were either neutral or positive. Students reported similar disadvantages such as length of travel time to school, and expressed the importance of taking advantage of the quality of education offered in the Open Choice schools they attended. The Open Choice program was designed to combat racial segregation in Connecticut, how are the students being affected?

## **Introduction**

Public schooling in Hartford has been a debate topic in the Greater Hartford community for quite some time. In the late 80's a group of parents from various towns came together and filed a lawsuit against the state of Connecticut in 1989 that highlighted educational inequality between the Hartford schools and the surrounding towns as unconstitutional. The *Sheff v. O'Neill* lawsuit has helped bring about changes to educational policy in Connecticut as a result. The *Sheff* ruling, in 1996 by the Supreme Court found that, "schools were racially, ethnically and economically isolated and that, as a result, Hartford public school students had not been provided a substantially equal educational opportunity under the state Constitution." The court also recognized that the school districts "unintentionally" contributed to racial segregation. "Importantly, this decision declared that the segregation was illegal even though there had been no deliberate segregation of students" (Poverty and Race Research Action Council, 2007) Parents who are cognizant of issues in education that affect whether or not their child will have access to quality education take advantage of alternative educational programs such as interdistrict magnet schools, interdistrict school choice programs, charter schools, private schools, and physically relocating or choosing their area of residence. They do this so that their child has the opportunity to be enrolled in an educational system that will benefit them long-term and allow them to flourish academically.

The underlying debate stems from the issue of racial segregation in schools. The *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954 combatted de jure segregation. This meant that schools were racially separated as a result of the law. This violated the fourteenth amendment rights of students. The *Sheff* ruling in 1996 combatted de facto segregation,

which is defined as factors outside of the law that contribute to racial segregation. The plaintiffs argued that there still was a racially isolated school system in Hartford, which resulted in unequal education between city schools and suburban schools. Alternative education programs such as magnet schools, and the Hartford Region Open Choice (HROC) program became the major remedies for desegregation in Hartford. This research looks at the benefits of the program and how it helps to improve the educational experience of students as well as the effects of the program on the students.

The significance of this study arises from the right of all students to have an equal access to education. Goldsmith (2009) eloquently states, “The latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century featured a powerful civil rights movement, dozens of successful legal challenges to segregation and the enactment of numerous laws to reduce segregation, but whites, blacks and Latinos still tend to live in different neighborhoods and attend different schools.” If the educational system in the various neighborhoods, not only in Hartford, but in the United States were equal then the argument could not be made that racial segregation is related to an unequal balance in socioeconomic status and poverty rates. Goldsmith continues on to quote that “Recent data show that 72 percent of blacks, 76 percent of Latinos, but only 11 percent of whites, attend schools where half or more of the students are not white (Frankenberg, Lee and Orfield 2003).” Not only are schools still racially segregated, neighborhoods are racially divided. “Residential segregation also remains high. Data from the 2000 U.S. Census indicate that 62 percent of blacks and 48 percent of Latinos would need to move to eradicate neighborhood segregation in metropolitan areas.” (Charles 2003) In Connecticut, the total number of students enrolled

in public school was 574,749, or 89.3 percent. (CSDE, 2006) the amount of students enrolled in the Open Choice program in 2010 was 1,300 (Borrero & Perrone, 2010).

The overarching dilemma is that students who are in schools that are a majority Latino, Black, Asian, or Native American are more likely than not to be in schools where the achievement gap is disproportionately distributed. For the typical student of each race [Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American], the percentage of white students in his or her school fell. (Frankenberg, Lee, Orfield, 2003) While the diversity in schools is generally increasing, the achievement gap has not significantly changed.

Education is an important vehicle for success in society today. In some professions the weight of a Bachelors degree does not hold the same weight that it did in years past. Consequently, there is a push for those currently in institutions of higher education to obtain more than one degree. If students are not able to access to higher education, then their chances to obtain a job that pays well decreases. Seeing that students will be facing the uncertainty of the economic system, it is important for students to have a firm educational foundation.

