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The Role of Regionalization in Public Education

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Research Question

What role does regionalization have in the delivery of educational services to students in the Greater Hartford region? Who benefits from these regionalization efforts? What are the benefits and what are the costs associated with the efforts and more specifically, do the benefits outweigh the costs?

Significance

The importance of this question is to understand the ways in which RESC's (Regional Education Service Centers) effect school systems. It is also to help find the ways in which school systems can benefit from combined efforts and to see if these programs save money and time.

The idea was this project was inspired from research done in a prior class which looked at a report done by Myron Orfield entitled **Connecticut Metropatterns:** *A Regional Agenda for Community and Prosperity in Connecticut***.** This report was commissioned to the Ameregis Corporation by the Archdiocese of Hartford and was completed in 2003. The results of this report said that regionalization is a necessary action in helping Connecticut 'retake control of its future,' they write: "Social and economic separation and sprawling development patterns harm not just Connecticut's

urban centers, but the state as a whole. Individual municipalities cannot effectively address these problems. They require regional and statewide action." (Orfield, Myron, 2003; Pg. 32)

This study is intended to see what is being been done in Connecticut that could be viewed as similar to what Orfield says needs to be done.

Thesis

The evidence shows that RESC's have a large and beneficial role in providing educational services to students in Connecticut school systems. Costs have been seen to decrease and services become more accessible to students, teachers and family members.

Methods

The research methods for this project consist of both quantitative and qualitative researches. Examples of the quantitative research are seen in the form of reports, journals and articles. Qualitative research was also used, in the form of private interviews, in this case with two separate people. One is with is the director of CREC, the other is with the acting principal of a magnet-school located in Bloomfield, Connecticut.

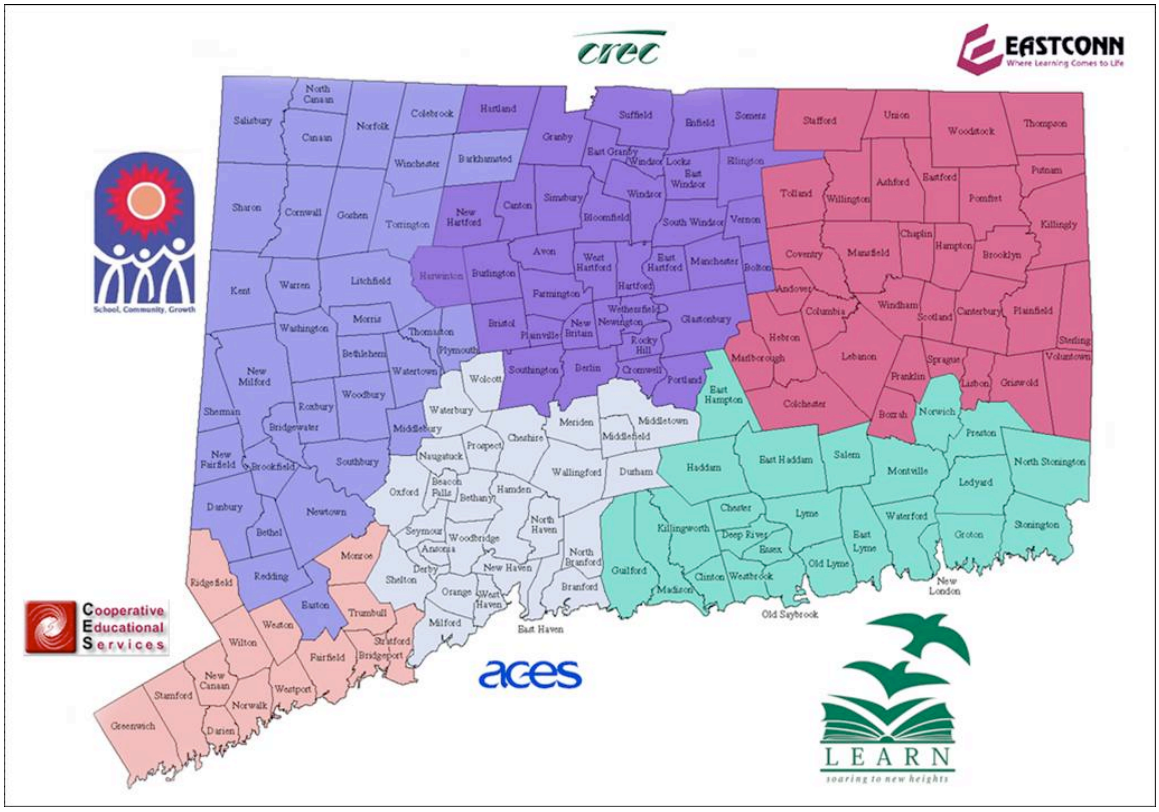
For the purpose of this research, one RESC was looked at and examined specifically. The specific RESC is called CREC which stands for Capital Region Education Council. It services Hartford and its surrounding areas. For the purpose of this study one institution was focused on as it would be too complex of an undertaking to

