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Parental Motivations for Magnet School Choice

A Qualitative Study in Hartford, CT

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Introduction

Magnet schools have continued to rise in popularity within the United States over the past decade for a variety of reasons. Besides the fact that some magnet schools are seen as the premier institutions which increase educational opportunities for its' students, many families have become somewhat interested in the range of curricular focus' that are afforded to students within these specialized schools (e.g. college preparatory, multiple intelligences, math and science, etc.). Furthermore, some magnet schools are classified as "a private school curriculum at a public school price,"¹ which speaks to parents who are interested in providing the best possible education for their children. This quote is a prime example of how magnet schools are presented to everyday families, and gives the perception that magnet schools are an example of free private schools. Overall, in most cities nationwide, the prospects of sending a child to a public school with a specialized curriculum while quite possibly, ensuring their future attainment of an advanced degree, continues to make a magnet school education a premium choice for families. The same is true in the city of Hartford, CT which has continued to create (and subsequently convert old neighborhood schools into) magnet schools to service the needs of both urban and suburban families.

The creation of inter-district magnets came in the form of a mandated response to an educational desegregation court case entitled *Sheff vs. O'Neill (1989)*. *Sheff* plaintiffs found that within the "majority-minority" urban population in Hartford, urban students were segregated from their suburban and therefore white counterparts, which further enhanced and enforced unequal educational opportunities for Hartford minority students while violating the state constitution. It was rare that predominately white families from wealthy suburban areas sent

¹ Greater Hartford Classical Magnet School Brochure, pp.5.

their children into the city of Hartford for their primary and secondary education; it was a known fact that if the former could not attend one of the many private and independent schools, they could attend a suburban public school which could provide similar academic opportunities. However, Hartford residents were unable to provide the same opportunities for their children. In 1996, the State Supreme Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, but did not provide a solution for this form of educational isolation. In 2003, the state enacted three goals whose proposed outcome stated that “By June 2007, at 30% of the public school minority students residing in Hartford will have an educational experience with reduced isolation...”² The first of the three goals, an increased amount of magnet schools in the metropolitan Hartford area, was meant to attract both urban students and suburban students previously isolated before the *Sheff* case.

Since the decision in the mid 1990s, 19 inter-district magnet schools have been opened in response to the *Sheff* case. Currently, a total of 22 inter-district magnet schools operate in the Hartford metropolitan area providing a variety of curricular focus’ ranging in the arts and sciences, sports and medical sciences, and an environmental science middle school. It is evident that within the city itself, many families *chose* magnet schools for their children because of the increased amount that have come into existence over the past decade; and while many families are unsure of the prospects of “public schools within the city of Hartford,” some have found that magnet schools have afforded their children with more opportunities. With the rise in popularity of magnet schools within the Hartford area, for my research project I chose to conduct a qualitative study on four different neighborhood school zones in the city of Hartford analyzing why families chose (or did not choose) to apply to magnet schools. While recognizing that in this metropolitan area, applying to magnet schools is sometimes second nature to families, it is

² Dougherty, J. et. Al. *Missing the Goal: A Visual Guide to Sheff vs. O’Neill School Desegregation*, pp. 3.

also important to understand why families do not choose to apply to magnet schools. Taking into account my interests in a descriptive study which could be very telling of magnet school choice in Hartford, my research question became: *How does parental rationale on magnet school choice differ between high versus low rate neighborhoods and white versus non-white parents in Hartford?*

Prior to conducting interviews within the Hartford area, I expected to find big differences in magnet school choice between high and low rate neighborhoods. However, parent responses don't differ between neighborhoods, but they do differ between race. In both high and low application rate neighborhoods, parents cited similar rational for deciding to apply or not apply to magnet schools. Choosers, meaning those parents who applied to magnet schools for the 2006-2007 academic year, in both high and low rate neighborhoods had similar pull factor motivations. Non-choosers in both high and low rate neighborhoods, those who did not apply to magnet schools, expressed similar satisfaction towards their child's current school, and did not apply elsewhere. Overall, despite the variations in magnet school applications in Hartford, there is uniformity within the chooser and non-chooser parents, regardless of where the neighborhood school zone is located. While some white families flatly rejected Hartford public schools, non-white families did not follow this pattern. Close to half of African American respondents constructively criticized their child's neighborhood schools.