### **Research Questions**

Throughout all of my research on the Open Choice program, the *Sheff v. O'Neill* case and related topics, I found that I wanted to learn more about the student experiences and how the program affects their educational journey. My research questions are: What is the experience of the students of color that navigate these schools? What benefits or disadvantages do they perceive as a result of their involvement in the program?

## **Thesis**

I argue that students are doing well academically because of the support system they have through the Open Choice Program staff. The students who stay enrolled in this program value the educational opportunities offered in the various Open Choice schools.

## **Literature Review**

There is research done on the effectiveness of various school programs geared towards desegregation. Most of the research stems from organizations that investigate educational inequality, poverty, race and its intersection with educational attainment and quality of instruction.

The first body of literature discusses various types of desegregation programs that were designed to combat racial segregation in eight cities: Hartford, Boston, St. Louis, Rochester, East Palo Alto (California), Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and Indianapolis. The authors of this publication discuss the background of the various programs, the demographics, the importance of student access to the programs, and the shortcomings of the program designs, and compares the programs. One of these programs is the Open Choice program in Hartford. In this publication, the authors describe in detail research on the Project Concern program, which was renamed Project Choice, and is presently known as the Open Choice program. There were different waves of research done regarding the program and authors summarize the different waves of research and the implications for the students involved.

“...a 1970 report on student achievement among Project Concern students found that in reading, the randomly selected African American students who

transferred out of the Hartford Public Schools and enrolled in suburban schools had significantly higher test scores than students from similar backgrounds remaining in the urban schools. Furthermore, the longer these students remained in their suburban schools and the younger they were when they started, the better they did (see Frankenberg, 2007, p. 25).” (As cited in Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race & Justice, 2009)

This research done early on was especially compelling and could be a strong factor in what caused the program to continue on. This showed that the Hartford school system was unequal to that of suburban schools and when students enrolled in the program, they did significantly better than students who stayed in Hartford schools. Further on in the document, the researchers discuss findings from the newer wave of the program, where students now had to apply for a spot. The study reinforced the findings that the students from Hartford who participated in Project Choice did better in standardized testing, and tested higher than their counterparts in Hartford.

In addition, in a study done on 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in Project Choice, compared to students who applied to the program and did not enroll the research found that “students moving to suburban schools initially scored lower, but that their scores improved significantly as they spent more time in suburban schools where their reading test scores increased in contrast to the comparison group (Frankenberg, 2007).” (As cited in Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race & Justice, 2009) This is especially important to note because factors that could affect the initial low test scores could be that the students did not have strong support in the transition from one school system to another. Students who enroll in the HROC program face long commutes to and from

school on a daily basis, and for most of the students it is the first time that they are placed in a setting where they are the minority in their schools.

The publication continues on to discuss the long-term effects that the HROC program has on the students. They cited fairly recent studies (1980-1990) that attest to the fact that students who attend schools in the suburbs, as a result of this program have increased instances of going on to college, and higher educational attainment increases the chances of upward mobility in society. There were two groups in the study: one group was comprised of students that participated in the application process of the program but did not attend the suburban schools and the other group was comprised of students who graduated from the Project Concern program. The study found that:

“Black students who attended suburban schools through Project Concern were more likely to graduate from high school and complete more years of college than members of the control group who remained in the Hartford Public Schools... Crain et al. (1992) found that the Black Project Concern graduates had a greater sense of interracial comfort in predominantly White settings. The male Project Concern graduates were also less likely to have sensed discrimination during and after college and to have far fewer encounters with the police. Male and female graduates, on the other hand, were more likely to have closer contact with Whites, such as living in integrated neighborhoods or interacting with more White friends in college (Crain et al., 1992).” (As cited in Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race & Justice, 2009)

An additional study cited in the publication reported that “Black graduates of suburban predominantly White schools were far more likely to work in professions that had traditionally employed fewer Blacks....” (Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race & Justice, 2009) These various waves of studies on the early stages of the Open Choice program extend into the structural issue of racial inequality in education and society as a whole. “In response to questions about why racial inequality still exists, and why African Americans continue to lag in school performance and educational attainment.... Ogbu (1994) argues that the cause of the inequality is not class stratification, but racial stratification, which created the gap in the first place, and continues to maintain it to some degree.” (As cited in Epps, 1995)