look at all RESC's in Connecticut in the time given. Choosing to examine a RESC in particular was a decision that was based on finding an establishment which, in theory, helps to do what Orfield's **Metropatterns** report says is necessary.

Background

Connecticut is a small state, proportioned almost like a rectangle. In terms of educational service centers it is split into 6 different sections; each center provides services for their respective district (section). In the Greater Hartford Region, CREC's services are used as and are employed as an example for this research project. If RESC's are not a familiar system one might look to this definition as a way to define an education service center: "RESC's are a way for public schools to develop cost effective programs which serve children and families (Bruce Douglas, 2004). Another good definition is given by one of the other RESC's which says that: "The purpose of each RESC is to enhance the quality of education and provide solutions to identified needs through a wide range of programs and services."(LEARN, 2004) These service centers are usually ways of helping school systems perform tasks that come in very small numbers or are difficult, costly or routine. The basic theory behind a program like this is that by combining efforts in a large group of schools (a regional district) that some of these tasks can become less complicated. Combining things into groups means that all issues can be dealt with on the same level which will in turn, hopefully, balance education levels for students.

CREC specifically serves children and families from New Haven County to the Massachusetts border. Attached is a map of Connecticut showing each of the 6 sections which the service centers for the state of Connecticut are split into. The top-center section is the area which CREC serves. The other 5 districts all have similar programs to CREC's. The greater New Haven Region has ACES which was established after CREC in 1969. The northeast corner of the state has EASTCONN while the southeast has an organization called LEARN. The following two institutions cover the western part of Connecticut and are called Education Connection, in the north and Cooperative Education Services in the south.



www.learn.k12.ct.us/ Resources/RESCs/

The RESC program in Connecticut was started under Connecticut State Statue 10-66 which says that "A regional educational service center may be established in any regional state planning area… for the purpose of cooperative action to furnish programs and services."(CT Statue 10-66a.) CREC is currently used as a Public Education Authority which means that it staffs experts in the field of education to service schooling needs. Last year they had an operating budget of 105 million dollars however CREC is run as a nonprofit agency (Bruce Douglas, 2004).

As a cooperative organization their mission statement is: To work with boards of education of the capitol region to improve the quality of public education for all learners. In order to achieve its mission statement CREC will:

> • Promote cooperation and collaboration with local school districts and other organizations committed to the improved quality of public education;
> • Provide cost effective services to member districts and other clients;
> • Listen and respond to client needs for the improved quality of public education and;
> • Provide leadership in the region through the quality of its services and its ability to identify and share quality services of its member districts and other organizations committed to public education.(CREC, 2004)

