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The Unthinkable Remedy: The Proposed Metropolitan Hartford School District

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The Unthinkable Remedy:

The Proposed Metropolitan Hartford School District



Trinity College-
Cities, Suburbs, & Schools Research Team

Jennifer Williams '04

Research Question

3 Parts:

- A. How was the metropolitan school district proposal created in the aftermath of the *Sheff v. O'Neil* case in 1996?
- B. How did various interest groups respond?
- C. Finally, why was the proposal eventually abandoned?

The Metropolitan Proposal

“The Unexamined Remedy”

produced by the

Connecticut Center for School Change

There were two reports created:

- 1998 “The Unexamined Remedy”
- 2001 “Beyond The Unexamined Remedy:
Moving Toward Quality, Integrated Schools”

The Metro Proposal

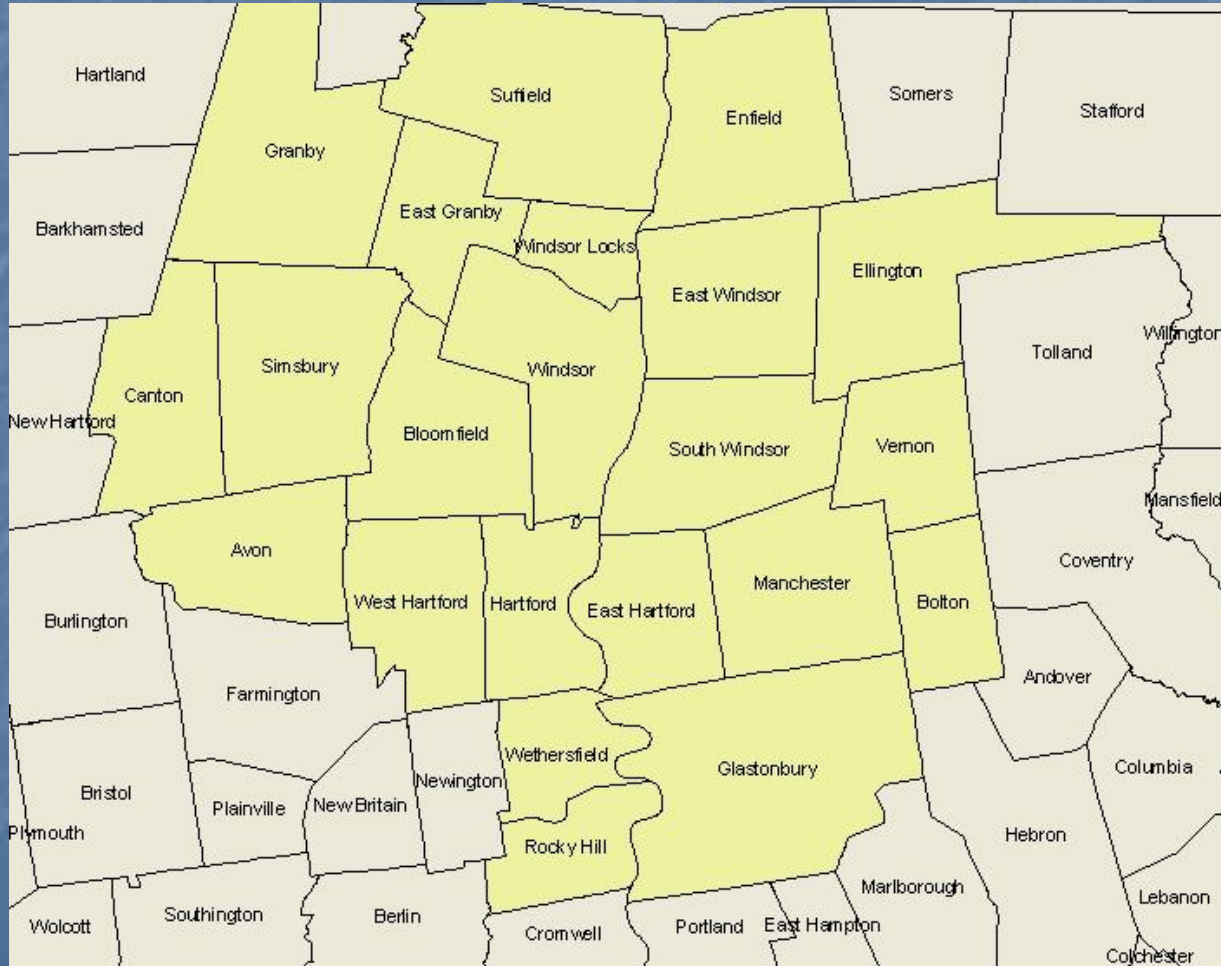
Key Points:

- The **consolidation** of Hartford & the 21 surrounding towns
- **Controlled Choice Model**
 - All schools would be converted into magnets
 - Students would be assigned to one of their top 3 choices

“This was the most comprehensive proposal, the most polished of the things that were floating around...”

