

Trinity College

## Trinity College Digital Repository

---

Community Learning Research Fellows

Center for Hartford Engagement and Research

---

2016

### Community Perceptions of Resource Inequities in Hartford's District and Magnet Schools

Cara Midlige

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/clrf>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Midlige, Cara, "Community Perceptions of Resource Inequities in Hartford's District and Magnet Schools" (2016). *Community Learning Research Fellows*. 40.  
<https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/clrf/40>

# Community Perceptions of Resource Inequities in Hartford's District and Magnet Schools

Cara Midlige, CLI Research Fellows Fall 2016

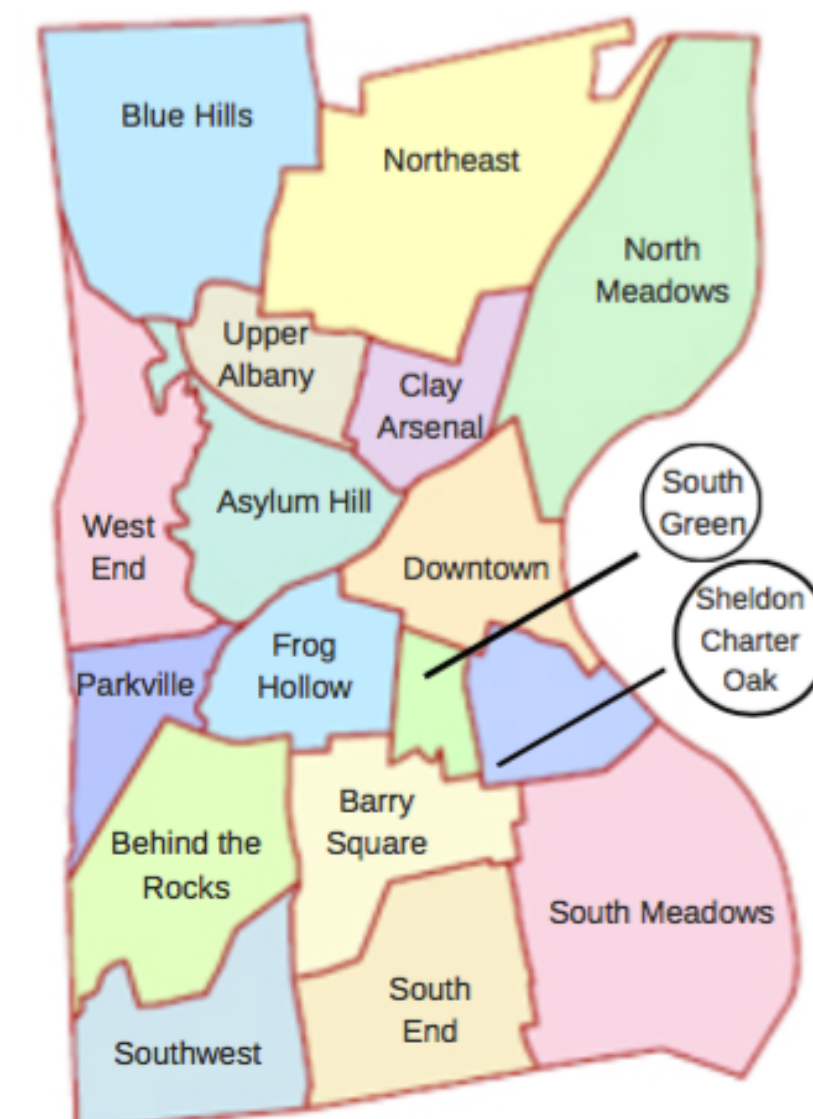
Community Partner: Southwest/Behind the Rocks NRZ

