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Spanish-Speaking Parents and School Choice

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Spanish-Speaking Parents and School Choice

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Community Learning Research Fellowship Fall 2016

Community Partner: The Center for Latino Progress

Research Question

How does the type of support Spanish-speaking parents receive influence their school choices?

Key Finding

Most Spanish-speaking parents who received early formal support during the school choice process were more aware of a wider range of options, and often sent their children to higher opportunity magnet or suburban Open Choice schools.

Background

School choice is one of the more current education reform movements in the United States, which often uses a market based approach to provide racial integration or consumer-style choices in public education in an effort to improve school quality, sometimes both.

Connecticut has seen a substantial increase in inter district magnet schools over the past 15 years with 45 in operation all over the state. The Greater Hartford region has seen the largest number of racially integrated magnet schools with some located in Hartford, and others located in the surrounding suburban towns. These schools boast special themes like: Environmental Science, Montessori, and Arts.

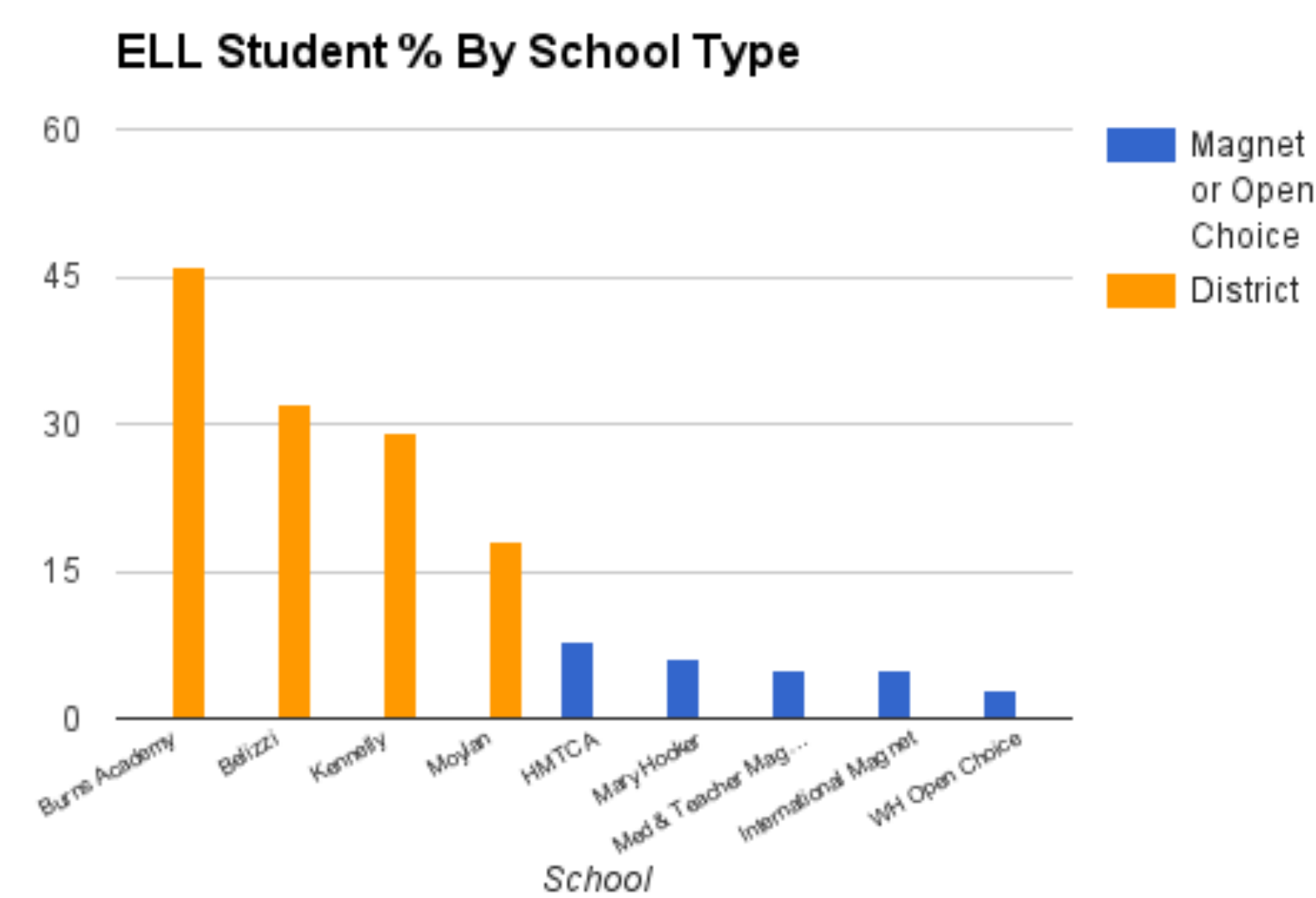
- 2006 Sheff v. O'Neill lawsuit: The court ruled that the de-facto racial segregation within public schools was unconstitutional and the State of Connecticut had a legal obligation to remedy it.
- Magnet schools were used as a main tool for voluntary school integration in addition to suburban inter-district school transfers.
- 2015: 41% of Hartford students are learning in "reduced [racial] isolation settings." But, over half of Hartford students continue to learn in hyper-segregated district schools.