Literature Review

While conducting my research I found that there is a plethora of literature on domestic school choice which cites the variety of schooling options afforded to children and their families throughout primary and secondary education. Some authors cited the ways that school choice, and its efforts to increase integration within most public schools, has changed since its first implementation after national desegregation movements like *Brown vs. Board of Education*. During the mid 20th century, school voucher and choice programs helped to keep segregation in place. It was not until the 1970s when school choice and more specifically magnet school choice were associated with efforts to integrate public schools; these specialized schools were promoted to “entice white families to enroll their children in high minority populations towards inner city schools while providing choice as a politically useful tool.”³ The latter belief about magnet schools is what is widely promoted by many today, and especially within the context of metropolitan Hartford, where many suburban white families enroll their children in urban magnet schools (predominately those schools with good reputations).

Some authors go into great detail about their viewpoints and analysis from research on who selects magnet schools, and how this choice varies in respect to social class, race, and information on magnet schools. Peter Cookson Jr. defines magnet schools that “offer specialized programs, often deliberately designed and located so as to attract students to otherwise unpopular areas or schools—often created to promote racial balance.”⁴ He summarized his findings from

³ Jeffery Henig *Rethinking School Choice: Limits of the Market Metaphor*, pp. 101.

⁴ Peter Cookson Jr. *School Choice: The struggle for the soul of American education*, pp. 15.

magnet school choice while he believes that different parents are more (or less) likely to take advantage of school options for their children. He states:

- (1) Educated parents are more likely to take advantage of choice than less educated parents.
- (2) Minority families are more likely to exercise choice than white families.
- (3) Access to information is critical if choice is not to produce an increasingly stratified school system⁵

In conducting my research and speaking with families from a variety of socio-economic, and racial backgrounds I found these examples to be persistent with families who chose to apply to magnet schools. Cookson's second claim relating to minority families helps to illuminate the fact that magnet schools, in actuality, tend to attract people of color more frequently than white families which in my study also proved to be factual. It makes one question whether these specialized schools are really attracting families equally from both a socio-economic and racial standpoint, while reducing educational isolation..

Qualitative studies on magnet schools have varied in their intent and findings. Some research has spoken to the ways that magnet school choice has increased social stratification in educational opportunities and outcomes. A study in particular conducted by professors and doctoral students at the University of Michigan and the University of Rochester focuses on school choice in Detroit, Michigan and links, "parents interests in the school exit option more with the disappointment or dissatisfaction with one's current school."⁶ This *finding* in particular

⁵ Ibid, pp. 93.

⁶ Croninger, Lee, and Smith *Parental Choice of Schools and Social Stratification in Education: The Paradox of Education*, pp. 436-437.

was different from my findings in Hartford, similarly with the understanding that my research was not centered on studying whether magnet schools reinforce social stratifications. Similarly to desegregation efforts in metropolitan Hartford, these authors cited white flight and increased segregation within the city itself as the primary reason why magnet schools have received increased attention and rise in popularity.⁷ One of the forms of social stratification stated by these researchers was that if choice was available to a variety of families, many people would not take advantage in these educational options. In contrast to the previous portion of literature, this poignant belief raises the possibility that it is not that magnet schools are not properly attracting all families equally, and that families are being pushed away from their child's current school. In some instances, it could simply mean that some families do not opt to apply to magnet schools for their children for personal reasons.

Another urban qualitative study conducted by Claire Smrekar and Ellen Goldring examines school choice as a whole, fully encompassing magnet schools, charter schools, and other public schooling entities. Their study, which was conducted in St. Louis and Cincinnati, both cities of which have attempted reducing socio-economic and racial isolation primarily between urban and suburban families. The study itself compares interviews from parents and teachers, who have children enrolled in or teach in either magnet or non-magnet schools. The primary reasons why parents in both urban districts chose to apply to magnet schools for their children was due to three different factors: academic reputation, teaching style, and transportation as a form of convenience for parents.⁸ Smrekar and Goldring's study also found that parents were dissatisfied with their child's current school which is similar to the previous

⁷ Ibid, pp. 440.

⁸ Claire Smrekar and Ellen Goldring *School Choice in Urban America*, pp. 32.

study which cites push factors for the primary reason why families decided to apply to magnet schools.⁹

How does my study differ?

