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Shopping for Homes and Schools: A Qualitative Study of West Hartford, Connecticut

Christina Ramsay
Trinity College

Cintli Sanchez
Trinity College

Jesse Wanzer
Trinity College

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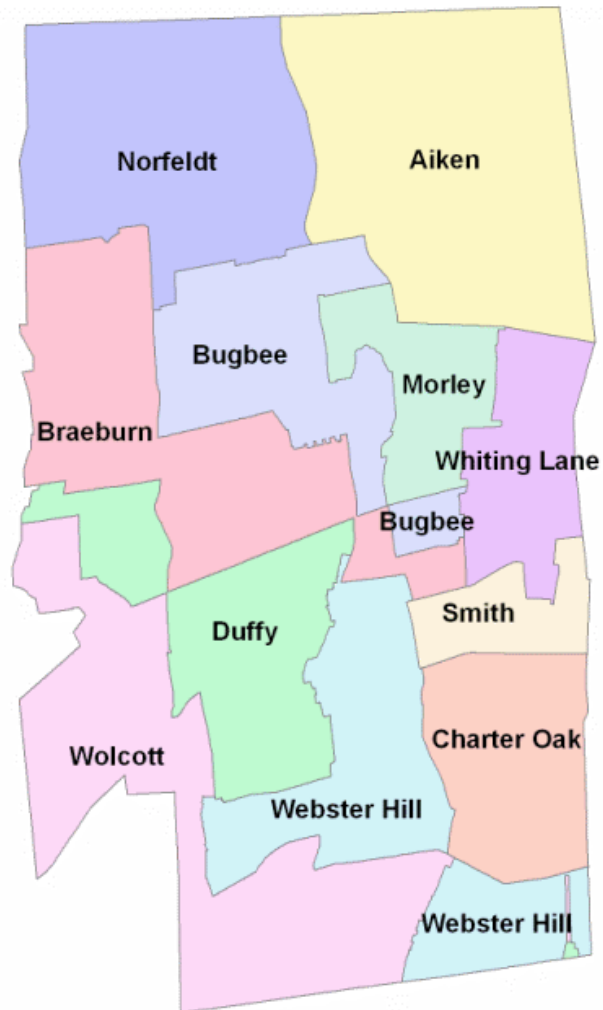
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Shopping for Homes and Schools:

A Qualitative Study of West Hartford, Connecticut



by Christina Ramsay, Cintli Sanchez, Jesse Wanzer
and the Educ 308 seminar, with Professor Jack Dougherty

December 2006

Cities, Suburbs and School Research Project report
Trinity College, Hartford, CT

<http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/educ/CSS>

In fall 2006, the Educ 308: Cities, Suburbs, and Schools seminar at Trinity College focused on the theme of “Shopping for Homes and Schools.” We are concerned about how schooling, a public good, is effectively bought and sold in the private real estate market. We have explored several broad questions such as: What are the broader social consequences of a system where privileged families may use private real estate markets to “buy” access into selected public schools? How does public data about schools (such as test scores, or student racial and socioeconomic composition) influence home purchasing decisions? And how do suburban homeowners construct their beliefs about the quality of neighborhood schools?

Our upper-level undergraduate seminar operates as a team research workshop. First, we closely examine a noteworthy study on some aspect of cities, suburbs, and schooling in the United States. Next, we design and conduct a small-scale parallel research project to test whether the author’s claims apply to the metropolitan Hartford area. The seminar develops three types of research skills: historical (interpreting archival source materials), qualitative (analyzing oral interviews), and quantitative (generating descriptive statistics and GIS computer maps from large datasets). As part of the community learning experience, the seminar partners with a local organization to develop the research study, present the findings, and discuss their significance.

In the course of our reading, our seminar concentrated on two very important studies relating to who buys homes and why: Jennifer Jellison Holme’s (2002) “Buying Homes, Buying Schools: School Choice and the Social Construction of School Quality” as well as Lois Andre-Bechely’s (2005) “Public School Choice at the Intersection of Voluntary Integration and Not-So-Good Schools: Lessons from Parent’s Experiences.”