3 Tier School Choice System for Hartford Families

- 1) City and suburban families can apply to attend inter-district magnet schools and Open Choice suburban schools, operated as a lottery by RSCO. These schools are considered high opportunity since they serve a more racially and socioeconomically diverse student body.
- 2) HPS district choice, allows city families to apply to a school outside of their neighborhood, but usually without special themes, extra resources, or free transportation.
- 3) Families who do not secure a seat in either choice program above fall into the third-tier, and are placed wherever HPS has space to accommodate them.

Motivation

The Hartford region has a relatively robust school choice system, but researchers have identified that English Language Learner (ELL) students are underrepresented in area magnet schools.



This graph shows that of the schools mentioned in interviews, HPS district schools serve a disproportionately high percentage of ELL students compared to magnet and Open Choice schools.

Research Design

Target Population
Spanish-speaking parents of school age children who live in Hartford

Research sites

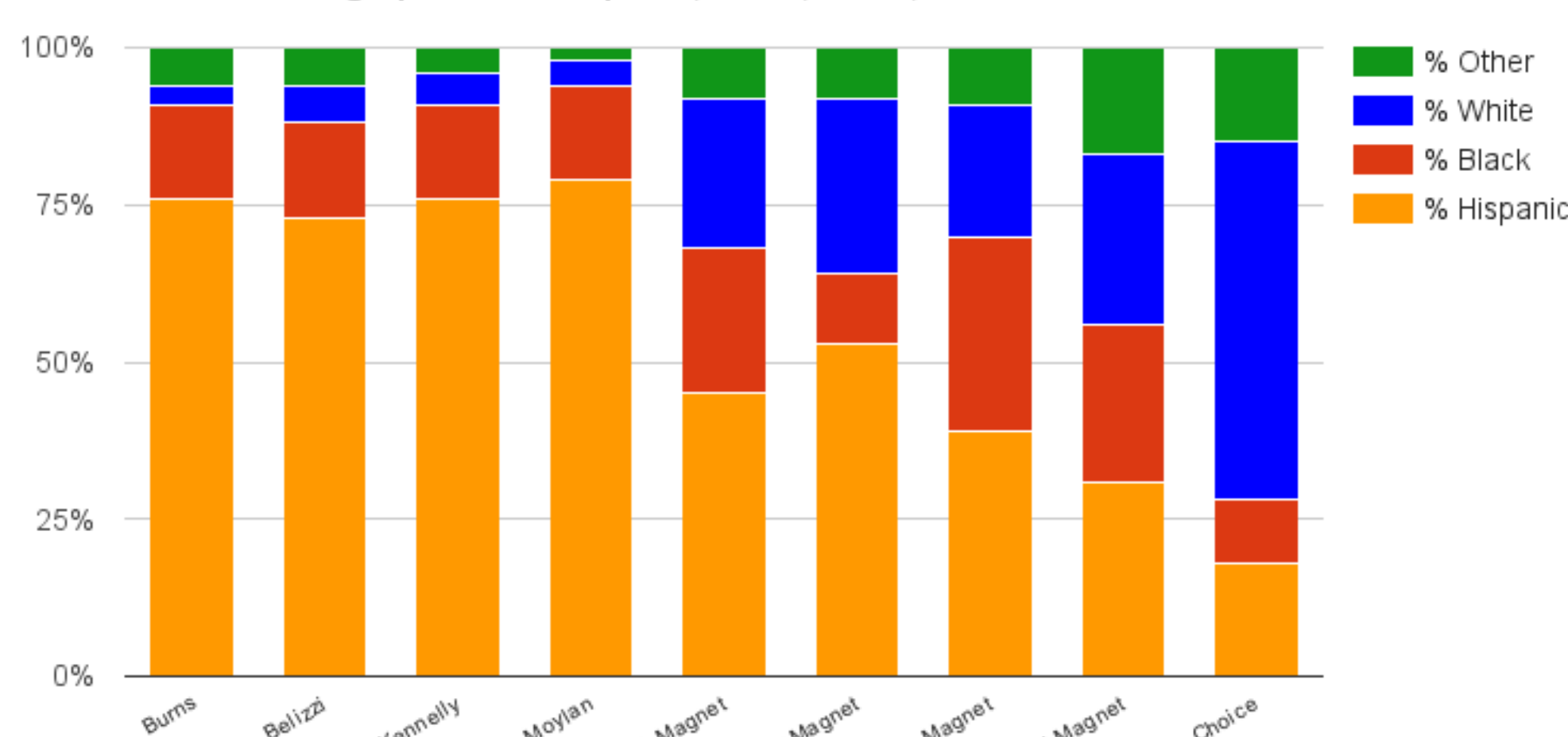
- The Center for Latino Progress- Park Street Hartford, CT
- Hartford Public Library- Park Street Hartford, CT