The *Sheff v. O’Neill* lawsuit played a major role in how the educational system in Hartford is structured today. The premise of the lawsuit was that Hartford Public schools at the time was violating the constitutional right of students to receive an adequate education. This was seen in the racially isolated school system, which was unequal to suburban education. This case was unique because the final ruling was similar to *Brown v Board of Education* and mandated that steps were to be taken to correct the inequalities present in the education of Hartford students. The court ruled that the state was obligated to provide Connecticut's school children with equal education. The *Sheff vs. O’Neill* ruling found that, “schools were racially, ethnically and economically isolated and that, as a result, Hartford public school students had not been provided a substantially equal educational opportunity under the state constitution” (Connecticut Supreme Court, 1999).

In 2003 the settlement of the *Sheff* case put in place specific time deadlines and goals to be reached. There have been amendments made to the original settlement and

every few years the school system is evaluated to see if these goals have been met. The 2003 settlement paved the way for new magnet schools in the Hartford area, and school integration programs like Open Choice were expanded. “The current settlement agreement requires the state to ensure that at least 35% of Hartford minority children have access to racially integrated schools by 2010-11, rising to 41% by 2013 (racially integrated schools are defined as schools with at least 25% white enrollment).” (Sheff Movement Coalition, 2011) Goals set in relation to previous stipulations have not been met.

The problem now is the new educational initiatives are not reaching the amount of students they need to in order to be effective and reach the goal of equal education for students in Connecticut. Also, while there is more money being spent on the students in Hartford as compared to some other school districts, there are no notable gains in their test scores. In the Hartford Public School system there is a pressure for the teachers to bring up the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) scores of the students each year but the administration fails to address the underlying problems that contribute to the educational problems such as low parent involvement, stressful home environments, inadequate nutrition, and teacher disinterest in the students. Problems not only exist in the Hartford school system, but also with the Open Choice program. This program also has the unique attribute of having students immersed in a different environment than the students who attend various schools in Hartford. Problems that arise from this arrangement are: the students may feel isolated in an environment where the majority of the student body is not similar to them, racial tensions can exist, and their school day is longer than the most of students who attend school in Hartford.

The Open Choice program is not the only interdistrict school choice program in the country. Programs similar to this are the METCO (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity) program in Boston, and the Milwaukee choice program. Milwaukee has been using the school choice method since the 1970s. The race relations in the state in the 1960s were likened to apartheid. (Antrop-Gonzalez & Chapman, 2011) In one case: “African American workers needed a work visa to cross the 16<sup>th</sup> Street bridge to work on the south side of Milwaukee.” (Antrop-Gonzalez & Chapman, 2011) These conditions led to a lawsuit against the state in 1976, which found that these laws were creating racially segregated neighborhoods and schools. Not only is this related to the *Sheff v O’Neill* lawsuit, this legal action in Milwaukee led to the formation of Parent Choice programs, and mandatory busing of school students between districts.

In Boston, the METCO program is quite similar to the Open Choice program. The

**Figure 1:  
Program Attributes of Boston and Hartford City-suburban Desegregation Program**

	Boston	Hartford
Number of Participating Students	3,300	1,070
Participating suburban districts	38	27
Funding per student to suburban district <sup>37</sup>	\$3700	\$2000*
Year Began	1966	1966
Magnet schools/ Intra-city choice option	No	Yes
Transportation	Operated by METCO Inc. or by district; reimbursed by state	Operated by CREC; funded by state
Support services provided by service provider	Yes	Yes
Support services in suburban districts	METCO Director employed by each suburban district	On an as-needed basis
Publicity	Annual Lobby Day at State Legislature; coordinated with parents, alumni, suburban supporters	Limited advertising a few years ago by CREC
Research on Program	Through annual survey of districts; studies surveying parents and alumni done within last decade	Most research is several decades old

\* Raised to \$2500 in 2007-08

figure is taken from the Sheff Movement Coalition METCO publication.