Holme explored how parents who can afford to buy homes in areas known "for the schools" approach school choice in an effort to illuminate how the "unofficial" choice market works. Using qualitative methods, Holme found that the beliefs that inform the choices of such parents are formulated by conversations with other parents in their social networks and are mediated by status ideologies that emphasize race and class. These status ideologies are “seemingly commonsense beliefs held by the dominant status groups to explain why members of other groups seem to fail disproportionately in a society where opportunity is theoretically open to anyone with the will and drive to achieve” (Holme, 180). However, it is important to note that Holme only looked at “high status” parents which she defines as “high income, White, native English speakers” (Holme, Sept 20th conference call).

Andre-Bechely looked at the school choice processes and practices in a large urban district on the West Coast. She explained the stories of three mothers' experiences with public school choice and tells how, through the process of choosing schools for their children, they became participants in the inequities and inequalities of the district's choice programs. By showing how these mothers accomplished their goals of getting their child into a school other than their neighborhood school, the article demonstrated how school choice policies proposed to be more equitable and democratic for parents, in many ways, still reproduce the schooling inequalities that they were intended to reduce.

Based on two studies previously mentioned, we focused our attention on three main research questions:

1. How do suburban homeowners form perceptions about school quality?
2. How do these perceptions factor into their home purchase decisions?
3. Do these perceptions and decision-making processes vary across different groups?

We conducted our research in West Hartford, Connecticut. Immediate neighboring towns include Newington, Bloomfield, Farmington, and Avon. It is adjacent to and west of the City of Hartford. As of the 2000 Census, West Hartford has a population of 61,046. The town includes a wide range of housing from starter homes to luxury estates. The West Hartford school system has been recognized for years as one of the best in the state. Within West Hartford there are eleven elementary schools, three middle schools, and two high schools.

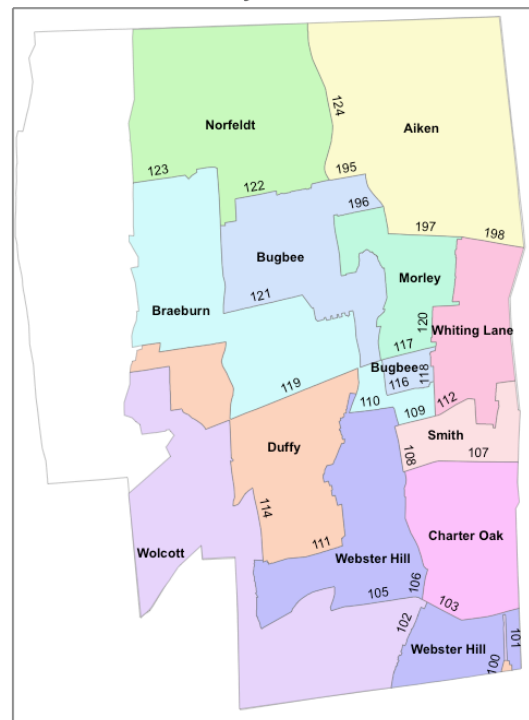
In order to conduct our qualitative research we had to construct our own interview guide. Seeing as how we wanted to model our study after Jennifer Jellison Holme’s study, our entire seminar had a conference call with her. After talking with Holme about her research design, we told her about our research and asked her some questions about how to develop our interview guide. She suggested we ask more open-ended questions to enable the respondent to elaborate. Our class was able to obtain a copy of one of her older interview guides, which we analyzed to see what would be necessary questions to ask our respondents. After three pilot interviews, we decided that our interview guide had to include questions that focused on reasons for buying in West Hartford, perceptions of West Hartford, influences of those perceptions, and lastly the demographics of the respondents. We also received feedback from our community partner, Terry Schmitt, a member of the West Hartford Board of Education who also has a doctoral degree in sociology. After finalizing our interview guide and submitting our Institutional Review Board proposal, we were ready to bring it into the field. (See interview guide in appendix.)

Figure 1

West Hartford elementary school areas & border codes

Our professor created a sample of homes from public information available via the Property Records Database of the Town of West Hartford. The total sample included over 450 single-family homes (not apartments, condominiums, or multi-family homes) that were sold during 2005. All of the homes in this sample were located within 0.25 miles of an elementary school attendance border. (See figure 1.) Some small borders were excluded due to convenience, but single-family homes in all 11 elementary schools were represented in the sample.