-Jack Hasegawa

The Metro District Visualized



Education Reform Timeline

1989: *Sheff* Plaintiffs filed Suit

1992: Privatization of Hartford Public Schools by Educational Alternatives Inc.

1996: The Connecticut Supreme Court rules in favor of *Sheff*

1996: The state takeover of the Hartford Public School System begins

Types of Sources

- *Hartford Courant* articles
- Articles from Scholarly Journals
such as *Excellence and Equity in Education*,
and *The Black Scholar*
- Interviews with various activists and policymakers who had contact with the proposal.

The Interview Process

Plan Creators:

- Gordon Bruno
- Kathryn McDermott

Other Proposal Contributors:

- David Nee
- *Ellen Ornato*
- *Mayra Esquilin*
- *John Mahoney*

State Ed. Policymakers:

- Rep. Cameron Staples
- Jack Hasegawa
- *John Aliceson*
- *Patricia Daniels*

Sheff vs. O'Neill:

- *Elizabeth Horton Sheff*
- *John Brittain*
- *Philip Tegeler*

Some Key Interview Questions include:

- What were your initial reactions or feelings about the proposal?
- In your opinion, why do you think the Metropolitan proposal was never implemented?

Preliminary Analysis

- Metropolitan proposal ran up against a strong history of town-level “local control” in Connecticut
- Many suburban superintendents and state representatives quietly supported the plan, but feared losing their positions if they publicly spoke in favor.

“...I had no small number of superintendents tell me, some of whom are still in office, “Gordon, if I support what you have recommended for metropolitan integration my board will not renew my contract,” they have told me that specifically.”

—Gordon Bruno

Preliminary Analysis Cont.

- The proposal did not fully consider daily logistics and established norms of community life.
 - long distances to be traveled
 - “Thinking about how exactly the transportation would play out and the kinds of distances that people would need to travel. Now that I have kids I’m more aware of the reality of what it’s like to travel with a kid in a motorized vehicle for 20 minutes and I might be a little bit less cavalier about that than I was six years ago, but I still think that diverse educational environment are the way to go.”
–Kathryn McDermott
 - town-oriented athletic competition

Preliminary Analysis Cont.

- In the end, the proposal became identified with only one key supporter -- Gordon Bruno -- rather than a coalition of advocates.

"I heard most often coming from legislators and others in positions of leadership and I mean *really* in positions of leadership was, "Gordon, do you really expect me to commit political suicide?" and my answer to that in public was, "Yes," ...The statewide Union was in favor of school integration, but did not support the metropolitan plan either. Actually, I was pretty much alone."

-Gordon Bruno

Preliminary Analysis Cont.

- The Unexamined Remedy was Examined by the Education Committee.

“...it’s not that it wasn’t examined, I always thought that Gordon’s title was inappropriate. It was examined and rejected by virtually every policy maker and legislator that spent time on it and certainly the education committee, among others. Everyone was aware of this idea, they just didn’t agree with what it would do, in their mind, to control at the local level...”

-Rep. Cameron Staples

Preliminary Analysis Cont.

- The proposal did NOT fail due to lack of publicity and organization.

“...One of the lead people in kind of organizing these conversations and these discussions was Dr. Tom Brown from New Haven, who’s a very skilled moderator and good at organizing public events. Another person they(CCSC) had working for them was a skillful public information person named, Ellen Ornato, one of her major clients for years has been First Night of Hartford...So you have these two people and *yet* they couldn’t quite get this to happen, so it’s not because that the center didn’t work at it or didn’t, I think, have a good plan there was just something deep here that didn’t resonate...”

-Jack Hasegawa

- Before any plan was implemented the quality of Hartford Public Schools had to be brought up to par.

Preliminary Analysis Cont.

- Despite rhetorical support for racial integration in Connecticut, most urban and suburban parents were not willing to send their children to schools in other towns.
- Contrary to planners' expectations, Black and Hispanic, communities in Hartford did not actively support the proposal because they feared losing the limited political power in Hartford schools.

"The urban legislators, and which I was one, were actually not very excited about losing control over their cities. That urban legislators didn't want us to create an incentive for city kids to go out of district, because they thought if they lost the children to other districts they would have less control over their education. The notion of local control really was pretty lively felt and it wasn't just a suburban versus urban issue. There were no urban legislators that were advocating this remedy either."

-Rep. Cameron Staples