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12/15/04
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Suburban Participation in Hartford's Project Concern School Desegregation Program 1966-1998

In the mid1960's the Hartford, Connecticut's Board of Education was facing some serious problems that needed immediate attention. Teachers were concerned that the public school system was rapidly deteriorating; students in low-income areas were testing well below the national average, de facto segregation was the norm, and even though the student population was growing; the dropout rate was ever increasing. Harvard University was called upon to conduct a study of the city to look into how Hartford could address the problems it was facing. The results were published in what is now referred to as the "Harvard Report"¹. The report made many suggestions on how to deal with the problems in Hartford. Although many of these suggestions were never executed, the idea of a regional busing program looked most promising. This proposed busing program would soon morph into Project Concern. This would become an innovative approach to desegregation that would receive national attention.

¹ Mary Carroll Papers, "Schools for Hartford". Hartford Studies Program, Trinity College

Hartford's Project Concern was a voluntary busing program that originally suggested sending students of color to mostly white suburbs as well as sending white students into urban schools that had primarily black and Hispanic student populations. The suburban reaction to this idea was not good. Some suburbs were willing to consider taking urban students into their schools, but were unwilling to discuss sending their own students to Hartford schools. The idea of sending their own students to deteriorating Hartford schools was not an idea that any of the suburban towns were willing to consider. It was clear that the suburbs would not voluntarily send their students to Hartford. Seeing that the two-way aspect of this program could stop it before it began, it was decided that the busing would go from city-to-suburb only. Once the major concern of keeping suburban children in suburban schools was addressed, talks began in several towns about whether they would/could open their schools to urban students.

Once it was determined that no suburban students would make the trek to Hartford, money moved to the top of the list of apprehensions. It was established that funds to educate urban students would be provided by the State of Connecticut, the City of Hartford and federal funds. Along with funds for education and transportation suburban schools would be provided with staff that would travel with the urban students and provide support for the needs of the transferred students. Another issue that came to the forefront of unease for the suburbs was student selection. The language used to describe the eligible urban students troubled the suburbs. These students were originally classified as minorities. The minority specification was removed, making it possible for

urban white students to be considered for an opportunity to benefit from a suburban education.

After issues such as funding problems, transportation issues, and student selection were negotiated, the towns then decided whether or not to join Hartford in launching Project Concern. The program operated from 1967-1998 (in 1999 the Capital Region Education Council (CREC) established a similar program called Project Choice). In total, seventeen of the twenty-nine towns in Hartford County participated in Project Concern at one time or another. Which towns participated (or declined to participate) in Project Concern, what was the extent of their involvement, and what factors motivated their decisions?

In the school year ending 1967, five suburban towns joined Hartford in Project Concern. These five towns were the pioneers for what would become a thirty-two year venture between Hartford and its surrounding suburbs. Twelve more suburban towns would participate in years following the two-year experimental phase. All suburbs did not respond the same way to Project Concern simply because they were suburbs. The decision by suburbs to participate in Project Concern depended primarily on four factors. The first influential factor is racial composition of the suburb. Second is the financial pressure on these towns. Third is the nature of various language used within town meetings. Finally, the attitude held by people in leadership positions affected whether or not the town participated. These factors have different levels of importance from town to town and change over time.

The history of desegregation attempts in educational systems is indispensable to the

study of education as a whole because of the affects it has on the accessibility of education and advancement to all. The black community has not always been afforded the same access to many services, including education, as white folks. In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 case about segregation on Louisiana railroads the U.S. Supreme Court held that “separate but equal” was constitutional, thereby endorsing segregation of public institutions, including schools. It was not until the 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* that the Supreme Court reversed course and determined that:

In the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.²

The *Brown* decision led to many conflicts, and although it was a step in the right direction, it did not eliminate the continuing problem of segregation in education across the country. Desegregation of schools is important, it is should be important to all, not only to people of color. The main focus of desegregation is to offer a better education to urban students isolated in areas where minorities comprise the majority of the population. It is important to keep in mind that primarily white communities exist in racial isolation as well. Even though to can be argued that suburban racial isolation is a choice; it does not change the fact that all students benefit from learning along side students that are different than themselves. As we learn together, we develop a better understanding of each other and can move beyond tolerance toward true appreciation of the value of

² <http://www.brownvboard.org/research/opinions/347us483.htm>

personal differences.

Only a handful of studies have closely examined voluntary desegregation across city-suburban lines. For example, Susan Eaton wrote about an attempt at a voluntary busing program in metropolitan Boston, Massachusetts in her book *The Other Boston Busing Story* (2001). She examined the affects of participation in Boston's city-suburb busing program called METCO on the urban children bused to the suburbs. Between the years of 1995-1998, in depth interviews were conducted with sixty-five students involved in the METCO program. These students had been out of the program for five or more years.³ Eaton was looking to examine the "longer-term" effects of school desegregation programs. Through her interview process she was able to determine whether or not these participants felt that the METCO program was beneficial. The most telling information comes when Eaton asks the METCO alum if they would send their own children through a similar program. The majority of interviewees were in what Eaton refers to as the "Yes, but..." category. This tells the reader that even if the program was in some ways beneficial, there were still negative affects.