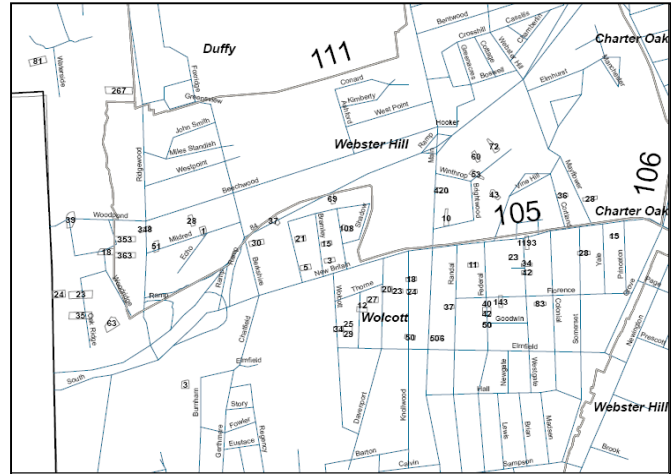
To conduct interviews, our seminar broke up into eight pairs of two students. Each pair was responsible for conducting interviews with recent homebuyers on both sides of a



Cities, Suburbs, and Schools Research Project @ Trinity College, December 2006

Figure 2

designated elementary school attendance border. Every member of the class received an individual list of homes (including only the street address at this stage) that were potential candidates for interviews. Students either worked alone or with their partner to obtain at least 5 interviews each. Figure 2 (inset) is an example of a map that students used as a guide of where to conduct interviews. For example, regarding border 105 (between Webster Hill and Wolcott elementary schools), one student would have been responsible for one side of the border while their partner would be responsible for the other side. Several homeowners were not at home or decided not to participate, while others agreed to participate in the interview.



After students obtained their interviews, we were responsible for transcribing each interview. In total, the class obtained 89 useable interviews with recent homebuyers. We linked each homebuyer's address back to the Property Records Database to obtain the 2005 sales price, which served as a social class variable. In sum, the key interview sample demographics were:

Currently have or expecting children of any age:	52 (58%)
Currently have school-age children (K-12 only):	34 (38%)
White: 77 (87%)	Non-White: 10 (11%)
	Unknown: 2 (2%)
Median home sale price for interview sample (in 2005 dollars):	\$277,000

Next, the class had to develop a coding scheme in order to analyze the interviews. Essentially, the entire seminar went through the interviews, looked for common themes to each question and coded each interview as such. Figure 3 illustrates a portion of our coding sheet.

Interview Code	7 & 7a) Sch info from social (Y/N)	7 & 7b) Sch info from web (Y/N)	7b) If web, which one? (open)	7 & 7c) Sch info realtor (Y/N)	7 & 7d) Sch info test scores (Y/n)	7 & 7e) Sch info visits (Y/N)	8) Accurate about elem sch? (Y/N); otherwise blank	8b) Accurate about MS or HS zone? (Y/N); otherwise blank	9) Tax-school value? (Y/N); otherwise blank
2									
3	Ali1	Y	N		N	N	N	Y	Y
4	Ali2	N	N		N	Y	N	Y	
5	Ali3	Y	N		N	N	N		Y
6	Ali4	Y	N		N	N	Y	Y	Y
7	Ali5	Y	N		N	Y	N	Y	Y
8	Bianca1	N	N		N	N	N	Y	Y
9	Bianca2	Y	N		N	N	Y	Y	Y
10	Bianca3	N	N		N	N	N		
11	Bianca4	Y	N		N	N	Y		Y
12	Bianca5	Y	Y		N	N	Y		Y
13	Christina1	Y	N	Not asked	N	Y	N	Y	Y
14	Christina2	Y	Y	Coldwell	Y	N	N	N	N
15	Christina3	N	N		N	Y	N	Y	Y
16	Christina4	Y	N		N	N	Y	Y	N
17	Christina5	Y	Y	Not asked	N	Y	N	Y	Y
18	Cintli1	Y	N		N	N	Y	Y	Y
19	Cintli2	N	Y	Connecti	N	N	Y	Y	Y
20	Cintli3	Y	N		N	N	N	N	N
21	Cintli4	Y	N		N	N	Y	Y	Y
22	Cintli5	Y	N		N	N	N	Y	Y

Figure 3

Finally, the coding sheet was analyzed to look for particular trends in our data. Based on this analysis, we found several trends, and this report focuses on the six most interesting findings:

Claim 1: Most homebuyers (who have or are expecting children) obtain information about school quality from their social networks, not from test scores, school visits or websites.