As you can see above, the Open Choice program started at the same time, but there is a large difference in the amount of students that participate in each program. In addition to that, the student participation is a small fraction of the amount of children currently enrolled in school in the respective states. Areas in which the Open Choice program is lacking is that there is no recent research related to their program, and the community knowledge of the program is limited because of little publicity.

The educational system in Hartford is undergoing some significant changes. There are different academies within the public schools; there are various supplemental education programs, charter schools, magnet schools, and the Open Choice program itself. It is important for students in Hartford to be aware that success is not something that happens to a lucky few but an opportunity that is available to all students.

## **Methodology**

I used quantitative and qualitative methods in my research study. I handed out questionnaires to current students and alumni of the program. I sent structured interview questions to support staff and Hartford Region Open Choice program administrators. I then used supplemental interviews conducted by the Sheff Movement Coalition.<sup>1</sup> The administrators included the program director and administrative staff at the Open Choice Support Center, administrators at The Capitol Region Education Council/Hartford Region Open Choice program, and a school principal in one of the schools that participate in the

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<sup>1</sup> This video was compiled by the Sheff Movement Coalition from a number of interviews done at their 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of Project Concern and Project Choice. Some interviews were shortened, partially included, or omitted for the purpose of this DVD.

Open Choice program. Sixteen students responded to the questionnaire, one current student and 15 alumni. Questions included four open ended questions, four close ended questions and two Likert scale questions; one 5-levels and one 7-levels. The interview questionnaires had six open-ended questions. The interviews conducted by the Sheff Movement Coalition included two current students, nine alumni, two parents, and five administrators. For all of these interviews occupation titles were used as descriptors, and student questionnaires were assigned numbers.

### **Context**

In the early 1960's, around the time that the *Brown v. Board of Education* lawsuit had just been settled, there were various initiatives to improve the educational experience of minority students in the Hartford area. One of these initiatives was first known as Project Concern. The name was changed to the Hartford Region Open Choice program after the *Sheff v. O'Neill* lawsuit. The program was founded in 1966 and was run by the Hartford Board of Education. There was a small group of students that traveled to suburban towns who agreed to participate in the program. In Hartford, as seen in the *Sheff v. O'Neill* case, there had to be a state mandate in order for students in Hartford to have increased availability to integrated education. Test scores showed that the students in Hartford were performing much lower than their counterparts in the same grades across the state.

This program is designed to provide students with an educational opportunity equal to that of students in the surrounding suburban towns. This is done by transporting the students to the various schools for the school day and they return home after classes or extracurricular activities are complete.

A *Sheff* plaintiff explained the importance of integration, but the struggle that still exists today. "...Yet integration almost inevitably means more dysfunction and more sacrifices on the part of the people. Most of the people who are integrated who have to change in order to make integration happen tend to be minority people." (Leach, 2007) This is reflected in the students enrolled in the Open Choice program who travel from Hartford to attend school in a suburban town every day. The program has faced many challenges over the years and is still serving a decent percentage of students. "As of 2010, approximately 1,300 Greater Hartford Open Choice students attend school in 29 districts in more than 130 schools." (Greater Hartford Region Open Choice Program, 2011) For the 2010-11 school year, 556,184 (Connecticut Education Data and Research, 2011) students are enrolled in public schooling in Connecticut. However in comparison to the 21,587 students enrolled in Hartford Public Schools in the 2008-09 school year (Achieve Hartford, 2010) a large percentage of students still are not being reached by the program. This can be attributed to the funding available for the program, which affects the amount of students they can grant a spot each year. It may also be due to the fact that some parents are not even aware of all of these school options available to their child.

The Open Choice program is designed so that students in the city of Hartford can experience education in the suburbs where there are more resources. This program also has the unique attribute of having students immersed in a different environment than the students who attend various schools in Hartford. It has now been 22 years since *Sheff* was filed, and there have been incremental changes to education in Hartford since then as a solution to the ruling. Focusing specifically on the Open Choice program, according to *Sheff* movement coalition website, both legislative and court mandates have not been met

over the years. For example, one court mandate was that: “By the agreement’s 2007 end date, 30% of Hartford students should be enrolled in magnet schools and open choice programs that afford an educational experience of reduced racial and economic isolation.” (Sheff Movement Coalition, 2007) The report for this legislation was failure. There is not enough push from the government and its supporting agencies to reach these goals.

