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Connecticut Pre-K Policy, Parental Choice, and the Trinity College Community Child Center

Manny Rodriguez '20

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Purpose

The Trinity College Community Child Center (TC4) has been a traditional full-day childcare program located in Hartford, Connecticut since 1985. The landmark 1996 Sheff v. O'Neill decision was aimed at substantially integrating students from urban and suburban areas and called for the creation of new magnet schools in hopes of meeting specific enrollment goals. To start integration with young children, Connecticut began to offer more magnet preschools to attract children from cities and suburbs with no tuition fees for parents. As a result, TC4 and similar traditional centers experienced more competition from magnet schools. This research seeks to understand overall how TC4 and similar institutions have been impacted by Connecticut state funding policy changes.

Research Questions

1. How has the growth of pre-k magnet schools affected the Trinity College Child Care Center and similar institutions?
2. How have these policies impacted the decisions current and former parents of TC4 make when choosing who will care for their 3-to-5 year-old children?

Current 21 Pre-K Magnet Programs

Town	Magnet School	Theme	Grades
Avon	Ana Grace Academy of the Arts	Arts	PreK3-5
Avon	Reggio Magnet School of the Arts	Reggio Emilia	PreK3-5
Bloomfield	Museum Academy	Museum Studies	PreK3-5
Bloomfield	Wintonbury Early Childhood Magnet School	Early Childhood	PreK3 & PreK4
East Hartford	Riverside Magnet School at Goodwin College	Reggio Emilia	PreK3-5
Glastonbury	Glastonbury-East Hartford Magnet	STEM	PreK3-5
Hartford	Betances Learning Lab	Early Reading	PreK3-4
Hartford	Breakthrough Magnet, North	Character Education	PreK3-5
Hartford	Breakthrough Magnet, South	Character Education	PreK3-8
Hartford	Capital Preparatory Magnet School	Social Justice	PreK3-12
Hartford	CREC Montessori Magnet School	Montessori	PreK3-6
Hartford	Environmental Sciences at Mary Hooker	Environmental Sciences	PreK4-8
Hartford	Hartford Pre-Kindergarten Magnet School	STREAM	PreK3 & PreK4
Hartford	Kinsella Magnet School of Performing Arts	Performing Arts	PreK4-12
Hartford	Montessori Magnet at Annie Fisher	Montessori	PreK3-8
Hartford	Montessori Magnet at Batchelder	Montessori	PreK3-6
Hartford	Noah Webster Micro-Society Magnet	Micro-Society	PreK3-8
Rocky Hill	Academy of Aerospace and Engineering Elem. Sch	STEM	PreK3-5
South Windsor	International Magnet School for Global Citizenship	International Baccalaureate	PreK3-5
West Hartford	University of Hartford Magnet School	Multiple Intelligences	PreK3-5
Wethersfield	Discovery Academy	STEM	PreK3-5