Of homeowners asked about how they received their information about school quality, over 50 percent of homeowners (29 out of 52) said they received their information from social networks. One interviewee explained that his opinion of school quality was shaped by “Friends, coworkers...and just people from the town and other towns” (Interview Ali 4). This finding supports Holme's argument that upper class, white families tend to base their home buying and school decisions on the opinions of people they know rather than on test scores and other school research.

Only 35 percent of homeowners (18 out of 52) researched the schools in the areas they bought a home in. We are using the term "research" in reference to school visits, looking at school profiles or websites, and tests scores. This claim supports Andre-Bechley's idea of choice work; however the homeowners in our study mostly talked to people and did not conduct the other aspects of choice work.

Thus, most homeowners we spoke to did not visit schools or look up information themselves; instead they relied on information that was passed around in their social networks. This leads us to question whether the information that is being exchanged is accurate and factual. The information may be concrete things such as test scores of a particular school, or general opinions like, "this school is good because it has a nice pool." Our interviews confirmed that the opinions being passed around were usually about whether a school was good or bad, which are terms that are socially constructed according to a person's status ideologies.

Claim 2: Families with homes above the median price (and who currently have or are expecting children) were more likely to "research" than those whose homes were below the median price.

The median home price in our data set is \$277, 000 and we used it as an indicator of wealth. We know that home price is not a full indicator of wealth, but it is the closest indicator we have, as it is not polite ask interviewees how much money they make. This claim suggests that homeowners with a higher income researched schools more than homeowners with a lower income. Over 40 percent (13 out of 31) of homeowners with children or expecting children with a high income researched by looking up test scores or gathering information from websites or visiting schools. While, only 25 percent (5 out of 20) of homeowners with a lower income researched. This is significant because it supports Holme's ideas about status; high status families are more likely to research schools than low status families. According to Holme, high status parents have the opportunity to "choose" their schools by deciding where to live (Holme, 178). This finding could lead some to believe that high status parents place more value on education, as Holme found in her study. Holme found that high status parents believed that only members of their class placed a high value on education. Also, "they believed that the values and conduct of students in schools they presumed were better, who were mostly White and from high-income families, were more conducive to a good education" (Holme, 181).

Claim 3: Non-White homeowners (who have or are expecting children) were more likely to mention schools as a factor than White homeowners.

One hundred percent (7 out of 7) of non-Whites with or expecting children mentioned schools as a reason for moving to West Hartford. Only 75 percent (33 out of 44) of comparable White homeowners mentioned schools. This claim allows us to make a racial comparison to determine the importance of schools and who places more value on them.

This contrasts with Jennifer Jellison Holme's finding that high-status parents thought that "low income students of color, cared little about education and would hinder their own children's educational experience by holding them back academically..." (Holme, 181). However, one concern that we is that our sample size may not be large enough because we only have data for 10 non-White homeowners. In addition, our sub-sample may not be representative of all people of color in West Hartford.

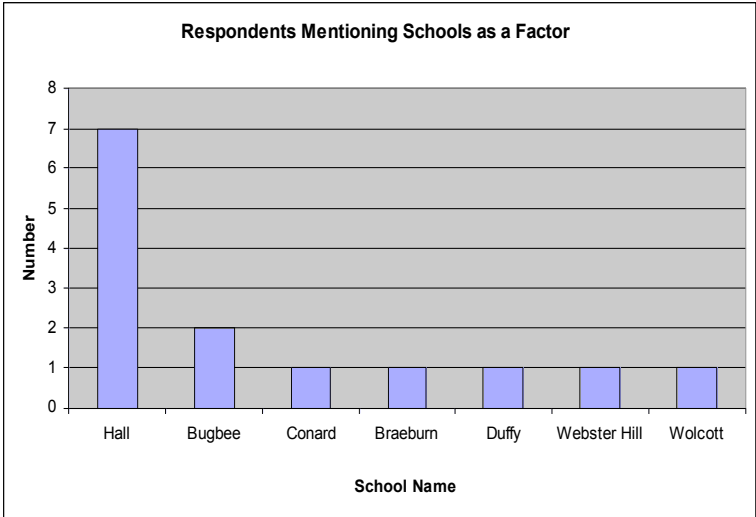
Claim 4a: Homeowners who mentioned schools as a factor in their home buying decision were more likely to mention the West Hartford district, rather than a specific school.