Each separate school district has to sign their students up annually to participate in CREC services at a cost of 20 cents ($0.20) per student. Schools then also have to pay for specific services. This can be done either as the services are needed or in advance, for instance before the school year starts. As of 2004 CREC offers over 150 different

services, each of which is available to everyone who signs on with CREC. Their region encompasses 35 greater Hartford public school districts where they have approximately 155,000 students participating. CREC is a semi-state run semi-private institution and is funded in such a way that 63% of their funding is from local sources, 35% comes from State/Federal funds and 2% is private funds. (CREC, 2004)

Findings

Positives:

The research shows many examples of positive things that CREC has done and continues to do. For instance, one thing they have done is created Employee Assistance Programs which is a service that helps people in the field of education who are experiencing personal problems. Clients receive one to three counseling sessions conducted by highly qualified licensed psychologists and social workers. This service provides low cost and easy access consulting with psychologists and social workers for students and their families. It is much easier to use and more cost effective for people who are having emotional problems than trying to hire their own professional help in the private sector. Services like these are extremely valuable because without them, people do not get the care that they need because they typically cannot pay for it. (Bruce Douglas, 2004) CREC also works to combine purchasing in the districts to lower costs for the schools. For instance, in the 2002-2003 school year CREC was able to save districts money that would have otherwise been lost as CREC gets companies to enter into agreements and contracts with them because they can offer such a large number of

costumers to these businesses. Examples of a few ways that they have saved money in the last year are:

- Saved districts $75,000 this year by expanding the Microsoft School Agreement to cover 15,000 computers, up from 3,500.
- Saved more than $100,000 for districts who are in the Connecticut Educators' Network while expanding the network's services.
- Secured more than $1 million worth of Universal Service Fund savings for Connecticut Educators' Network participants.
- Negotiated with the only Connecticut-based, certified **Understanding by Design** (curriculum development) trainer to provide teacher training at significantly reduced fees ($550 vs. $700 for the series; $200 vs. $900 for four-day training sessions).
- Entered an agreement with Heinemann Publishers, to offer their on-line courses in Reading and Writing instruction for teachers to our districts ($85 vs. $129 per course) (CREC, 2002-2003)

CREC also does things like help write grants as well as hold seminars for school districts on how to write them for themselves. Also in the 2002-2003 school year, CREC was able to assist in gaining almost 5 million dollars in grants for Hartford schools alone. (CREC 2002-2003) The Grant Division of CREC has a goal of writing at least 115 grants per year in raising amounts between 18 and 20 million dollars annually. (CREC 2004) Their services also help secure grants for construction projects including the building of new schools.

While CREC will help to secure funds, their actions do not stop there. The services that they offer can be complete, from the concept of a project right through its completion; they will actually manage the school as well if need be. CREC has a staff of experienced professionals in this field that can help to do anything from develop

preliminary programs and plans of operation for schools, to monitor its construction progress, start up the building and coordinate new services for that school.

CREC also works hard to offer their districts students' alternative choices. CREC has worked hard to help offer alternative choices to students in their region. One example of this can be seen in the form of 9 Magnet Schools which students can apply to if they so desire. Admissions to these schools are based on an open lottery system. If a child is accepted each school buses its students from their surrounding towns to their school site where they can all work together. Most of the Magnet schools have special offerings which attract students. Some of these programs include a focus in such subjects as arts, languages, music, math, science or sports. These independently run schools give students a unique opportunity to learn things in different ways in a setting with different students, often with similar interests as themselves. Magnet schools are a great way of bringing students together from different cities as well as giving students different chances and experiences.