Faculty Advisor: Jack Dougherty

## Abstract

The Connecticut State Constitution states that all children "should have equal opportunity to receive a suitable program of educational experience." However, post *Sheff v. O'Neill*, the legal battle that fought to provide equitable schools for all Connecticut children, many Hartford students still do not receive equal educations. My project seeks to understand the intersection of school desegregation and funding in one neighborhood in Hartford, as well as the parent perceptions of the lack of resources between the district and magnet schools in the neighborhood. In addition, this project will examine the perceptions of policy initiatives to rectify equity problems in schools. Findings are based primarily from observations in community Neighborhood Revitalization Zone (NRZ) meetings and interviews with NRZ Education Committee members and neighborhood residents, supported with primary source documents about the schools. My research shows that while there are generally less resources in district schools than magnet schools when it came to school programming and facilities, funding is a much more complicated issue. In addition, perceptions of these resource differences vary between neighborhood residents and NRZ members, as both groups use different methods for assessing the resources in the neighborhood schools. Lastly, policy implications on the neighborhood was a contentious issue that NRZ members were adamant contributed to these issues and pointed to two examples of policy that has affected resources and in turn funding for the schools, inadvertently leaving magnet schools more resourced than district schools.

## Southwest/Behind the Rocks



### 8 schools in neighborhood

- Expeditionary Learning Academy at Moylan School
- McDonough Expeditionary Learning School
- L.W. Batchelder Elementary
- E.B. Kennelly School
- Montessori Magnet
- Breakthrough Magnet School
- Environmental Sciences at Mary Hooker
- Prince Tech (not part of this project)

## Introduction

### Research Questions:

Do NRZ members and neighborhood residents perceive resource inequities in Hartford's district and magnet schools in similar ways? How do NRZ members perceive policy initiatives created to address these inequities?

### Past Research:

- School Resources are systematically related to student achievement and these relationships are large enough to be educationally important (Greenwald et. al 1996)
- There are benefits to after-school programming for low-income children and these programs are one way to help alleviate the effects of living in poverty (Posner and Vandall 1996)
- Based on the 2009 Hartford neighborhoods assessment (Martin 2009) and 2016 Educational Development Index (EDI) Report published by the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving children in the Southwest/Behind the Rocks neighborhood would benefit from additional resources in their schools to help combat neighborhood vulnerability.

## How Did Hartford Get Here?

### *Sheff v. O'Neill (1996)*

- The Connecticut Supreme Court case which ruled that segregation based on race and ethnicity in Hartford's schools was a violation of the state constitutional rights on Connecticut schoolchildren.
- This case called for court-ordered desegregation in all schools in Connecticut.

### School Choice

- Currently, there are several different school options for children in Hartford which include magnet schools, district schools, charter schools, and open choice schools.
- Families take part in an optional school choice lottery which allows them to have the choice for what schools their children attend.

### Equity 2020

- Currently, Hartford students attend many under enrolled and inferior schools.
- This Hartford Public Schools initiative was designed to serve as the districts master plan to ensuring that all Hartford children are attending equitable schools by the year 2020 and looks to build a robust offering of theme-based schools for students.
- This initiative looks at facilities, zone enrollment and geography and with the assistance of outside consultants will make recommendations for school consolidations and closures around the district in order to support their goal.

## Methodology

For this project, I worked with the Southwest/Behind the Rocks Neighborhood Revitalization Zone (NRZ) to understand the differences in the perceptions of the inequities between the district and magnet schools in the neighborhood. I chose to only focus on one neighborhood in Hartford to make my project as focused as possible. To conduct my research, I primarily focused on three different methods with are...

### Field Notes

Attended community NRZ meetings and NRZ Educational Committee meetings since April 2016 and collected field notes which were coded and analyzed for common themes.

### Interviews

Conducted interviews with NRZ Education Committee members and 25 door-to-door interviews with neighborhood residents in Southwest/Behind the Rocks.

### Primary Documents

Analyzed primary source documents including the *Sheff v. O'Neill* complaint, Equity 2020 documents and school strategic profiles for schools in the neighborhood.