Research Method

- Semi-structured, voluntary interviews ranging from 10-40 minutes
- Conducted in Spanish with the help of a translator
- Transcriptions anonymized
- Analyzed for patterns

Interview participants by school type	
District School Parents	4
Magnet School Parents	2
District & Magnet School Parent	1
District School & Open Choice Parent	1
Private School Parent	1
Total	9

School Demographics: % Hispanic, Black, White, & Other



The HPS district schools: Burns, Belizzi, Kennelly, and Moylan have approximately 90% Hispanic or Black student population, which qualifies these schools as hyper-segregated by race.

Supporting Findings

Most parents felt a sense of agency regardless of the types of schools their children attend due to the multi-tiered school choice system in Hartford.

Evidence:
Interview Question: "Do you feel you chose your child's school or were assigned to it?"
8 out of 9 interview participants responded that they "chose" their child's current school.

Limitations of school choice knowledge within these parents' social networks created social barriers that constrained awareness of the full range of choices available to them.

Sample Evidence:
"I chose this school...my friend was the one who showed me here. I came here recently so I didn't really know what to do."
-Burns Academy for Latino Studies Parent

Most parents received formal support from individual schools during the application and enrollment process, but this support came late, after they had already made their choice.

Sample Evidence:
"The teachers and the social workers at Burns helped me [with the enrollment process]"
-Burns Academy for Latino Studies Parent

Some parents received early formal support during the school choice process and learned of more options than they had previously known of. As a result, they were able to apply to these schools and their children were enrolled in higher opportunity magnet and suburban Open Choice schools.

Sample Evidence:
"the director of Head Start. She enrolled him, she did the application online...She filled out the applications for multiple schools, not just for this one."
-Environmental Sciences Magnet School Parent

Most parents were unlikely to move their children from their current schools unless they had a strong negative experience. therefore, engaging them in the early school years is important for encouraging greater participation in the inter-district school choice system.

Sample Evidence:
"They are in the Burns school right now, and the fact that they already established there and that they have already been there for a while, um I would much rather just keep them there."
-Burns Academy for Latino Studies Parent

Next Steps

Research: Qualitative inquiry into structural barriers to participation in school choice for Spanish-speaking families.

Policy: Develop programs that will provide high quality, early formal support to Spanish-speaking families.