Another part of CREC's offering of alternative choices has to do with their student services. They can provide services directly to students to support them as long as they are in any of the public schools in their region. One example of this is the Farmington Valley Diagnostic Center which: "provides services to students with learning and behavior problems, short term diagnostic and interim alternative placements and specialized evaluations to improve educational and behavior management strategies."(CREC 2004) This center allows the school district and CREC to keep a close watch on children with special needs and give them treatment all without the worry of proper care or diagnoses used to keep students in services longer than needed as a source

of income generation at other private institutions. In an interview with Bruce Douglas he said: "This is one of the best programs we have. It really lets you see that you are helping the kids." (Bruce Douglas, 2004)

They also have other alternative forms of education such as the Polaris Center which provides residential, full and partial-day special education programs and services to children with severe emotional, behavioral and learning disorders. A thematic curriculum emphasizes integrated, experiential learning. Services include behavioral intervention and support as well as on-site psychiatric consultation and management of psychoactive medication. They also offer a program called APEX which gives another chance to students expelled from a local district school. (CREC, 2004)

These programs allow students possibilities that a normal school setting would not. Students with special needs are taken care of in a more effective manner as they can all be around each other and their needs can be met more easily because there are fewer distractions. Programs like the Farmington Valley Diagnostic Center is also a beneficial arrangement because students are helped who may not have been helped before; they are typically out of school for less time than when in the care of a private entity. Developments such as these are ways to further even chances and opportunities for students who might not otherwise be up to normal.

While CREC does try to focus on the students and families, they also help teachers and faculty. For instance, CREC organizes workshops for teachers so they can participate in curriculum training and professional development. Through consolidating efforts they are able to offer teachers a much lower cost of training guides, online courses and teaching materials. They enter agreements with programs and are given large

discounts in pricing because of the amount of teachers they can get to participate. CREC says that: "based on research on what works in schools, we offer specialized training, consulting, and coaching services that have proven success in raising the quality of teaching and learning." (CREC, 2004) Some of these services include allowing the teachers to continue their education online, which is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week, and giving staff special specialized training on how to deal with students.

Negatives:

While it has been shown that RESC's can do great things, they do have some downfalls. For instance, magnet schools are supposed to be schools which are on an equal level to the neighboring public schools but a different alternative. Often times this is not the case. The students at magnet schools are motivated and end up doing better on standardized testing and AP scores which provokes competition from the surrounding schools. The regular public schools do not want to see all of their best and brightest kids apply to a magnet school for a good reason. If the smartest of the public school kids go to magnet schools, it simply makes the magnet schools look better and the regular public schools look worse.

CREC has to make sure that, while their magnet schools are doing well (especially because some are run directly by CREC), they are not making the other schools look like poor alternatives. They have to allow for a balance between the public schools and the magnet schools. If the magnet schools start to make the public schools look like incomparable alternatives then both CREC and the school districts have problems. CREC is hired semi-privately to work with schools in the surround Hartford

area which means that if the school system does not like what CREC is doing, they will no longer employ their services. In a recent interview with Anne McKernan, principal of the magnet school named the Metropolitan Learning Center (MLC) she said: "CREC tries to make sure MLC doesn't shine too much."(Anne McKernan, 2004) She believes that while CREC has done an excellent job so far, they should use the magnet schools to help benefit more students and parents in the surrounding area even if students do not attend that school. She said: CREC "needs to find more ways to take credit with Bloomfield and surrounding districts." (Anne McKernan, 2004) She goes on to illustrate that she thinks the relationship between magnet schools and the public schools would improve if CREC took advantage of the magnet schools more often and allowed more public school kids the opportunity to see them, visit, and interact with the schools and their students in any other way.

It is also true that sometimes services may suffer when RESC's are involved. This happens when the RESC's try to combine services to make them work for ever one. The services are created as a "greater good" and therefore some specific or minute things may be left out. This is the case in situations where each student/ teacher might not get every specific thing tailored to them. Both Bruce Douglas and Anne McKernan commented on this and neither felt that this situation was overbearing. Both said that they understand the consequences but there is very little missed compared to what is gained.