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

I argue that students have the tools to do well academically due in part to the support system they have through the Hartford Region Open Choice program staff. This is seen directly through my brief observations conducted at the Student Support Center, interviews conducted by the Sheff Movement Coalition and administrator questionnaire responses.

As some background information on the structure of the student support center; students arrive at the center from their various schools anywhere between the times of 3-4:30 pm. They take out their planners and show it to the tutor or teacher sitting at their assigned table and then take a plate of food to eat. The students get individualized attention from the staff and the intensive program helps students who are struggling in some areas academically improve. The staff is organized and the students stay on task and are invested in learning and doing well in their academic subjects.

According to responses that I received from the administrators, one noted that they have a personal connection with the students in the program and go beyond their job

description to help the students who are enrolled. “I visit the homes of the Hartford students during the summer. We need to reach out to the kids to make sure they have a great experience.” (HROC program School Principal) The average population of Hartford students in an Open Choice school is much less than the student body that resides in the town of the host school. That makes it more feasible for administrators (in this case the principal) to reach out to students in the program if he/she is concerned about the academic performance of the student.

In addition to the support of the administration and the Open Choice schools themselves, parent involvement and initiative on the part of the student is important to student success. “Parents who are a part of the child's educational team, students who are involved in extracurricular activities and who have good connections with school staff are the most successful.” (HROC program Administrator) When asked what aspects of the program they would attribute to student success, responses included “The encouragement and support students get from support staff.” (Support Center Staff Member), “The fact that the support specialist goes out to the schools in the various district[s] to check on behavior and academic progress [of the student].” (Support Center Staff Member), “The advocacy they receive from the support specialist.” (Support Center Staff Member) The Support Center serves 72 middle and high school students. Students from 18 districts are enrolled in the program attend the support center.

One of the alumni of the program discussed the importance of her guidance counselor in her college career and subsequent employment.

*“My guidance counselor who was very special to me ... I’m actually a guidance counselor now so – you know, that’s my profession and when I*

*think back on my experiences you know he really had a lot of influence over me at that time. I was a first generation college graduate so my mom didn't have a lot of experience about you know furthering my education beyond high school.... I'm sure that if it wasn't for him I probably would not have gone to college.”* (Sheff Movement Coalition, Alumni 1)

Just like the principal of one of the Open Choice schools, the guidance counselor took an additional interest in the well being of the student. Support from the staff at the Open Choice schools is indeed key for the students who are participating in the program, but is also important for students outside of the Open Choice program. If there is no support system set in place, then the students are less likely to remain in the program, and begin to devalue education. If large numbers of students are essentially ‘falling through the cracks’ then not only does it affect the type of jobs these individuals work in, it affects their chances for upward mobility.

One of the students interviewed by the Sheff Movement coalition expresses the marked difference in education between schooling in Hartford and their Open Choice school.

*“For starters just being exposed to a new group of people, a different way of doing things. One of the things that surprised me the most was having a class where the classwork was actually done and not being disrupted for interruptions and I think all the opportunities for learning, the different exposures we had, going places I probably would have never gone to in Hartford field trips, and just learning drastically and fundamentally new and different things I think it made*

*me a stronger more confident person...” (Sheff Movement Coalition,  
Current 1)*

In order to gain an understanding of some of the things that need improvement in the Open Choice program, I asked students what they thought some weaknesses of the program were. Responses from the students included: “The bus problem during the winter months, the after school bus problem...” (Student 10) “At the time I was in it we had to use the city bus they discontinued the school bus for high schoolers.” (Student 7) “Not enough Parent Participation.” (Student 14) “The distances between home and school” (Student 3) “The travel time it takes to get to the schools.” (Student 4) “The time you have to be up every morning to catch the bus, and that some students aren’t able to play sports at far out schools because transportation isn’t provided. Also the lack of parents and students who attended student activities or functions.” (Student 8) While there may not be any largely significant adjustments that can be made to the travel time to each Open Choice school, especially to districts that have long commutes, ironing out the logistics of busing still seems to be an area that needs improvement.