Seventy percent (40 out of 56) of homeowners mentioned the district as a reason for moving to West Hartford. When asked if they had a particular school in mind, one interviewee said, "We didn't weigh that heavily, we were just happy with the public school system in West Hartford period" (Interview Cintli 2). Homeowners are mostly getting their school information from others in their social networks and are not getting facts, but general opinions. It seems that most parents do not have a preference for a particular school because they do not know any specific information about them. They just know that West Hartford schools are "good," so they want their children in the district, no matter which school. This is similar to Claim 1 and Jennifer Jellison Holme's finding. She states that, "Parents don't refer to the quality of instruction and curriculum at a school rather they tend to make assumptions about culture and values of those within various school communities" (Holme, 202).

Claim 4b: The remaining 30% who stated schools as a factor in their home-buying decision and mentioned a particular school, were likely to specify Hall High School.

Figure 4

Fifty percent (7 out of 14) mentioned Hall over any other school in the district (See Figure 4, inset). One parent claimed that Hall High School was "definitely a factor" in her home buying decision (Interview Bianca 2). Another interviewee said that they had "heard the differences between the Hall and the Conard side" (Interview Ali 1). The general opinion of the homeowners we spoke to was



that Hall High School is superior to Conard, the other public high school in West Hartford. People without children of high school age, or people without children at all, largely still wanted to be within the attendance area of the “good” school. However, we did a little research to see if the “good” and “bad” reputations had any academic basis, and did not find any objective basis for this perception. Hall and Conard students average similar SAT and CAPT scores. Conard actually offers a few more Advanced Placement classes than Hall does, yet Hall is still thought of as more desirable. We found no substantial differences between Hall and Conard, other than their reputations.

Claim 5: One of every four homeowners who said that schools were a part of their home buying decision were not able to accurately state both their elementary and middle/high school zone.

Fifty five homeowners stated that schools played a factor in their home buying decision in either the open question or when prompted. Of those 55, 14 (25 percent) did not accurately state both their elementary and middle/high school zone. These parents told us that schools were very important to them. Of the 14, 9 were incorrect when asked their elementary school zone and 8 were incorrect about their middle/high school zone. Three were incorrect about BOTH their elementary and middle/high school zones although they stated that schools were a factor in their home buying decision. We found several possible reasons for the discrepancy between what people said and what they really knew. One interviewee bought for resale and only cared about the reputation of the district (Interview Cintli 3). Other homeowners told us that as long as they were in the district they did not have a preference for a certain school because all West Hartford schools are good. Other interviewees stated that they bought for the schools but not necessarily public schools. One woman bought her home so that her children would be closer to the private Hebrew Academy and their synagogue, so we realized that buying for the schools did not necessarily mean buying for the public schools. Yet these reasons cannot possibly account for all of the homeowners who got the question wrong. The fact remains that many homeowners bought their homes “for the schools” without educating themselves on what school zone they were buying into. Researcher John Maddaus found a similar trend saying, “These parents may not investigate the schools in their new neighborhoods carefully, and a few did not even know which schools their children were actually supposed to attend until they went to register them” (Maddaus, 280).

Claim 6: Most homeowners had positive views about tax value regardless of having school-aged children.

Over 65% (60 out of 91) homeowners felt that they were getting value from the taxes they were paying. Some homeowners cited extra services that other towns do not have such as, “the town programs, the sports, the kids’ activities,” (Interview Tyler 1) which they believed made the higher taxes worth paying. Many interviewees cited educational reasons like sending several children to public school. However, others cited non-educational reasons for getting tax value. They often spoke about taxes going to things other than schools, such as roads and shopping centers that are used by everyone.

So what does this all mean? Media and policy makers focus on test scores and believe that parents are conscious about test scores and look to scores to determine whether a school is "good." But that is not an accurate interpretation of what actually happens. In our study of West Hartford, we found that most homeowners obtain information about schools not from concrete data, but by word of mouth within their social networks. The data we gathered supports Holme's argument that parents rely mostly on social networks to obtain information about school quality, which are typically general opinions or a school's reputation within the community. This demonstrates the fragility of the reputation because it can easily shift according to the changing opinions within social networks.