Supporting Research

Report:

The report done by Myron Orfield, entitled **Connecticut Metropatterns** is of substantial importance to this project. In reference to this project the report emphasize the need for regional efforts in the state of Connecticut. Its findings state: "The cumulative impacts of uncoordinated decision-making from 169 individual actors are increasingly detrimental to the long-term health of Connecticut." (Orfield, Myron, 2003; Pg. 32) Orfield also goes on to talk about the need for more effective decision making and regional leadership as well as the use of the states large investments in infrastructure and schools to encourage "smart growth" development by focusing funding in target areas. (Orfield, Myron, 2003) Orfield also says that: "Enhanced roles for state government, councils of government or other regional organizations can help solve regional problems while ensuring that all communities have a say in decision making."(Orfield, Myron, 2003; Pg. 13)

The **Metropatterns** report is something that relates directly to what CREC is doing. By regionalizing efforts as CREC does as one of the six RESC's in Connecticut, it is helping to put Connecticut on the right track for the future. This research was originally initiated to see what has been done in Connecticut that is similar to what Orfield is showing in his research. In reference to the work he has done, CREC would be a great example of ways to bring a large region together and collaborate efforts.

Journals:

While it has proven difficult to find articles on this specific topic, some journals which can be of value were used. One of the journals is entitled: *Stalking Cost-Effect Practices in Rural Schools* and goes in to detail about the effectiveness of RESC's. It is based on the study of ESA's (RESC's in Connecticut) and their effectiveness. The journal goes on to say that Educational Service Centers "provide services to component districts more cost-effectively than if the districts provided these services on their own." (Pg. 2) It also says that service centers rated in Texas "indicates that ESA's received high marks from 71% or more of the respondents on the quality of their organization, responsiveness, staff, and operations." (Pg. 2) The journal then reports that: "more than 80% of districts administrators indicated that their ESA allowed them to operate more efficiently."(Pg. 3) This part of the journal concludes by saying: "In sum, there is a growing body of literature that suggests that ESAs offer services more effectively and less costly than could component districts." (Pg. 3)

This journal on trying to effectively cut costs is a testament to exactly what RESC's and CREC are trying to do. This journal is important as well because it has specific sources which have been interviewed and say that their Service Centers provide them with effective ways of saving money and regionalizing efforts.

Another journal, entitled: *An Empirical Discussion of Public School Districts As Budget-Maximizing Agencies* is a helpful source. This article focuses on the school as a budget minded agency and the effects of money in the school system. This journal says

that: “supporters of public education use the same statistical methodologies to assert that positive, statistically significant economic relationships do exist between educational expenditures and the out comes generated.” (Pg. 2) It also says “that the amount of revenues available to a school affects its level of production.” (Pg. 2)

This journal also reflects institutions like CREC in a positive manner. CREC is good at saving school districts money, which this journal article says is helpful to the overall education experience. This journal also links revenues available to a schools level of production which means that if CREC is helping schools to save money then that is directly translated into a better education for the students involved because they can benefit from the larger amount of available revenues.

Conclusion

Overall, the research has shown that institutions like CREC are beneficial to the districts that they serve. The positive things that CREC does for students, teachers and families show that the benefits do outweigh the costs. The efforts put forth are advantageous to students; they are given options that they would otherwise not have without CREC. The same can be said for teachers and parents who benefit from the services which are also part of the vast program the CREC offers. The ability to save school districts money can benefit districts in many different ways. Saved money can help the towns, their schools and in turn the children or students; enough money can never be saved. Making services more readily available to the school systems at cheaper prices is extremely valuable to any school district. By making services further available

and easier to use, students and teachers get helped more quickly than in the private sector. This means that students and teachers are more healthy and apt to teaching and learning. Also, more time is spent in the school as there are fewer absences due to mental and physical illness so students can learn better and more easily.

The small problems associated with RESC's are not nearly as noticeable as the great things that have been done to help student services. The same can be said for the school districts as a whole. While they have to pay for services rendered, the services are cheaper than looking to hire private practices. In this case the role of regionalization in public education is one of great importance and is working well in this example.

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