One respondent discussed the attrition rate of the Open Choice program. “I feel that the Choice Program needs to offer some type of incentive for people to not just enroll but to stay enrolled in the program. Many people that I’ve met from Hartford left the program by the time we were seniors.” (Student 12) This is a disadvantage to the program. Students, for various reasons do not stay for the entire span of their high school or elementary years in the program. Various factors play a role in this trend. The parents may not have the resources to keep their child enrolled, the student is not receptive to the

change in setting and has not made the transition well, or it may be that the program simply was not the right fit for the parent or the child.

A disadvantage that an administrator for the Student Support Center mentioned in conversation with me about the HROC and the students mentioned in their questionnaires and the surveys was the length of the day. Students who come to the support center often leave their homes as early as 5:30 am and do not return home until after the program ends, at 5:30 pm. In the surveys, some of the weaknesses that the students found with the program overall was with the buses. When asked about some of the weaknesses of the Open Choice program students responded: “The only weakness I’ve ever experienced is dealing with the buses. Sometimes they’re early so kids miss the bus and sometimes they’re late so kids are late to school.” (Student 1), “ Having to wake up so early to get on a school bus.” (Student 4), “Returning home late from school because of the district in which you attend school” (Student 6). Returning home late often means that the students cannot participate in various activities at home, in their neighborhoods.

I found that a majority of the students found that the strength of the program is having the opportunity to get a better educational experience. When asked about what they thought the strengths of the Open Choice program were responses included: “Diversity, opportunities to learn about different races and cultures.” (Student 6), “Gives children a better education than they would get in Hartford.” (Student 3), “The strengths of the Open Choice program is mainly how they open up opportunities for children from urban cities, the education from suburban towns. It gives children a chance at bettering their knowledge elsewhere before going to college.” (Student 1) Two respondents used similar phrases: “The opportunity to learn with students from different backgrounds.”

(Student 2) “The strengths are that they give you the chance to meet others with different backgrounds and a chance to go to a different place that you would not have though[t] of going to.” (Student 7) Words and phrases that also came up frequently in the student responses included ‘diversity’, ‘a good/better education’, meeting different races, exposure to different cultures. The students are seeing and realizing the benefits firsthand of attending school in a racially diverse setting.

*“It offers you a different point of learning perspective in and out of the classroom. The in class education was good but not as valuable as the social aspect of the Choice Program. I became a minority in this new school system and realized that the world is bigger than what I knew. I've made many new friends of a different skin color than mine and I also learned and saw many new things that I would not have if I stayed in the urban community for school.”* (Student 12)

Research has argued that students who are enrolled in these school desegregation programs are prone to increased racial discrimination. What was an interesting revelation in my research was that a majority of the students did not perceive the race relations in their various Open Choice schools as negative. 3/15, or 20% of the respondents. When asked what the race relations were like in their Open Choice school, responded negatively. Responses that were neutral or positive comprised 12/15, or 80% of students. These responses included “They held several meetings in regards to attempting to bring together the many different cultures at the school.” (Student 4) “My Open Choice [school] was more diverse than other districts. There were never any race issues that hindered me from getting my education.” (Student 10) “There weren’t any problems with

my race at the Open Choice school I attended.” (Student 12) These responses are interesting to note, they reinforce the studies done on the early stages of the Open Choice program, which found that students who graduated from the program

### **Conclusion**

I conclude that the advantages of the program are that students receive individualized attention from the staff, which contributes to their academic achievement. The length of the school day and transportation problems are aspects of the program that students cite as disadvantages as a result of their enrollment in the program. However, the overall experience of attending one of the HROC schools was beneficial for their academic future. The students who stay enrolled in this program value the educational opportunities offered in the various Open Choice schools. In essence, the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. I propose that additional research needs to be done on the HROC program that looks at parent involvement, the implications that the program has on the home life of the students who participate, and how to expand on the support systems available to students not only for the Hartford Region Open Choice program, but for students who are enrolled in the Hartford Public School system.

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