In considering all of the studies previously mentioned, my study tends to differ in a variety of ways. First and foremost, I am analyzing whether parent responses are different between locations within Hartford, CT. Since there is such a quantitative variation in application rates for magnet schools within the city, I wanted to examine if there were differences in the ways that parents spoke about magnet schools across distinctive neighborhood school zones. Since the increase in popularity of magnet schools within the Hartford area, I decided to focus specifically on this form of school choice as opposed to other forms (e.g. charter schools). I also chose not to focus on the outcomes of magnet school choice, and whether the process itself reinforces stratifications between urban and suburban communities.

Methodology

Jesse Wanzer, my colleague in the Educational Studies department, conducted a quantitative study on which parents apply to magnet schools in Hartford. His study entitled, “*Magnet Schools in Hartford: The Intersection of Race and School Choice among Applicants*,” questions where HPS elementary magnet school applicants reside, and whether these school applications are directly reflective of the racial makeup of the urban community. He conducts this study using ArcGIS, an electronic program which uses computer software to translate addresses and other residency information into intricate mapping; this software gives a visual

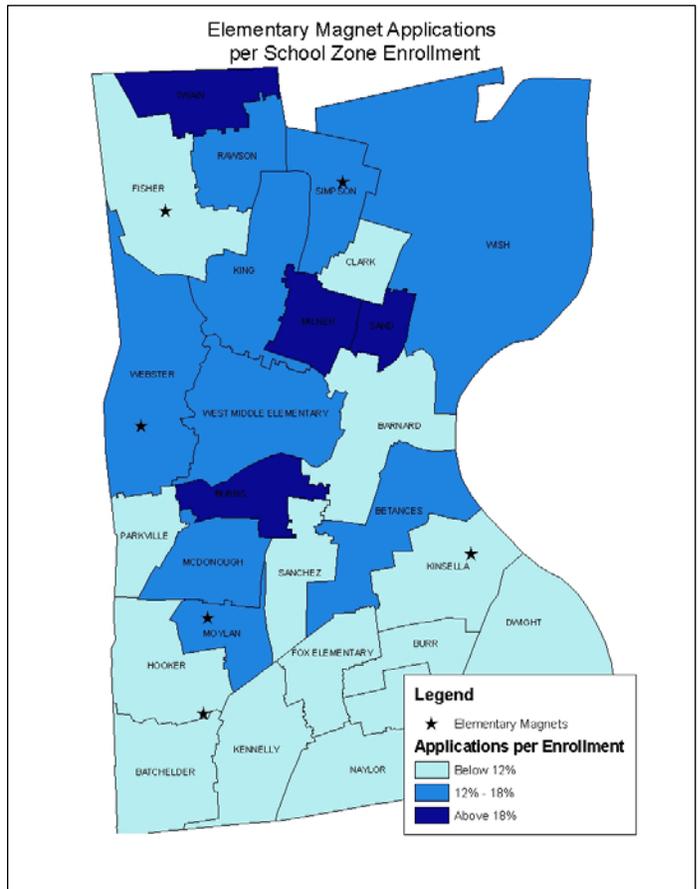
⁹ Ibid, pp.

representation of residential information (in this case the percentage of Hartford Public School [HPS] magnet school applications for one academic year). His study

does not involve an analysis of parental opinions on why they chose schools for their children, and does not assess whether this is true (or not true) for *a large number* of families. While he examines the visual representations of neighborhood district school zones on a physical level and the number of applicants per neighborhood school zone, I decided to give more insight into Hartford parental rationale on their motivations for applying to magnet schools.

Map #1 entitled, “Elementary Magnet Applications per School Enrollment,”