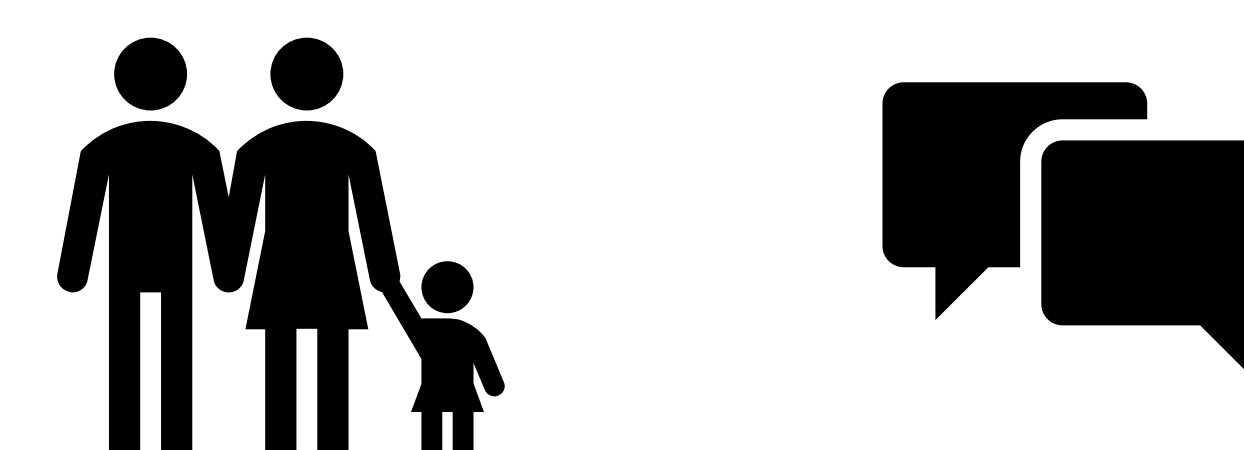
Sources and Methods

Policy Analysis



I thematically analyzed state pre-k policies and the growth of magnet pre-k programs, specifically those following the landmark Sheff v. O'Neill decision.

Qualitative Interviews



I interviewed 10 diverse parents from the Hartford area whose children are either currently enrolled or were previously enrolled at TC4.

Policy Recommendations

- New and substantial investments in non-magnet, neighborhood schools, particularly those concentrated with low-income families.
- A focus on expanding pre-k and early childhood options outside of the magnet system.
- More accessible subsidy programs for infants and toddlers that assist with the cost of childcare.

Limitations

- Sample size was small and consisted primarily of mothers (8/10)
- Prior relationships with parents could have influenced their opinions

Future Directions

- The Trinity College Child Care Center hopes to use this data as part of a larger effort to build a new childcare facility in the near future.

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I am eternally grateful to the Trinity College Child Care for not only supporting me with this work, but for the opportunity to work in their center throughout my undergraduate career.



FINDING 1: QUALITY, COST AND LOCATION ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO PARENTS

Parents were asked to rank from most to least importance six factors they may consider when choosing a center for their children. Quality, cost and location were overwhelming most important. Through a weighted analysis, the following table was developed.

Rank of Importance	Factors to consider
1 st	Quality
2 nd	Cost
3 rd	Location
4 th	Curriculum
5 th	Extended Hours
6 th	Uniforms

These [cost, quality and location] are like a tie for me. Because even if it costs nothing and the location was convenient, if the quality wasn't good, I would never put them in it. And the same like, if the location wasn't good, but the quality and the cost were, we wouldn't go for it. I think all these three have to be there for us to want to do it.

– Kaitlyn, current White TC4 parent

FINDING 2: MAGNETS ARE NOT OPTIONS – THEY ARE THE ONLY OPTION

Most (6/10) parents viewed magnet programs as the only way to ensure that their children receive a high-quality education. Parents do not necessarily prefer to send their children to magnet programs, but they believe this is where money and resources are being directed.

“When I think of magnet schools, I feel like I don't have any other choice but to send the girls there if they're going to get a good education, unless they go to private school, which I can't afford for all three...But I feel like I wish people would take the same energy and resources they put into magnet schools and put them into the public schools in our area”

– Nicole, current TC4 African American parent

FINDING 3: PARENTS ARE MORE PRAGMATIC THAN IDEALISTIC

Parents are *homo economicus*; that is, regardless of the program or the amenities it may offer, parents are more pragmatic than idealistic and therefore make decisions based on what is best for their unique schedule. Even when parents could point out challenges with the magnet school system, such as the school lottery protocol, parents will still apply to send their children to a magnet program as early as 3 years old to maximize their chances of earning a seat.

“I feel like the main reason that we send our kids to magnet schools was because if they didn't get in in pre-K, we didn't think they would get in for kindergarten; like if TC4 went until fifth grade. I am leaving here as like a pragmatism thing. So I'd say like our number one factor was the lottery protocol, like the way the lottery works and the number of seats, that was definitely number one. Beyond that like, I would probably say I don't care about other things”

– Elisa, former TC4 White parent