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Ashley Yanyac
Trinity College

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**An Alternative Magnet High School:
The Sports & Medical Sciences Academy**

**Ashley M. Yanyac
Class of 2005
EDUC 400
Senior Research Paper Final Draft
December 20, 2004**

“During 1997-98, the first year of operation, the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy, Hartford’s first local charter high school, directed its resources toward establishing a “supportive learning community” within the district’s boundaries. The pioneer ninth grade class of 113 Academy students were recruited from seven Hartford middle and K-8 schools, and were brought together as a group, for the first time, at a location in the center of the city.”¹

Karen Finder- Founders of Sports Sciences Academy

Introduction

Educational inequality has, for an extremely long time, has been a problem in America and specifically in Hartford. It is a common fact that urban schools tend to be less successful in producing an acceptable level of educational obtainment for their graduates. In the state of Connecticut this fact has obviously been known for at least the past fifty years since in 1966 the first program in attempt to reverse this inequality was created. Project Concern was created in 1966 and consisted of busing students from urban school districts into suburban school districts in hopes of eliminating the educational gap that had been created over time. Project Concern was not overly successful and had to cope with racial discrimination problems that occurred as well as basic education problems. These problems that have existed since 1966 have not vanished and the educational society is still attempting to create ways for these problems to be narrowed or eliminated.

As discussed, there have been and continue to be many problems lurking within the Hartford School district. These problems include: inequality of education when compared to suburban schools, lack of proper equipment and technology, socio-economic

¹ Strategic School Profiles (1997-1998): Division of Evaluation and Research, Data Central.
http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/der/datacentral/ssp/ssp_frameset.htm

problems, and many more. All of these problems have been present for many years and there is little to show of any overall improvement even when including the changes made to the school system since the Sheff v. O'Neill Supreme Court case. But of all the changes made to the Hartford School district, from increased funding to more stringent guidelines, none have made more of an improvement than the introduction of alternative educational choices for students.

Since the mid 1990's there have been many choices for students to choose from when deciding where they would like to attend middle and high school. These choices include regional technical-vocational schools, regional agricultural schools, lighthouse schools, the Open Choice program (which replaced Project Concern in the 1997-1998 school year), magnet schools, and charter schools². All of these choices were created in hopes of fostering higher educational equality as well as providing students attending public schools more options for a specialized education.

Of all of these choices none has made more significant changes to the landscape of public education than the introduction of magnet schools in 1991 and charter schools in 1997.³ In Connecticut alternative forms of schooling are extremely popular; magnet and charter schools are an ever growing phenomenon in the state of Connecticut and more keep opening on an annual basis. Currently in Connecticut there are 31 magnet schools, 13 Charter Schools, 18 regional vocational-technical schools, and 19 regional agricultural centers and with new educational policies being created there is little chance of this number decreasing any time soon. And of all the magnet schools in Connecticut

² Connecticut State Department of Education. Public School Choice in Connecticut: 2003-2004. http://www.state.ct.us/sde/dsi/equity/schoolchoice_eng2003.pdf

³ Connecticut State Department of Education. Public School Choice in Connecticut: 2003-2004. http://www.state.ct.us/sde/dsi/equity/schoolchoice_eng2003.pdf

the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy in Hartford is an extremely interesting example of the success that can come from these alternative schools and should be studied to determine what makes it so successful and popular.

Research Question and Significance

The question I want to answer in this study is: **What makes students and teachers choose to attend or teach in the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy in Hartford?**

This questions significance to educational studies can be broken into four different aspects; the first aspect being the Sheff v. O'Neill Supreme Court case, the second aspect being the implementation of charter and magnet schools in Connecticut, the third aspect being the improvement of public schools as a whole, and the final aspect that aides in proving the significance of the research question are literature reviews of other authors. And it is through these four aspects that the gravity of this research question will be proven to the readers as well as introducing the reader to the basic background of how the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy was created.

The Sheff v. O'Neill Supreme Court case is most clear and relevant to citizens of Hartford and Connecticut, but it is also easily recognizable to all of the country because of the impact the findings of the court has had on public education "Statewide, in the 1991-92 school year, children from minority groups constituted 25.7 percent of the public school population. In the Hartford public school system in that same period, 92.4 percent of the students were members of minority groups, including, predominantly, students

who were either African-American or Latino.”⁴ It is for this reason that in 1989 one Hartford student decided to take action. *Sheff v. O’Neill* is Connecticut Supreme Court case between Milo Sheff (the plaintiff) and Governor O’Neill (the defendant) that argued students in urban school districts were being cheated of the “quality of education that the states Constitution guarantees.”⁵ The Supreme Court eventually ruled in 1996 that the inequality of education between students in urban school districts compared to students in suburban schools districts was unconstitutional and resulting in students being denied their constitutional right of equal education.⁶ With this decision the Supreme Court ruled that it was not the courts decision to make changes to the school systems, but rather that the state legislation had to make these changes and they did so swiftly.

“On July 25, 1996 Governor John Rowland issued Executive Order No. 10, creating the Education Improvement Panel ("EIP"), which was charged to ‘explore, identify and report on a broad range of options for reducing racial isolation in our state's public schools, improving teaching and learning, enhancing a sense of community and encouraging parental involvement.’ Twenty-one Connecticut citizens, diverse in race, occupation and background, were selected by the Governor and the Legislative leadership and appointed to serve on this panel which was chaired by Theodore S. Sergi, the State's Commissioner of Education.”⁷

This action by ex-Governor Rowland was taken just sixteen days after the courts July 9th ruling and would result in Public Act 97-290, which stated that the state would attempt to fight economic isolation problems by including programming such as creating:

“1) Interdistrict magnet school programs; (2) charter schools; (3) interdistrict after-school, Saturday and summer

⁴ *Sheff v. O’Neill Ruling (1996)*

<http://www.moffitt.com/archive/sheff.html>

⁵ Connecticut State Department of Education. Public School Choice in Connecticut: 2003-2004.

http://www.state.ct.us/sde/dsi/equity/schoolchoice_eng2003.pdf

⁶ Connecticut State Department of Education. Public School Choice in Connecticut: 2003-2004.

http://www.state.ct.us/sde/dsi/equity/schoolchoice_eng2003.pdf

⁷ <http://www.jud.state.ct.us/external/news/sheff.htm>

programs and sister-school projects; (4) intradistrict and interdistrict public school choice programs; (5) interdistrict school building projects; (6) interdistrict program collaborative for students and staff; (7) minority staff recruitment; (8) distance learning through the use of technology; and (9) any other experience that increases awareness of the diversity of individuals and cultures.”⁸

And it was through this decision by the Education Improvement Panel that magnet and charter schools were put on the fast track in educational planning. Now it should be discussed how the implementation of magnet and charter schools was performed in the state of Connecticut.

The second aspect that gives significance to the research question is how magnet and charter schools were implemented in the state of Connecticut. First, to understand what a charter and magnet schools are and the difference between the two a definition of each will be given. A charter school is “a public nonsectarian school organized as a nonprofit corporation and operated independently of a local or regional board of education” while a magnet school is “a publicly funded school operated by a local or regional school district, by a regional educational service center or by cooperative agreement involving two or more districts. Each magnet school has an educational theme or focus; students choose to enroll based on their interest in the school’s theme.”⁹ Further the first magnet school was started in New London in 1991 and the first charter school was started in 1997 the year following the Education Improvement Panel’s decisions on programming to decrease economic isolation and increase diversity in Connecticut public schools.

⁸ *Memorandum of decision - Sheff v. O’Neil*
<http://www.jud.state.ct.us/external/news/sheff.htm>

⁹ Connecticut State Department of Education. *Public School Choice in Connecticut: 2003-2004*.
http://www.state.ct.us/sde/dsi/equity/schoolchoice_eng2003.pdf

The third aspect that will help to provide significance to the research question is the impact that the findings of the research question could have on schools. Specifically, if it is found what makes students choose to attend the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy then those same principals could be emulated in other public schools to make them just as attractive to students and their parents. These different aspects could be easily emulated with higher funding such as: higher technology or better facilities or could be hard to emulate if found that students like caring teachers and a cohesive student body (which is not easily replicated). Whether it is easily emulated or more difficult to emulate this is an important topic to look into solely because of the impact that finding what attracts students to the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy could have on schools in general.

The fourth and final aspect that helps to provide significance to the research question is prior research done on magnet schools and school choice. Past research is so important since it gives support or opposition to the findings of this research as well as allowing an insightful view into a topic that one may not consider when concentrating on their own research. For the literature reviews on the topic of school choice and magnet schools three articles were chosen: “Do Magnet Schools Boost Achievement?” by Adam Gamoran, “Why Do Students Choose Alternative Schools?” by Sally Bomotti, and “On Better Alternatives for Urban Students: a Conversation with Sylvia L. Peters” by Marge Scherer.

In “Do Magnet Schools Boost Achievement?” by Adam Gamoran the argument that Gamoran is making is that magnet schools produce better and more qualified students for two primary reasons. Those reasons are stronger personal relationships and

increased accessibility to technology. Gamoran states that stronger personal relationships are important because they help to create “‘social capital’ that is, strong social networks in which norms, expectations, trust, and a sense of interpersonal obligations prevail. Recent decades have seen the withdrawal of institutions that once anchored these communities....”¹⁰ These personal relationships can be between parents and the school, teachers and students, or students and other students; but it is important for these social relationships to be present in a school for students to be successful. Access to technology is the other reason why magnet schools produce better students and this is a more obvious reason. This is because magnet schools are able to obtain grant money much easier than a typical high school and therefore can more easily obtain grant money for highly technological computer facilities and classrooms. These two reasons allow students at magnet schools to be more capable individuals and more productive adults which is a goal of all education systems.

In the article “Why Do Parents Choose Alternative Schools?” by Sally Bomotti, the focus is on the parents and their decision making skills. Bomotti’s main point in this article is that parents are making the decision to send their children to alternative schools for highly educated and thought out reasons. It is stated that “parents tend to choose alternative schools for their children based on reasonable consideration and not simply on convenience or the school’s social composition.”¹¹ The significance behind this is that parents are shown here as putting thought into the decision process of where to send their children, knowing the advantages and disadvantages of the different schooling options

¹⁰ Gamoran, Adam. “Do Magnet Schools Boost Achievement?” Educational Leadership, Oct 1996 v54 n2 p 42.

¹¹ Bomotti, Sally. “Why Do Parents Choose Alternative Schools?” Educational Leadership, Oct. 1996 v54 n2 p30

and attempting to send their child to the best option for their child. This is highly applicable to the research question and parental involvement could make up a large part of what school a child will attend.

The third and final literature review will be on the article “On Better Alternatives for Urban Students: a Conversation with Sylvia L. Peters” by Marge Scherer. In the article Sylvia Peters discussed the importance of alternative schools and the benefits that they provide to their students. Peters discusses the importance of technology and allowing students to work with it, she introduces the idea of New Compact Schools. In the New Compact school model it “permits schools to cluster their resources, personnel, and funds...it greatly reduces the amount of learning time lost to students from the high mobility of their families.”¹² This model is currently working in the impoverished Baltimore, Maryland and most importantly stresses the importance of students access to technology even if that means sharing the technology with other schools in order to afford it. Now, whether or not this idea would work overall in the state of Connecticut is uncertain, but perhaps taking one or two aspects of the program and attempting such ideas in Connecticut’s urban schools would be a productive endeavor.

There are many reasons why studying the question “what makes students and teachers choose to attend or teach in the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy in Hartford?” is important and significant to educational studies. As stated above these reasons include: the Sheff v. O’Neil Supreme Court case, the implementation of charter and magnet schools in Connecticut, the affect that this research could have on other educational institutions, and past research on this subject.

¹² Scherer, Marge. “On Better Alternatives for Urban Students: a Conversation with Sylvia L. Peters.” Educational Leadership. Oct. 1996 v. 54 n2 p 47.

History of the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy

The Sports and Medical Sciences Academy was founded by in part by Karen Finder as a charter school in 1997 and was originally named the Sports Sciences Academy. The school is located on Asylum Avenue in Hartford and will reside there until the 2006-2007 academic year at which time the school will move in the Colt Building which is being renovated for them. In 1997-1998, its first academic year, the school was far from diverse- it had fifty-four black students, fifty-two Hispanic students, and four white students all of which were from Hartford. Karen Finder's and the founder's idea for the school can best be summed up in her statement that "the Sports Sciences Academy founders believed that the current educational system needed to change. To accomplish that objective they designed an effective educational process that capitalized on a young person's enthusiasm for sports without sacrificing his/her pursuit of academic excellence."¹³

In the first years of the schools function, up until the 2002-2003 academic year, Karen Finder was a founder of the school as well as the Principal. Under her rule the school worked towards creating a "supportive learning community" since they "recruited from seven Hartford middle and K-8 schools, and were being brought together as a

¹³ Finder, Karen. "Founders' Conceptual Ideas"
<http://www.sportandmedicalsciences.org/history.htm>

group, for the first time.”¹⁴ But, it was not until the 2002-2003 academic year that the school really started to make dramatic changes for the better.

In July of 2002 Dr. Joseph Gallucci was brought in as principal of the school, along with the change of principal in 2002-2003 school year the school also made the change from charter school to magnet school. Further, Gallucci and the school officials made the students complete an application and interview before their names were allowed into the lottery for the school; and many changes were made to the way the school was run, the academics taught at the school, the mission statement, and the name. The school name was changed to the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy and its new mission statement was (and still is) “to develop a community of life-long learners in which all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and courage to become productive citizens within a diverse society.”¹⁵ The school in making the switch from charter school to magnet school also created its theme as being “a local magnet school which utilizes a thematic approach in delivering a cross-disciplinary curriculum, integrating technology into all subject areas,” and thought the new theme of the school there was also a new academic focus taking place.¹⁶ More emphasis was now to be placed on academic work and the usage of various forms of technology in their academic work. Through Dr. Gallucci and the other administrators the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy made a drastic turn and would within two short years become one of the best schools in Hartford.

¹⁴ Strategic School Profiles (1997-1998): Division of Evaluation and Research, Data Central.
http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/der/datacentral/ssp/ssp_frameset.htm

¹⁵ Sports and Medical Sciences Academy-General Information (Website).
http://www.sportandmedicalsciences.org/general_info.htm

¹⁶ Sports and Medical Sciences Academy-General Information (Website).
http://www.sportandmedicalsciences.org/general_info.htm

The Sports and Medical Sciences Academy Today

Today in the 2004-2005 academic school year the students are in a school quite different from the one that Karen Finder and the founders had created only five years ago. It is difficult to list in all the ways that the school had changed since its transformation into a magnet school and with Dr. Gallucci as its leader. Some of the ways in which the school has changed is: in the way students are selected, the number of students and the demographics of the student body, the curriculum, and the technological aspects of the school. But three aspects of the school that haven't changed practically at all is the community level of involvement, the parental level of involvement, and the teachers/administrators level of involvement in the schools functioning. Now all of these aspects will be discussed in order to go into more detail about how the school really has evolved into being a premier high school not just in Hartford, but statewide.

Under the original framework of the school students were let in under a pure lottery system, this allowed for any student to possibly be admitted so long as they put their name down on the card. This was one of the first things that Dr. Gallucci changed when he came to power in 2002; he along with a few others devised the school application and interview process. This process was created by taking private schools and college's admittance applications and forming them into questions that would apply to their students, as well as requiring students to obtain recommendations. One question that was asked was "Why do you want to attend the Sport and Medical Sciences Academy (this statement must be written by the student)?"¹⁷ After the application process the students had to attend an interview, where if they didn't show, their names would be removed from the list. If the student did attend their name was placed into the lottery

¹⁷ Sports and Medical Sciences Academy: Information and Application Packet.

system, this allowed for only active students who truly wanted to attend the school to be in the school since they were the only ones to be placed into the lottery. This was one way that the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy became so prosperous in such a short time- because the students wanted to be there. This year, the 2004-2005 academic year, will be the first year that there will be no application process because the Director of Magnet schools decided that the application process was wrong and no longer allowed it. Only the future will tell what affect the loss of the application process will have on the student base of the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy.

For the 2002-2003 school year the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy student body was made up of 141 black students, 156 Hispanic students, thirteen white students, and one “other”.¹⁸ The total number of students in the school was 311 and of those students seventeen percent are from one of the fourteen suburban school districts that participate in the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy. Overall, the school has become significantly larger in size with more students from different school districts, but there is still a disproportionately large number of minorities attending the school.

The curriculum has changed a lot from what it originally was to form the widespread options that students now attending the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy have. Students today have the choice between taking General education courses, Academic education courses, or Honors courses. The school runs on a semester basis, so students take up to four classes for a semester and then another four classes for the second semester. The subjects that students are required to take are: English, science, math, social studies and electives; but what class in each subject students take are up to

¹⁸ Strategic School Profiles (2002-2003): Division of Evaluation and Research, Data Central.
http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/der/datacentral/ssp/ssp_frameset.htm

them and/or their coursework track. For example, in the first semester freshman year General education students will take English 1G, while Academic students will take Composition A, and honors students will take Composition H. Each student will therefore get a good solid educational background that is geared towards their ability level, which is very important. Also, students are have the opportunity to obtain college credits not only through Advanced Placement courses but also through taking classes at Capital Community College in the afternoon during the last block of class. Some of the other special options that are offered by the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy are: Anatomy and Physiology, Sports Journalism, Sports Marketing, Advanced Marketing, Sports Studies, and foreign languages. Of all of the options that students have at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy the most worthwhile and lucrative are marketing and the schools' Senior Project.

Marketing at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy is required by all students to take at least once in their time at the school. The marketing class allows students to use a great deal of technology in the classroom; by using computers, PowerPoint, Smart Boards, laptops, and many other devices the students are introduced into cutting edge approaches to marketing in the world. Each marketing class is required to design a project and two years ago the students were given \$20,000 to actually design the marketing project for the school- making bumper stickers, radio commercials, fliers, billboards, etc. It is in this class that many students are introduced to marketing and the business world and realize they like it a lot. In the case that they do like marketing there is an after school club and a program called Mass Mutual Achievers that allows students to work in the business during the summer and guarantees them a job when they

complete high school. These programs are all great ways for students to realize the occupational options that are open to them if they assert themselves and take education seriously.

All seniors at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy are required to complete a senior project. In their senior project they research colleges and/or future occupations, write a resume, write a five to eight paragraph essay about themselves, complete a financial aid search, obtain several letters of recommendations, and attend parental and school staff consultations. All of these aspects of the project must be completed before graduation and serve as a way to ensure that students are prepared for their future once they leave the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy.

The final aspect of the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy that has changed drastically over the five years of the school is technology. At first in the 1997-1998 school year there was minimal technology at best, there were computers but not many in working order. It was Dr. Gallucci who put technology in an extreme level of importance to the school. And over the past three years Dr. Gallucci and his staff have received many grants (including a \$30,000 annual Carl Perkins Grant for vocational education) which help to give the school all of the funding for their technology. The technology applied at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy is vast and includes: a laptop for every teacher, a Smart Board or Smart Board 2 in every classroom, wireless computer labs, two carts with fifteen laptops each that are hooked up to the schools network, and a special marketing computer lab. In all there is one computer for every 3.8 students and that will increase as time proceeds and more grants are received.¹⁹ Technology is one area in

¹⁹ Strategic School Profiles (2002-2003): Division of Evaluation and Research, Data Central.
http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/der/datacentral/ssp/ssp_frameset.htm

particular that the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy stands out, not just in Hartford but in the state as a whole, there are few places in the state as good as this school and that is something that shows through the students that come from the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy.

The three areas of the school that have changed only a little over the years are: parental, communal, and school staff participation in the school. Parents, the community, and the school's staff have, since the first year in 1997, been extremely involved in the organization and management of the school and the only change made to that is the way in which they are involved. Originally in 1997 many parents protested and argued for equal educational rights (having to do with Sheff v. O'Neil) but currently parents are involved in different groups within the school. There are now two separate ways that parents can be active in the school community and that is through Breakfast with the Principal on Saturday mornings where the principal sits and discusses problems or concerns that the parents may have about something, or through the School Improvement team which is where members of the staff, administration, teachers, parents, and students all can come to voice their opinions and make changes as to how the school is run. Teachers are extremely active within the school now more than ever, and teachers have three or four different group meetings that they can attend in hopes of making changes to the schools management. Those meetings are: Cluster team meetings (between a certain grade), Academic Leaders team meetings (between a certain school subject), School Improvement team meetings (between parents, staff, teachers, students, and administrators), New Teachers meetings (for teachers in their 1st, 2nd, or 3rd year teaching), and the Director's group (only for the director of each aspect of the school).

Through all of these meetings the teachers and staff of the school are given several opportunities to make changes to the school, and most importantly have their voices heard. Overall, the teachers, staff, students, parents, and community are as active as they ever were in the school's management but now there are meetings where all voices are heard instead of arguments and protests that occurred in years past.

Research Methodology

In completing the research necessary for this project there were many different aspects of the research process that needed to be kept in mind and decided upon. The first thing that was needed was to decide how the research would be completed, whether the research would be done using interviews, statistical analysis, or historical documents. In looking at the research question at hand it was decided that using interviews of students and teachers at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy would be the best approach possible. And with the decision of interviews the research was made into qualitative research and that helped to guide my next steps in the research process.

Having decided the research would be qualitative using interviews as my primary method of gaining information the next necessary step would be to create the questions and consent forms necessary to complete the interviews. It was decided that there would need to be two sets of questions and two sets of consent forms, one for the students and one for the teachers with the consent form for the students including a space for the parents as well as the students to sign. The questions were open-ended and allowed for the interviewee to give a full explanation to the question in their own words without any censorship. The questions for the students were:

- What made you choose to attend the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy? Did you want to attend this school or did your parents want you to attend it? What roles do your parents play in your education?
- How do you rate the academic work at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy? How much homework do you have on a daily/weekly basis? What kinds of papers or group projects have you been involved in?
- What is your area of concentration at the school?
- What classes are you currently taking? Will these classes help you to achieve your goals after graduation?
- What do you plan on doing for your mandatory job shadowing and internship in your later academic years? What do you plan on doing after school-college/trade school or going into the workforce?
- How would you rate the teachers in the school? Do you feel as though they care about your academic work as well as you as a person?
- Do you feel you are getting a good education at this school? Do you think attending a traditional high school would be better for students? Why or why not.
- Do you plan on taking the SAT's? If so, does this school help you prepare for them?
- If a peer asked you whether or not they should attend the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy what would you say to them? What would help you decide if this would be the best place for this student?
- Do you participate in after-school sports at this school? If so which ones, if not why? Are there any incentives to do so?

The teachers and Dr. Gallucci had a different consent form (without guardian signature line) and different questions. This is the list of questions that was asked to the teachers interviewed and Dr. Gallucci:

- How do you like teaching at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy? Do you find it that the students are genuinely interested in the subjects?
- Would you prefer to be working at another school at this time?
- What is it like working with a relatively new principal? How would you rate the changes Dr. Gallucci has made in the school since he started?
- What do you think that advantages are to students who attend this school? What types of students do you think would benefit from attending this school the most?
- Do most students who graduate go to college or go into the workforce? Does the school help students find colleges or jobs that are right for them?
- Would you send your child to this school? Why or why not.
- What do you think of the unique school subjects taught here? Does this benefit the students or make the students more marketable after graduation?
- What is the number and percentage of students who participate in sports at this school? Do you find sports participation to be equal between men and women here? What is your take on the impact sports can have on student's academic and personal life.

These questions for both students and faculty have an extremely broad span but the most important questions there circle around the thematic question of: why the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy?

In order to be able to start the interviews it was necessary to complete an Institutional Review Board (IRB) form that assures the research/interviews will be conducted in an ethical fashion and that no interviewee will be violated. This form came back and required me to make some changes to my interview questions (which were already made to the questions written above) which were completed and then I was allowed to commence my interviews.

The first and last interview conducted was with Dr. Gallucci, it was through my interviews with him that I was able to get the best background on the school. This background information would be key to my understanding of the students and teachers answers. Dr. Gallucci did a great job of answering my questions about the school and the different programs that are offered in order to keep the students, teachers, faculty, staff, parents, and community one cohesive body. It was only after my initial interview with Dr. Gallucci did I feel sufficiently prepared to begin the interviews with the teachers.

The teachers were the next to be interviewed because I wanted their opinions on: what makes them want to teach at the school, why they feel students attend, and about what types of students they feel will do best at this school. Overall, what I found from the teachers is that: they sincerely like being at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy, they feel that students benefit greatly from the block scheduling and unique coursework offered, that the technology they have is essential to creating the student body they currently have, that students who attend genuinely care about their coursework, and that

having a cohesive student and faculty allows for the school to run in such a smooth fashion. The overall answer I got from the question referring to whether or not they would prefer to be working at another school was a resounding “No, this is the best school I have ever worked at!” This answer was given to me by four out of the five teachers I interviewed and the fifth teacher gave the response of “No, only if I was working as an administrator.” I feel as though that is one of, if not, the most important question that I asked the teachers, because when the faculty is content and enjoying their position than their performance will be better, as well as the students.

The student interviews were set up by Dr. Gallucci’s secretary and were comprised of five students in grades ten through twelve and one 2001 graduate of the school. The students were four females and two males and they were all minority students with two being from a school district other than Hartford. The student interviews were to be of vital importance to the overall outcome of my research and having the past information from Dr. Gallucci and the five teachers interviewed I felt properly prepared to interview the students. All five current students were interviewed on the same day and they all gave similar answers to the key questions. The main focus of all of the students answers to the questions surrounding why they chose to attend the school were: the small class sizes, rigorous academic work, technologically advanced classrooms, and advanced preparation for the future. These responses were given by every student in at least one question and it is clear to see how seriously the students take their academic work and their futures. The students interviewed also stressed the fact that *they decided to attend the school on their own and that their parents didn’t play that large of a role in their decision making process.* In analyzing their answers it is clear to see that the Sports and

Medical Sciences Academy pulls students in who genuinely care about their academic achievements and chose to attend a school that would challenge them and properly prepare them for their future.

In regards to the interview of the graduate of the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy who currently attends Trinity College a different view of the school was given. It was stressed through this interview that when he graduated in 2001 the school also had students who genuinely cared about their academic performance, but that the technology was not there. He stressed that the school lacked many of the necessary pieces of equipment, but that the school still managed to do a better job of educating than Hartford Public schools because of the small class sizes available at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy. The interviewee also seemed extremely interested in all of the changes made to the school since 2001 and was greatly impressed by the massive steps the school has taken.

The last interview conducted was again with Dr. Gallucci and this time focused on the history of the school and more in depth information on the current organization of the school. In this interview the discussion was on the different meeting groups that occurred to keep all faculty, parents, students, and staff updated with information and having everyone's voice heard. Overall, this interview brought together his feelings on the school and also allowed for discussion on his leaving the school effective January 2005. Dr. Gallucci stressed the ability of the school to succeed and the high caliber of students and teachers that are present at the school. Dr. Gallucci came into the school in July 2002 and gave it a massive overhaul and introduced many students to technology and what their life can be like with a good solid education. And it is because of Dr.

Gallucci's beliefs and hard work that the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy is succeeding like it is.

In all of the interviews conducted; between the teachers, students, and Dr. Gallucci it became clear that the Sports and Medical Sciences is successful because of a few main points. These points are surrounding the ideas that a collegial atmosphere focused programming, interested student body, rigorous programming, technological advantages, and the preparation of students for the future are what attract the students and the faculty to the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy.

Thesis

The Sports and Medical Sciences Academy provide a safe and supportive learning environment for students and faculty: faculty choose to work at the school for its collegial atmosphere, focused programming, and engaged student population; students choose to attend the school for its rigorous curriculum, technological advantages, and improved opportunities for future learning.

Findings

The above stated thesis can be proven by looking at the findings from the interviews of both the teachers and the students. The teachers had their own set of reasons for choosing to work at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy and the students had their own reasons for attending. And it is through the reasons that the students and teachers give that inferences can be made about how to improve school systems as a whole.

The five teachers that were interviewed all had started at different points in the school's short history, some having been at the school since its beginning while others being there for only months. The findings of the teachers' responses show three distinct reasons why the teachers choose to work at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy over other schools: set in a better location or having a larger more diverse student body. Those reasons are: A) the collegial atmosphere present in the school between the faculty as a whole, B) the presence of an engaged student body, and C) the focused programming. The collegial atmosphere is exemplified in the following ways: through the various Cluster Team and Academic Leader meetings, the Open Door policy of Dr. Gallucci and through the open banter I experienced in the faculty room where the teachers were openly joking and having discussions with each other. Finding B states that the engaged student body is a reason why the teachers choose to work at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy. This can be supported by the responses received from three of the five teachers about how the students, as a whole, care about their academic work and show a lot more effort than in other Hartford public schools that the teachers have worked in. Finding C states that the focused programming is another positive aspect of the school that attracts teachers. The school offers many different courses that many typical high schools just do not offer, and this is one reason why all five of the teachers interviewed believed that the unique classes and content provide the students with a better education and one that differentiates their students from any other schools' students. Overall, through the interviews with the teachers it was shown that they had several key reasons for teaching at and being avid supporters of the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy that go far

beyond just being their place of occupation, rather the teachers believe in the schools teaching methods, subject areas, and the students.

The findings in the student interviews that support the thesis that students choose to attend the school for its rigorous curriculum, technological advantages, and improved opportunities for future learning can be found throughout each and every student's interview including the interview with the graduate of the school. First, it was found that students choose the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy because of the rigorous curriculum that they face. This may seem like far from the truth, but actually every student made one comment or another acknowledging the importance of taking classes that will properly prepare them for their futures, not classes that will just fulfill the general requirements for graduation. The students at this school know the importance of a quality education and what they need to do in order to prepare themselves for the future so that they can attend a good college and/or get a good occupation after school. Second, all five students praised the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy's technology and the incorporation of such technology into the classroom. Each student interviewed had already completed at least one PowerPoint presentation, had been introduced to searching "proper" websites (reputable) of the World Wide Web for information on reports and school work, had completed class presentations using their classrooms Smart Board, and most importantly felt confident in using computers. And the third finding in support of the thesis is that all of the students including the graduate recognized the importance of the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy offering improved opportunities for future learning (college, trade school, etc). The students knew the importance of education and the various opportunities available to them as students of the Sports and Medical

Sciences Academy for the future and the graduate is currently attending Trinity College in Hartford making him quite aware of the opportunities for future learning that the school offers. Finally it was described that the seniors at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy perform an intense college, job, and financial aid search as well as preparing a resume and collecting letters of recommendation. All of which, is done in order to ensure that the students are ready for their entrance into the world after graduation.

Overall, the Sports and Medical Science Academy provides its students with a superb education that fully prepares them for their future and the students understand this and choose the school for just that reason. The teachers choose to work at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy over all other schools in Connecticut because it allows them to teach in subjects not taught in most high schools to students who are truly interested in the subjects with colleagues that respect each and enjoy teaching at the school. And when these two aspects collide- well prepared happy students and effective happy teachers- the school has all the opportunity in the world to become prosperous and an effective institution of alternative education in Connecticut.

Conclusion

My results show that students and faculty of the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy choose to work or attend the school because of rigorous programming, focused coursework, collegial atmosphere, tremendous accessibility to technology, and improved opportunity for future learning. The students and faculty both have their own reasons but the fact is that both the students and faculty would choose to be nowhere else than at their current school.

Also, the students and faculty both enjoy working at or attending the school because of small class sizes of an average of 15.5 students per 10th grade English class (which is about 5 students less than the state average).²⁰ The small class sizes are part of what helps to create at least two of the reasons why students and teachers choose the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy. According to the thesis one of the reasons why the teachers choose to work at the school is because of the collegial atmosphere, which is allowed to foster through the small number of students and teaches at the school. Because when there are smaller numbers relationships are easier to form with other people. Also, according to the thesis one of the reasons why students choose to attend the school is because of the rigorous programming; which is enabled through the presence of small focused classroom, not large classrooms that are present in most typical public schools (especially in Hartford). It can easily be said that students and teachers make the decision to attend or work at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy in part because of the small class sizes.

Rigorous coursework is one other area that attracts students and teachers to the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy, students like the benefits of rigorous coursework and the teachers like students who are dedicated enough to take difficult classes and actually do the work for them. So, despite many stereotypes of teenagers in America there are many students who like to take mentally challenging courses in order to properly prepare themselves for their future, and once this fact is believed than maybe more schools will offer various honor programs and college credit initiatives. This is important for students to have, because when students are challenged and believe that

²⁰ Strategic School Profiles (2002-2003): Division of Evaluation and Research, Data Central.
http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/der/datacentral/ssp/ssp_frameset.htm

there are people who believe in their abilities they are then destined to do better as students and as people.

As a school the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy is the best ranking school in the Hartford School District, having six students pass all four parts of the CAPT tests and on average scoring five to ten percent higher on each section of the CAPT than any other school in the Hartford School District. This may be for many reasons and one of them definitely is that the students choose to be at this school and the schools enrollment is not simply based upon where the students live, but rather the educated choice of where the students wanted to attend school. The teachers and the students choose to be at this school and those reasons have already been discussed, now the if other schools can replicate what the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy does than perhaps all schools can improve as this one has.

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