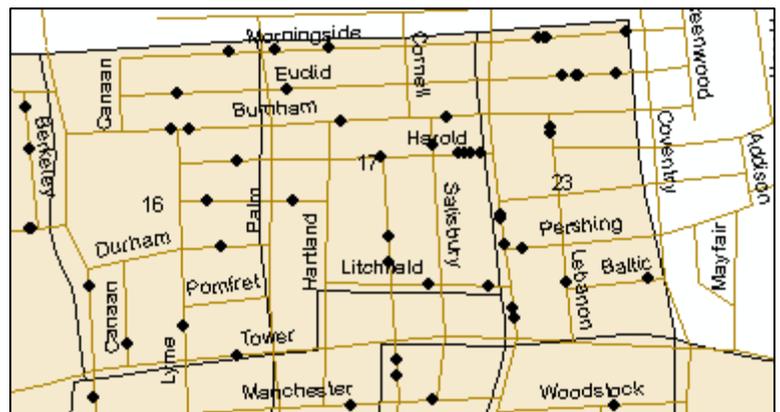
displays the percentages of magnet school applicants for all neighborhood school zones in Hartford. The quantitative data helps to classify different regions primarily as those with “high application rates,” or “low application rates” (which I will call high- and low- rate neighborhoods) in all Hartford school zones. It displays that most neighborhood school zones in this region have different magnet school application rates. In understanding the importance of allowing parents to express their opinions about how they determine schooling options for their children, I found that it would be the most interesting to compare families in both high- and low-rate neighborhoods. My qualitative study will shed insight into whether these choice sets are



identical; if the high- and low- rate neighborhood motivations and rationale are completely opposite; if both sets of school zones are more alike than different; or if there are more differences than similarities. I decided to conduct door-to-door interviews with parents in four different neighborhood school zones, both high (Twain and Sand) and low- rate neighborhoods (Naylor and Burr), asking parental feedback on why they chose to apply, or not apply to magnet schools for their children.

Understanding that the neighborhood school zones themselves are larger entities than those depicted in graphs, I believed it to be most important to target regions within these neighborhood school zones with the highest amount of magnet school applications for the 2006-2007 school year. These regions, deemed “census block groups,” examined neighborhood

school zones further by locating which areas had the most applications on a street level; this typically included four to five city blocks. It allows for interviewers, like myself, to examine the highest amounts of parents who applied to magnet



schools in both high and low rate neighborhoods. It helps to insure that I will have access to those families, particularly within low rate areas who decided to apply to magnet schools.

Prior to creating the interview guide, and assessing the types of families that I would possibly interact with in this qualitative study, I assumed that many of these parents would be those who *did not* apply to magnet schools for the previous school year. I therefore created an interview guide designed for both types of parents I came across: those who chose to apply to magnet schools, and those who did not apply for the 2006-2007 academic year. A previous

interview study that asked why parents chose schools for their children at a variety of choice fairs (including private and charter schools) was conducted in Hartford during January 2007, I found that the former study helped to provide similar types of questions that I raised in my study about parental motivations, rationale, and spoke to parents' perceptions of "public schools" within Hartford.¹⁰

My interview guide begins by asking demographic questions such as where the students are currently attending school, and proceeds with whether or not the parents chose to apply to magnet schools for their child. If the parent answered *yes*, they are subsequently asked why they chose the schools they applied to (while assuming that some schools possessed a better reputation than others), and the prospects of convenience, curriculum taught at the magnet school, and dissatisfaction of the child's current school. If the parent answered *no*, they were asked a series of questions which asked why they did not apply to magnet schools (some of whom stated they had not even heard of them before), whether magnet schools were convenient for them, and if they were satisfied with their current school. The interview continues by asking the parents how they heard about magnet schools (the former) or whether they received information about magnet schools at all (the latter). The most intriguing question was towards the end of the interview which asked parents perceptions of the neighborhood elementary school in their immediate school zone, which assessed what informed their opinions about neighborhood schools, and if they perceived (or did not perceive) differences in educational outcomes differently in neighborhood schools as opposed to magnet schools.

¹⁰ EDUC 309:Race, Class and Educational Policy seminar, *Interview Guide* Spring 2007.

In total, my colleagues and I collected 36 interviews from the four distinct neighborhood school zones. We collected 6 interviews from Twain, 6 interviews from Sand, 15 from Naylor, and 9 from Burr. There were approximately 12 interviews collected from the high rate neighborhoods and 24 interviews collected from the low rate neighborhoods. The participants' children ranged from grades from Pre-K to 12th grade, some students have enrolled in elementary, middle, and high school magnet schools. For instance, 31 out of 36 interviewed parents were underrepresented people of color within the city of Hartford; while, 21 of the 36 parent respondents possessed a high school diploma or below. Overall, 12 choosers applied to magnet schools during the 2006-2007 academic year while 21 non-choosers had reasons to consider the child's current school or other possible educational opportunities; the "other" category encompassed 3 interviews conducted whereby parents chose to apply to magnet schools prior to the 2006-2007 academic year.