## Ensuring Ethical Research

In order to maintain anonymity and protect people's privacy, I have chosen to only include verbal consents for my project so that people's names will not need to be documented. In addition, I submitted an IRB application to the Trinity College IRB Board. I have also completed the CITI ethics training and will be sure to follow all confidentiality guidelines in my application to maintain people's privacy. While I have not promised anonymity to the NRZ, I will not be using members' names in my project as some members have expressed concerns about their names being public. My application also does not require me to omit the names of the schools.

## Emergence of Themes

### School Programming

"Even though we have a theme, we do not get any additional resources which means we don't do much with expeditionary learning."  
-District School Teacher

### School Facilities

"When a school looks nice and has nice facilities people want to be there....When schools don't have nice facilities the opposite happens and it is like pulling teeth to get parents to come to the schools and teachers don't want to work in schools that don't have nice facilities."  
-NRZ Member

### School Funding

"At a neighborhood [district] school they might have a lot more ELL students or students in poverty, so they need more resources and money, but they basically have the same amount that the other schools have."  
-NRZ Member

## Perceptions of Resource Inequities

### NRZ Members

Unanimously thought that magnet schools provide the best educational opportunities in the neighborhood

vs.

### Neighborhood Residents

Majority thought that the schools closest to where they lived were the best schools in the neighborhood showing a theme of neighborhood pride

## How Does Policy Effect Equity?

NRZ members typically find policy initiatives created to address equity as contributing to the inequitable educational opportunities in the city. They examples like the *Sheff v. O'Neill* remedies and Equity 2020 as contributing to the number of Hartford students essentially left behind in substandard district schools.

### *Sheff v. O'Neill* Remedies

- The creation of magnet schools in the city to attract students from suburban districts has left 54% of Hartford students still attending segregated schools
- There will be no more magnet schools created in the city, even though magnet schools were the primary method used to desegregate schools (Thomas 2016)

### Equity 2020

- 2016 initiative that has a primary goal of helping the district reach educational equality for all students by 2020.
- Proposed school consolidations/closures are not seen as being the most equitable decisions for all students
- South End school closure and reassignment for many students would have negative impact on SW/Behind the Rocks schools

"They know they don't really need to touch any of the schools in this end of the city. Even though that school is not the nicest school, it is by far not the worst, and they know they have to talk about closing that school only because people will start complaining that they are only targeting schools in the north end of the city."  
-NRZ Member

## Conclusion

School segregation has long been in issue in the state of Connecticut, especially in Hartford. Despite this, there have been many attempts to desegregate city schools and provide equal educational opportunities for all students. Yet, time and again, these attempts have failed and resulted in large numbers of city students being left behind in unequal schools in the city. This project sought to understand the differences perceptions of NRZ members and neighborhood residents in resources in district and magnet schools in the city.

### When examining resource differences...

- It was especially interesting to find that neighborhood residents and NRZ members do not perceive these inequities in similar ways.
  - NRZ members find magnet schools to be most resourced and the best educational opportunities in the city
  - Neighborhood residents found schools closest to their homes to be the best, showing a common theme of neighborhood pride.
- In addition, there was a strong belief from NRZ members that policy decisions created to address equity have contributed to further inequity in the city.

\*Full citations available upon request\*

## Why This Research Matters?

This project will be useful to the Southwest/Behind the Rocks NRZ because it will...

- Provide information on community perceptions on the school
- Inform the work of the NRZ in order to better help them advocate for their neighborhood
- Help to ease frustrations with Hartford Public Schools

The Southwest/Behind the Rocks NRZ members and community residents would like to help mitigate the unequal educational opportunities for students in the neighborhood by providing more programs like tutoring, sports, recreation, and sharing of school resources to the community residents. In addition to this, I would suggest sponsoring more dialogues between the neighborhood and Hartford Public Schools in order to keep open communication with the district and help ease frustrations. It is my hope that the information in this project will, specifically on neighborhood residents perceptions, will help inform this work.



Trinity College  
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT