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### COVID-19 Pandemic: Major Disparities in Connecticut Public Education

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2020

# COVID-19 Pandemic: Major Disparities in Connecticut Public Education

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## COVID-19 Pandemic: Major Disparities in Connecticut Public Education

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Oonah Maggie O'Neil

### *Introduction*

The opportunity gap has long existed between urban and suburban communities and COVID-19 has brought these issues to the forefront of many people's minds because of virtual learning. The opportunity gap is defined as "the cumulative differences in access to key educational resources that support learning at home and at school: expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful information resources" (Darling-Hammond 2013, 77). A notable example of these inequalities is the differences between the public education systems of Hartford and Greenwich, Connecticut. The pandemic has challenged all public education systems; however, cities like Hartford, with many low-income families, have had the most difficulty adapting to online learning. It has been challenging for the Hartford public education system to provide adequate learning for their students because many students did not have sufficient access to broadband or computers in the beginning months of the pandemic. Greenwich, a wealthy suburb of Stamford, Connecticut, and New York City, has grappled with remote learning, yet not to the same extent because they have widespread access to resources that Hartford lacks. Students, especially in elementary school, have been struggling due to a lack of school structure and limited access to food and other services that schools provide. Virtual learning has also taken a toll on teachers in cities, which has heightened student difficulties. Connecticut's Governor, Ned Lamont, developed temporary solutions to aid schools and those solutions have been successful, but there are still more permanent solutions that must be implemented to minimize these inequalities. The pandemic has impacted every aspect of an urban student's schooling experience and amplified pre-existing disparities regarding broadband, computer access, race and ethnicity, student challenges, and teacher resources and capacity, between urban and suburban areas. COVID-19 has exacerbated the pre-existing opportunity gap between urban schools, like Hartford, and suburban schools, like Greenwich, significantly altering the education an urban student gets compared to the education a suburban student gets, despite both being in Connecticut.

### *The Background of Hartford and Greenwich Public Schools*

Hartford and Greenwich are in the same state, so their public education systems are required to meet the same standards, but the growing opportunity gap makes that difficult. The Connecticut Department of Education's "Five-year Comprehensive Plan" from 2016 to 2021 stated that they are committed to:

- Ensuring their [students] non-academic needs are met so they are healthy, happy, and ready to learn. (Mental health, nutrition, after-school programs)
- Supporting their school and district in staying on target with learning goals. (Education Cost Sharing - ECS, Alliance Districts, Commissioner's Network, School Choice)
- Giving them access to great teachers and school leaders.
- Making sure they learn what they need to know to succeed in college, career, and life. (Connecticut 2016, 2)

These goals indicate that the Connecticut Department of Education wants to minimize education disparities throughout the state's public education systems and provide equal opportunities to their students. However, in 2016, the pandemic was nonexistent, and no one predicted that the future of public education would require virtual learning. The inequalities

regarding broadband and computer access that COVID-19 has brought to light exacerbate the disparities between urban and suburban public education due to differing access to educational resources. These issues were not addressed in the 2016-21 goals even though they were present. Furthermore, to be on the same level as a suburban school district, like Greenwich, “the [Hartford] district would need to spend an additional \$7,780 per student - a 47% boost- to keep up with state spending and performance averages” (Thomas September 17, 2020). The reason for state-wide public education standards is so that children who live in urban areas get the same level of education as children who live in suburban areas, however; that has not been the case for a long time and COVID-19 is only making it worse. There is a stark difference between the education that students in suburbs receive, and the education that students in cities receive and it is unreasonable to assume they can meet the same standards if there is no change. Hartford needs more support to be able to reach the same level of education as Greenwich. Not only do funding disparities perpetuate the opportunity gap, but digital disparities also perpetuate the opportunity gap between Hartford and Greenwich schools.

There is a digital divide between Hartford and Greenwich, which existed before the pandemic, and it has amplified the opportunity gap because of remote learning. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that, in Greenwich, 96% of households have computer access and 93.3% of households have a broadband internet subscription (US, “Greenwich,” 2019). Compared to Hartford, only 83.7% of households have computer access, and 71.9% of households have a broadband internet subscription (US, “Hartford,” 2019). More specifically, John B. Horrigan, a Senior Fellow at the Technology Policy Institute found that as of 2020 in Connecticut “36% of low-income Connecticut households lack high-speed internet at home” and “92,000 children under the age of 18 live in households without a desktop or laptop computer” (Horrigan 2020, 3 and 25). This data shows that many Hartford students who live in low-income households could not access any of their assignments or classes, especially when schools were completely remote from the middle of March to the end of the 2019-20 school year. Governor Lamont committed to distributing learning devices to many of these households, but this process took until December 2020 to complete (Connecticut’s 2020). It is unsettling to consider the amount of learning Hartford students had to miss because they did not have technological resources until December 2020 to attend class, nine months after the schools went remote. Greenwich households statistically have better access to technology and internet connection than Hartford households based on the Census’ statistics, so Greenwich students have not had many issues accessing their online classes and homework in the preliminary months of the pandemic. Now that the distribution of devices is complete, Hartford must focus on getting students caught up, and acclimating them to the new education models, while Greenwich continues their stable virtual learning and their students thrive. The digital divide significantly widens the opportunity gap because the pandemic has called for different learning models, which many of Hartford’s residents were not able to quickly adjust to due to lack of resources.

Both Greenwich and Hartford school districts have adjusted their 2020-21 education plans because of COVID-19. The Hartford Superintendent, Leslie Torres-Rodriguez, sent a letter to the Hartford community releasing the “Return to Learn and Accelerate Program,” and wrote, “all of our students are expected to participate in learning five days a week” and families were able to decide their preference, whether it be in-person, hybrid, or remote (Hartford November 2, 2020, 2). As of December 15th, 2020, Hartford schools were in an “Orange Alert Level” and had a COVID-19 positivity rate of 1.79% (increasing daily), putting most of their schools in a hybrid learning model (Hartford December 14, 2020; Hartford December 15, 2020; Hartford November

16, 2020). At the beginning of the school year, the Greenwich Public Schools planned for “full re-entry” with divided cohorts that would attend in-person classes at the elementary and middle schools, and a hybrid model would be implemented at Greenwich High School (Greenwich July 24, 2020, 27-28). As of December 15th, Greenwich Public Schools had a 0.2% positivity rate, and affected cohorts attended class remotely during quarantine periods (“Greenwich” 2016, 1; Greenwich December 15, 2020; Munson 2017). Hartford Public Schools is very conscious about updating their COVID-19 dashboard with important COVID-19 information. In stark contrast, Greenwich does not provide consistent updates on important COVID-19 information, like their current education models in use. The breadth of Greenwich’s resources affords them flexibility with their education model and COVID-19 updates. Greenwich does not have the same worry about remote learning as Hartford does because their infection rate is not as high, and they also have much better access to technological and educational resources if they had to go fully remote. These advantages ease their worries and emphasize their privilege as learners and members of society. The Hartford community has to risk their health as their infection rate increases because, otherwise, students suffer when they are fully remote due to their extremely limited resources. These substantial differences exacerbate the disparities between Hartford and Greenwich education, which continues to widen the opportunity gap for students. The increasing inequalities affect every aspect of an urban student’s education and worsen the inequalities between urban and suburban schools during COVID-19.

#### *The Harsh Impact of the Opportunity Gap*

Certain racial and ethnic communities tend to be on either end of the opportunity gap, which either advances or hinders their education during the pandemic. Hartford and Greenwich are in the same state, but they have largely different racial demographics within their populations. Greenwich’s population is 83.4% White, 3.7% Black, and 13.8% Hispanic or Latino (US, “Greenwich,” 2019). This is compared to Hartford, which is 31.3% White, 37.7% Black, and 44.3% Hispanic or Latino (US, “Hartford,” 2019). Using these statistics, Michelle Fox, a journalist, reported McKinsey and Company’s research, that observed, due to COVID-19:

Black students may fall behind by 10.3 months, Hispanic students by 9.2 months, and low-income students by more than a year. School closures will also probably increase high-school drop-out rates, [and] according to McKinsey, ‘We estimate that this would exacerbate existing achievement gaps by 15% to 20%.’ (Fox 2020)

A student’s race and ethnicity significantly impact the type of education that they are receiving during the pandemic. Many Hartford students are of color and many Greenwich students are White. McKinsey’s estimation about Black and Hispanic or Latinx students emphasizes that COVID-19 is continuing to grow the opportunity gap between the Black and Hispanic or Latinx students in Hartford and the White students in Greenwich. Hartford is home to many races and ethnicities, and sadly, this means that Hartford students have to deal with challenges that Greenwich’s largely White population will never have to deal with. These racial and ethnic disparities within education create many injustices within our society today. The opportunity gap is widening due to COVID-19 between these two communities, and already marginalized racial and ethnic communities are being more affected than others during the pandemic.

Additionally, the opportunity gap widening due to the pandemic has taken an immense psychological toll on students that live in harsh living spaces. Professors of Pediatrics, Emily Hurley and Abbey Masonbrink observed that due to COVID-19 students may develop “post-

traumatic stress, anxiety, and behavioral disorders,” and students that live in harsh environments are “particularly vulnerable [to these disorders] because of underlying psychosocial stressors” (Rajmil et al., 2008, quoted in Hurley and Masonbrink 2020, 4). Elementary and middle school years are developmental periods, and as Hurley and Masonbrink reported, virtual learning is negatively impacting these students during a crucial developmental stage. Students are missing an important socialization process, and there are many long-term psychological side effects of this loss, especially for children experiencing poverty or difficult living situations (Hurley and Masonbrink 2020, 4). In Hartford, 28.1% of residents are experiencing poverty (US, “Hartford,” 2019). In Greenwich, 6.0% of residents are experiencing poverty (US, “Greenwich,” 2019). According to these statistics, there are most likely students in Hartford who live in difficult living environments and are suffering from these social and emotional impacts. The social and emotional impacts affect the type of education they receive because students may need help in areas other than their academics. In contrast, there are most likely fewer Greenwich students that have to handle these other stressors. COVID-19’s psychological effects have long-term consequences, and something has to be done to help students living in challenging living spaces. The preexisting disparities between Hartford and Greenwich are continuing to grow as these other side effects from COVID-19 impact certain Hartford students and perpetuate the opportunity gap. Hartford students are struggling, and their struggles are only going to create a larger opportunity gap as they continue their schooling.

Furthermore, the reduction of in-person school has perpetuated the opportunity gap by taking away essential resources that Hartford students normally would get from school. Students have lost important needs like food, socialization, and safety because they could not physically go to school. Many students in cities are “impacted by a range of other social problems, including food insecurity, inadequate access to government services, and limited engagement with the critical social development tools that could be addressed with a home broadband connection,” and these concepts create an even wider opportunity gap between Hartford and Greenwich during the pandemic (Lee 2020). Hartford students rely on school for more than their education, and due to COVID-19, many of them lose school-provided meals, a social structure, select healthcare benefits, and a secure environment outside their home. Hurley and Masonbrink wrote, “social distancing coupled with increased economic stress in vulnerable households increases risk for domestic violence and child abuse and neglect,” further putting these urban students in a dangerous position (Rajmil et al., 2008, quoted in Hurley and Masonbrink, 2020, 4). School officials are “mandated reporters,” and with remote learning, these officials are not as aware of students’ unsafe personal situations (Hurley and Masonbrink 2020, 4). A mandated reporter is a person that must report anything that seems to be threatening a student’s physical, mental, or emotional wellbeing. Some students in Hartford who come from low-income households need the essential resources that schools provide, however; in Greenwich that is not as common for students who come from wealthy households. Students are not only missing out on their academics; they are missing meals and a safe space with school officials present, away from a possible challenging living environment. Nobody knows when the pandemic is going to end, so action must be taken now to provide aid to these disadvantaged students. This never-ending opportunity gap continues to damage urban students’ educations because they do not have the sufficient resources required to succeed and participate in remote learning compared to suburban students.

Moreover, the opportunity gap widening due to the pandemic has taken a large toll on educators, especially in Hartford because of the city’s underfunded educational resources. Before

the pandemic, urban teachers already struggled to “meet the social and emotional demands of their jobs” (Camacho et al. 2018, 1146). Due to these challenging times, there is increased teacher stress, and that stress can be directly translated into more student stress which negatively impacts the students’ qualities of education (Luetmer and Gallagher 2020). Some teachers are in their classrooms with no students and teaching to a camera, some are in their homes and teaching to computer screens, and some are teaching in-person classes and must maintain social distancing guidelines while risking their health. On top of those unprecedented circumstances, Hartford teachers have to deal with students not being able to access their online classes; consequently, many students are behind on assignments and teachers must manage that inconsistency between their students. Greenwich teachers do not have to deal with this struggle because their students have better access to technology. The pandemic has not only shown that Hartford students do not have the essential resources needed to learn the same as Greenwich students, but it has also shown Hartford teachers do not have the resources to do their job effectively. This further makes it clear that the opportunity gap does not only impact students, the opportunity gap also impacts teachers, which increases inequalities between urban and suburban schools.

*The Next Steps to Narrow the Opportunity Gap in Connecticut*

As stated above, Governor Lamont is committed to helping students in disadvantaged communities, like Hartford. *Hartford Courant* reporter Amanda Blanco stated:

The state will draw the money from its portion of the federal CARES Act, the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund. Twenty-two million will be used to purchase 50,000 laptops, \$15 million will be used to improve home internet connectivity for 60,000 students and \$4.5 million will go towards 200 public WiFi hot spots across the state. (Blanco July 28, 2020, 1)

The Connecticut government has worked to identify solutions for their students during this time, and that is encouraging for the education of Hartford’s students. On December 2nd, 2020, it was reported that Connecticut was “the first state in the nation to provide a learning device to every PK-12 student in need” (Connecticut’s 2020). This change is promising for Connecticut’s public education, and it shows that the state is developing impactful education reform for urban areas, like Hartford. After a long nine months, the disadvantaged Hartford community can get on track now and begin to repair this horrific damage because the government has finally distributed the required technological resources to students. There is so much more to be done to close the opportunity gap between urban and suburban communities, but these steps are a shred of hope to narrow the opportunity gap within Connecticut’s urban and suburban areas.

COVID-19 made Connecticut focus on technological disparities between cities and suburbs. Now that all the devices have been distributed, Connecticut’s Department of Education should go back to the 2016-21 standards and reassess the goals that can be accomplished in the new learning models. With the pandemic still going on, the most important concepts to focus on and that have successfully closed “early achievement gaps” are: prioritizing healthy physical habits, increasing student attendance, having a strong sense of community, and getting students prepared for their futures (García and Weiss 2017, 3). Some of those above concepts were in the state’s 2016-21 plan, and they should be the next steps for Connecticut’s Department of Education when confronting education during the pandemic. To get Hartford on track, the above ideas should be implemented across the remote, hybrid, and in-person models. Every step taken

by the Connecticut Department of Education should be to decrease the large opportunity gap between the state's urban and suburban areas.

*Conclusion*

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the opportunity gap between Hartford and Greenwich more visible to the public eye. There are clear differences between the education that the wealthy communities of Greenwich receive, and the poorer communities of Hartford receive. Students should not have to struggle in school because of their race, ethnicity, and/or residence; however, Hartford is a clear example that race, ethnicity, and residence do determine a student's access to education in the world today. Hartford's public education needs help now more than ever because of COVID-19's persistence and unexpected duration. Hartford students and teachers are suffering due to the digital divide because, when positivity rates increase, there is a need for more virtual learning. The pandemic is going to continue to challenge communities for years, and it will have lasting impacts on students and educators. Connecticut's government should continue to improve their education in urban areas because they deserve the same education as suburban areas. Policies should be further investigated by Connecticut's Department of Education to help the Hartford community improve its quality of education now that Hartford students have access to technological devices. Silver linings from COVID-19 are few and far between; however, the pandemic has allowed people to be more aware of the prominent opportunity gap between urban and suburban schools, like Hartford and Greenwich, and the work that needs to be done to close that gap. This opportunity gap does not only exist within Hartford and Greenwich, it is a national issue that COVID-19 has shined a bright light on. There must be further conversations and policies implemented to close the opportunity gap and provide urban students with the education they deserve.



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