Data and Analysis

Choosers

Choosers had similar pull factor motivations in both high-and low-rate neighborhoods.

Of the parents interviewed in the four neighborhood zones, 12 parents applied to magnet schools. Parents who applied to magnet schools within the 2006-2007 school year chose magnet schools for similar motivations. These parents' primary reason for applying to magnet schools was due to pull factor rationale. For instance, 5 out of 7 families who chose in lower rate neighborhoods, and 3 out of 5 choosers in high- rate neighborhoods cited their reasons for taking interest in magnet schools was due to a pull towards the schools themselves. "Pull" motivations is a term used to explain why families are attracted to certain schools. On the contrary, these parents did

not cite “push” factor motivations for their reasons for choosing magnet schools. “Push” motivations occurs due to a parents’ (or child’s) dissatisfaction with their current school. Most choosing parents citing their main reason for applying to magnet schools was due to educational opportunities and reputation of the magnet school. For example, one parent who applied to Hartford Magnet Middle School the previous academic year stated, “My niece goes there and it has a good reputation...”(Naylor: Heather #6). These two categories within themselves are NOT mutually exclusive, as rationale for choosing a school can be due to a combination of both, or none at all.

Families who chose also cited additional reasons as to why they applied to magnet schools for their children. While parents gave a wide variety of answers as to why they would like to send their child to a magnet school, the categories that will be used in the following will be in respect to: educational opportunity and reputation. In coding for the strongest motivations from families who chose to apply to magnet schools for their children, 3 out of 5 in the high rate neighborhoods and 4 out of 7 in the low rate neighborhoods stated they applied due to educational opportunities that magnet schools could provide for their children. One parent compared the education that her children would have received in their neighborhood high school; she stated, “Otherwise, they would have to go to Bulkeley and these [magnet schools] are much better schools” (Naylor: Heather #23).

Some choosing families in both high- and low- rate neighborhoods’ children were currently enrolled in neighborhood schools. Of those choosing families in both high- and low- rate neighborhoods, 8 out of 12 parents had children that were currently enrolled in neighborhood schools as opposed to 4 out of 12 who were enrolled in choice schools, both private and public schools. In the high-rate neighborhoods, 2 out of 12 families were enrolled in

neighborhood schools. In low rate neighborhoods, 6 out of 12 families had children enrolled in neighborhood schools and 1 family with a child enrolled in a choice school. Since majority of the choosing families have children who are currently enrolled in neighborhood schools, and when asked why they chose to apply to magnet schools they did so due to similar pull factor motivations. This claim supports this notion because choosing parents in both high and low rate neighborhoods were not necessarily dissatisfied with their current schools, and in this case their neighborhood schools, but they were interested in what magnet schools could offer their children. For example, when asked if she was dissatisfied with her child's current school, which also happened to be their neighborhood school, Naylor Elementary, one parent stated, "Naylor is a good school. But if you can get your child into a magnet school as opposed to Naylor than..." (Naylor: Heather #6). This comment in particular signals parents' interests in wanting to provide their children with the best educational opportunities they can at magnet schools not citing "push" factors in respect to their child's current school.

While interviewing parents and examining their perspectives on magnet school choice, unknowingly some families began to construct a hierarchy of schooling options for their children. In respect to those choosing families, many of whom had few negative comments about their child's current school, believed that if they could get into magnet schools, it would provide better opportunities for their children. It seems as though most "choosing" families that I had the opportunity to speak with first spoke to their perceptions of their child's neighborhood schools, and then the opportunities afforded at other choice schools; primarily those offered at magnet schools. Many parents constructed their hierarchy in respect to the ways they viewed their child's education: rising from neighborhood schools, to magnet schools, which would ultimately lead to higher education opportunities for their children.

Non-Choosers

Non-choosers had similar levels of satisfaction with their child's current school in both high- and low- rate neighborhoods. For instance, 21 out of 36 parents interviewed decided not to apply to magnet schools for their children. The overarching reason why non-choosing parents decided not to apply to magnet schools for their children in both high and low rate neighborhoods was due to satisfaction with their child's current school. For example, 4 out of 5 non-choosers in the high- rate neighborhoods were satisfied with their child's current school. 12 out of 16 non-choosers in the low rate neighborhoods were also satisfied with their current school; however, these beliefs are even more emphasized when an overwhelming amount of parents expressed positive opinions about the neighborhood schools within their areas. In fact, many parents with whom I spoke had an overwhelmingly positive perception of schools like Naylor Elementary School, located within a low- rate neighborhood. These comments were restated by a variety of parents whose perceptions of Naylor (even if their child had not attended the school itself) were regarded as one of the better public schools who was trying their best to provide its' students with the best education they could. This detail signals that those parents who have sent their children to a school like Naylor, in that particular school district, are seemingly less likely to apply to magnet schools due to their satisfaction with their neighborhood school.

Some non-choosing parents in both high- and low- rate neighborhoods stated that they didn't apply to magnet schools due to lack of information about the schools themselves. For instance, 1 out of 5 parents in the high rate neighborhoods, and 4 out of 16 parents in the low rate neighborhoods reflected this opinion. This poignant piece of information signals that the possible reason why these individuals chose not to apply to magnet schools was due to the fact

that they had never heard of these schools, or never received any information about them as possible options for their children. This finding could be the contributing factor as to how certain neighborhoods are deemed as low rate neighborhoods. It could possibly be that certain schools do not examine the population of their student body and its location within the city of Hartford. It becomes a question of whether these same families who did not have access to magnet school information would choose to apply to magnet schools, if they were better informed like choosing families.

Some non-choosers in both high and low rate neighborhoods had their children enrolled in non-neighborhood schools. Non-neighborhood schools can encompass a variety of different types of schooling for children, but most notably within this study it is attributed to students enrolled in both urban and suburban public and private schools. In high- rate neighborhoods, 5 out of 21 non-choosers had children enrolled in non-neighborhood schools as opposed to 0 out of 21 non-choosers whose child was enrolled in a neighborhood school. In low- rate neighborhoods, 8 out of 21 non-choosers had children enrolled in non- neighborhood schools. For instance, when asked why they did not consider a magnet school for their children, one parent responded by saying, “[I did not apply] Because I have them in the CREC program. They go to good schools” (Naylor: Heather, #10). The parent was referring to her children’s enrollment in the Capitol Region Educational Council (CREC), a program which allows students to attend “choice” schools (non-neighborhood schools) within or outside the city of Hartford. Due to her children’s participation in this program, and her satisfaction with their current school, there was no need for her to apply to magnet schools for the previous academic year. The importance of this claim to the study is due to the fact that some non-choosing parents are not enrolling their children in their neighborhood schools, but are sending their children to other

“choice” schools. In some respects this could quite possibly signal dissatisfaction for neighborhood schools, especially within the high rate neighborhoods, and in turn cause increased enrollment in choice schools in both urban and suburban areas in metropolitan Hartford. This claim is also related to the thesis which states that the primary reason why non-choosing parents did not apply to magnet schools was due to satisfaction with their current schools. In this case, satisfaction with their child’s current school did not necessarily mean that their child was currently enrolled in their neighborhood school.

White Parents vs. Non-White Parents

Three out of five Caucasian parents in low rate neighborhoods either previously enrolled or have their children currently enrolled in private schools. In total, 4 out of 5 of white interviewees were non-choosers, all of whom were located in low- rate neighborhoods. Prior to conducting the interviews, I was very interested in the ways that white families would speak to their children’s education and express their viewpoints on the Hartford Public School System. I was further intrigued by their notions about schools in Hartford while analyzing the language used to express opinions about both public and magnet schools in the city. For example, the sole white “choosing” parent expressed her rationale for selecting magnet schools because, “they would have to go to Bulkeley (her neighborhood high school) and these [magnet schools] are much better schools.” When this same parent was asked if she would ever consider private schools for her children, she stated, “Yes, they used to go to private school” (Naylor: Heather # 23). The other two white parents, who had children currently enrolled in private schools, were much more candid in their responses than the aforementioned. When asked why she decided not

to apply to magnet schools for the previous academic year, one white parent stated, “They [her children] have always had a Catholic school education.”