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- Jellison Holme, J. (2002). *Buying Homes, Buying Schools: School Choice and the Social Construction of School Quality*. *Harvard Educational Review*. Vol 72. (2). 177-205.
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Important Note

See also a forthcoming quantitative study that is closely related to this qualitative project:

Harrelson, Jeffrey, and Laura Maloney, Drew Murphy, Michael Snow, Russell Smith, with Professors Jack Dougherty and Diane Zannoni. "How Do Public Elementary Schools Affect the Value of Your Home? A Quantitative Analysis of West Hartford, CT, 1996-2005." *Cities, Suburbs, and Schools Research Project report*, Trinity College, forthcoming in January 2007, <<http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/educ/CSS>>.

Appendix

Final interview guide for West Hartford homeowners, Fall 2006 Code _____

Hello, my name is _____. I'm from Trinity College and we're doing a class project to learn more about why people buy homes in West Hartford. It would really help me if you could offer five minutes of your time for a quick interview. Would that be okay? [If yes, then:] The interview is anonymous and entirely voluntary. Is it okay to tape record you while I also take some notes?

Residency:

1) Do you own this home?

[If yes]: How long have you owned it? [If no]: May I speak with the homeowner?

2) Where did you live before you bought this home?

[If from WH]: What brought you to this neighborhood?

[If not from WH]: What brought you to West Hartford?

Home-buying decision:

3) What factors led you to buy this home?

[after answer, ask these prompts, one at a time]:

Was the price a factor?

Was the location of your job a factor?

Were the schools a factor?

[If yes]: Were you attracted to the West Hartford school district overall, or to a particular school? [If yes:] Which one, and why?

4) What sources of information influenced your decision to buy this home?

[after answer, ask these prompts, one at a time]:

Did you rely on information from friends or co-workers?

... from a website? [If yes]: Which one?

... from a real estate agent?

5) Did you consider any other towns or neighborhoods while searching for a home?

Perceptions of school quality:

6) What is your opinion about the quality of the West Hartford public schools?

[after answer, prompt:] How does it compare to other school districts?

7) What sources of information have influenced your opinion about the quality of schools?

[after answer, ask these prompts, one at a time]:

Friends or co-workers?

A website? [If yes]: Which one?

Real estate agent?

School test scores?

School visits?

8) Which elementary school attendance zone is your home located in? Which middle/HS zone?

9) For the taxes that you pay on this home, are you are getting value from the public schools?

Demographics:

Do you have school-age children?

[If yes]: How old? Which school does each attend? [Clarify where school is located]

What is your occupation?

What level of education have you completed?

How would you describe your ethnicity?

Thank you for participating in this interview.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Cities, Suburbs, and Schools seminar. This project was a collective effort throughout the semester. We all worked hard creating the interview guide, conducting interviews, coding interviews, and analyzing the data. We have something that we all can take with us.

We would also like to thank Rachel Barlow for her help in getting this project started and coordinating the data and all of the other logistics, as well as sitting in on several of our class meetings. We really appreciate it.

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We would also like to thank both authors, Jennifer Jellison Holme and Lois Andre-Bechely for taking time out of your busy lives to speak with us about your research as well as offering suggestions for how to better conduct our research.

We would also like to thank Lis Pennington for her continual support all semester with facilitating our group discussions, reading through *all* of our papers, and driving us in and around West Hartford. You're pretty much the greatest TA ever.

We would also like to thank our community partner Terry Schmitt for coming to our class and helping us refine our interview guide. We also appreciate you for coming to our research presentation and getting us to think more deeply about what implications our research has in West Hartford.

Finally, we would like to thank Professor Jack Dougherty for everything you have done for us this semester. You have endured the average college student's problems times 16 and were still able to help us pull off this project. We would truly be lost without you. Thanks.



The Educ 308: Cities, Suburbs, and Schools seminar, Fall 2006

Back: Tyler Sims, Jeff Pratt, Jesse Wanzer, Katie Brewer, Christina Ramsay, Jared Boyd.

Middle: Cintli Sanchez, Melissa Harris, Gloribel Gonzalez, Kelly Mearns, Erin Flanagan, Lis Pennington.

Front: Joe Clark, Bianca Simms, Maria Dixon, Ali Schmidt, Natasha Rosa.