Some white families flatly rejected Hartford public schools, let alone urban magnet schools. For example, 2 out of 5 parents reflected this statement. I asked the previous parent whether or not she disliked the curriculum at magnet schools, where she responded by saying, “Never thought of it. I just knew I was never sending them to Hartford schools” (Naylor: Heather #21). This parental rationale for not choosing magnet schools shows that some white parents (the other two white parents within the study were Bosnian immigrants) will not consider sending their children to magnet schools because it fits under the scope of the Hartford public school system. For those parents who are aware of the distinctions that exist between Hartford Public Schools and magnet schools (many of which are public schools located within the city of Hartford), some families will not apply to magnet schools because of the reputation that Hartford schools has maintained over time. This same belief is reflected with one white parent whose child was considering applying to a magnet school, located in a predominately Hispanic and African American neighborhood. This parent did not want to send her child to that school because, “I’m not crazy about the location of magnet schools. [it] would have been nice if for example there is one in the Flatbush area, and my daughter wants to go there, but I would have put the school here, and bused those kids here, instead of us going into that kind of neighborhood” (Naylor: Heather #8).

This not only reflects the reason why she would not send her child to a magnet school due to its’ location, but it also speaks to the prospect of busing “those” kids here, instead of her having to travel to the neighborhood which she dislikes. In respect to de-segregation efforts, this statement in itself is reflective of the attitudes that many privileged parents had when questioned

why they would not send their children to urban schools; as long as the “better” schools are located in an area that is “safe” and convenient for white families, they may consider it. However, in contrast, if it is located within an area that is “majority-minority,” it is an underlying fact that many families may not send their families to these schools. All the while magnet schools are rising in popularity amongst Hartford residents; this claim shows that some white parents still have reservations in respect to why they will not apply to urban public schools, let alone Hartford magnet schools.

In respect to non-white families, 0 out of the 31 non-white participants stated that they wouldn't consider Hartford public schools or urban magnet schools for their children. For example, one Hispanic parent who was questioned whether or not she would ever consider applying to a magnet school for a child stated, “Of course...they are better than the public schools” (Burr: Heather #11). This statement is reflective of the reality for many families, especially people of color within the city of Hartford. First and foremost, some families may not be able to afford to provide their children with the best possible education money can buy (i.e. a private school education). With this statement being made, it is obvious why parents would opt to provide their children with the best possible opportunities available to their children, but within a monetary bracket that was in fact affordable: free of charge. In this respect, many non-white families are only able to consider public school choice for their children, and in turn many options such as the prospects of magnet school choice help to enforce the notion that non-white families will be able to provide their children with educational opportunities while paying for their child's elementary, middle and secondary schooling. The statement made by the two white respondents within the study about not considering Hartford public schools as an option for their children is in many ways not an option for non-white families; under most circumstances, many

non-white families can only consider public schools for their children, and especially magnet schools which have the reputation of providing its' students with the most "profitable" public school education.

Close to half of African-American respondents tended to constructively criticize neighborhood school. While speaking about magnet school choice many voiced that they only wanted the best educational opportunities for their children. For instance, 6 out of 14 African American families spoke about neighborhood schools in this fashion. When questioned by one interviewer her perceptions of her child's neighborhood school, the parent stated, "There isn't much that they do with them to make them really think and focus. So, I'm just trying to find something that will challenge them more and get better grades and you know" (Sand: Cintli #1). Other African American parents had similar perceptions about their child's neighborhood school; many families gave suggestions on ways that these schools can provide better services to their students, as opposed to flat out rejecting these schools as possible sites of instruction for their child. I found this claim to be particularly interesting because it showed that some black families spoke of educational options for their children critically, and expressed ways that neighborhood schools could provide more educational opportunities for their students, and other more technical suggestions for these public schools. For those black families who applied to magnet schools within the previous academic year, they cited that the primary reason why they applied was because they wanted the best opportunities for their child. If those children were currently enrolled in neighborhood schools, and when asked if they were dissatisfied with their child's current school, these black respondents would say "No," but continue on citing ways that the neighborhood school could improve.

Additional Findings

In low- rate neighborhoods, 13 out of 24 parents had a positive perception of the neighborhood schools within the community; In high- rate neighborhoods, 1/3 of families possessed negative viewpoints of their child's neighborhood schools. While collecting data in the lower choosing zones, some families expressed satisfaction with their neighborhood schools that are located within the city. Occasionally, parents would state that these schools are doing, “the best they can” and one interviewee even stated that it is not the fault of the teachers for the state of Hartford public schools, but it is the behavior of the students. When questioned about his satisfaction with Naylor, one interviewee simply stated, “I haven’t run into any problems yet” (Naylor: Heather #14).

In respect to higher rate neighborhoods, families regarded their neighborhood schools as institutions which “need to be better.” One respondent continued her statements by saying, “They [neighborhood schools] need better teaching/They don’t have discipline, all things need to be changed back to the way it [?] was” (Twain: Heather #4). Another parent in the Sand high-rate neighborhood spoke to how they felt about their elementary neighborhood school and stated, “I don’t feel like they [Sand] challenge them enough/So I’m just trying to find something that will challenge them more and get better grades...” The two comparisons of reasons why parents value neighborhood schools differently varies between high and low rate neighborhoods, however these distinctions speak to whether or not different neighborhood schools are more valued than others, and whether this contributes to why certain families tend to apply to magnet schools, while others willingly attend their neighborhood schools.

Limitations and Further Study

The initial goal of this study was to conduct 50 interviews with parents from the city of Hartford. However, due to time constraints and lack of maintenance, not only was I unable to reach this goal, I also failed to keep track of the amounts of interviews collected from both high- and low-rate neighborhoods. If a future comparative qualitative study was to take place, the data collection and further analysis would greatly benefit from an “equalized” data pool. While understanding that the collection was primarily random, I was unable to determine the amount of choosers and non-choosers I would have on any given day; in turn, this made the analysis of choosers for example that much more difficult since I only had a small portion to work with.

One topic that could possibly be pursued further as a qualitative study is a possible comparative examination of white family’s reasons why they choose to apply to magnet schools for their children (parents who live in Hartford and in surrounding suburbs). A researcher may find that suburban families apply to magnet schools for different reasons other than why urban white parents choose to do so. I also found that my most interesting conversations came after the interview was completed and I had the opportunity to speak with children about their experiences in their schools and how they viewed their educational opportunities compared to other students. Another interesting study would be to interview students within Hartford public schools. I found that many children were candid in their viewpoints of Hartford public schools, while critiquing the school systems on both macro and micro levels.

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- The Greater Hartford Classical Magnet School Brochure

Appendix

Hello, my name is _____ from Trinity College, would you be willing to participate in a two minute interview about your children's school choice right now? Your participation is completely voluntary, and anonymous. (If yes) Is it okay to tape record you?

1. Do you have school aged children?
 - a. (If the answer is NO, say thank you and GODDBYE!)
2. What are their current grades?
3. What schools are the attending?
 - a. Is it a neighborhood school? Magnet? Private? Parochial? Suburban Project Choice?
4. Last spring, did your child apply to any magnet schools?
- 5A. Which magnet schools did your child apply to?
 - Why are you interested in those magnet schools for your child?
 - Like Curriculum?
 - Convenience?
 - Dissatisfaction with current school?
- 5B. Why didn't you consider applying to magnet schools?
 - Dislike curriculum?
 - Inconvenience?
 - Satisfaction with current school?
- 6A. How did you learn about magnet schools?
- 6B. Did you receive information about magnet schools?
7. What are your perceptions of the neighborhood school that your child attends (or would have attended)?
8. Would you consider applying to private/parochial schools? Why or why not?

Demographics

Children

male/female _____

child's race or ethnicity _____

how much schooling have you (parent/guardian) completed?

- Some h.s.,
- h.s. diploma,
- some college,
- college degree,
- graduate degree

FOR INTERVIEWER ONLY

Interviewer Name _____ Interview Number ___ Neighborhood Zone _____

Address _____

Table #1: Neighborhoods

High Rate Neighborhoods	Low Rate Neighborhoods
Twain	Burr
SAND	Naylor

Table #2: Total Interviews

	Total Interviews
Twain	6
SAND	6
Burr	9
Naylor	15
Total Interviews	36

Table #3: Selections by Neighborhood

	Choosers	Non-Choosers
High Rate Neighborhoods (Twain and Sand)	5 (42%)	5 (24%)
Low Rate Neighborhoods (Naylor and Burr)	7 (58%)	16 (76%)
Other	0	3
Totals	12 (100%)	21(100%)