In another study of voluntary city-suburban desegregation, Amy Stuart Wells and Robert L. Crain examined busing in the St. Louis, Missouri area in their book, *Stepping over the Color Line* (1997). Similar to Eaton, Wells and Crain based a large part of their study on interviews. Over a five-year period of time (1989-1994) they conducted over three hundred interviews. Unlike Eaton their interviewing process was not limited to participants in the desegregation program. They spoke to educators, policy makers,

³ Susan E. Eaton, *The Other Boston Busing Story* (Yale University Press, 2001),

judges, lawyers, parents as well as students.⁴ Along with interviews, they used every document and newspaper clipping they could gather. Classroom and meeting observation were also a factor in their findings. With all of this information they had the ability to look at important issues from both sides of the “color line”. In the process of their research they were looking to see who benefited from the desegregation program in St. Louis. They found that urban students bused to the suburbs excelled even compared to those urban students in attending racially mixed city magnet schools. They found the suburbs also benefited by way of increased racial tolerance.

In contrast to these authors, my research is historical in nature and is based on the way in which newspapers reported the events that lead to participation or lack thereof by suburban towns in Hartford, Connecticut’s attempt to desegregate public schools. I am not looking to see how the program affects individuals. I am looking at communities and the factors that contribute to suburban involvement or resistance to city-suburb desegregation programs. I agree that it is important to look at how individuals are impacted by desegregation attempts, but in order for these programs to work we must find the smoothest path to suburban participation. A good working relationship between city and suburb is vital in making a program like Project Concern work. Without suburban participation we will have no need to look at the impact of individuals, because there will be no working programs of this kind.

Methods and Sources:

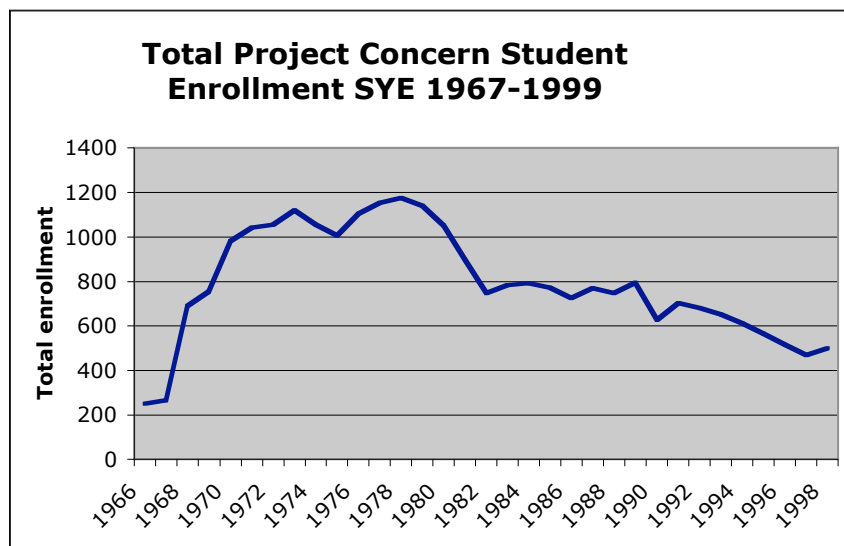
⁴ Amy Stuart Wells, and Robert L. Crain, *Stepping over the Color Line* (Yale University Press, 1997)

Due to time constraints, I elected to look at a sample group of towns within Hartford County, rather than all twenty- nine, in order to have the time to look at factors that lead to participation or absence of thereof by the suburbs. Although many variables could be used to categorize the towns, I used participation as the most important variable to my research question. The towns were broken into three categories: Early Participants, Late Participants and Non Participants. Within these groups (with the exception of the non participants) there was a variation of participation. Some towns accepted close to four hundred students at the height of the program, while other towns never took more than twenty students at any given time throughout the duration of the program. I felt that it was important to include towns taking many students, towns taking a small number of students and towns that fluctuate in the amount of student from Project Concern. Keeping enrollment in mind allowed me to begin to narrow down the towns. I then placed all towns in Hartford County on one of three charts according to the participation category. With the categories of towns charted, I matched towns in the Early Participant category to those in the Late Participant by looking for towns in these two categories that were similar in at least one of the following: distance from Hartford, town demographic and ratio/number of Project Concern students accepted. Non-Participants were also chosen based on the aforementioned criteria. As it turns out the chosen towns are also evenly split between “Inner Core Towns” (those towns directly touching Hartford) and “Outer Core Towns” (those bordering the Inner Core towns).⁵ The towns I chose are: Farmington, West Hartford, Simsbury, South Windsor (early participants), Avon,

⁵ Mary Carroll Papers, “Schools for Hartford” Table C. Hartford Studies Program, Trinity College

Glastonbury (late participants), Bloomfield and East Windsor (non participants).

<u>Early Participants</u>	<u>Late Participants</u>	LP cont.	<u>Non-Participants</u>	NP cont.
Farmington	Avon	Plainville	Berlin	Marlborough
Manchester	Bolton	Rocky Hill	Bloomfield	Windsor
Simsbury	Canton	Southington	Bristol	
South Windsor	East Hartford	Suffield	East Granby	
West Hartford	Glastonbury	Wethersfield	East Windsor	
	Granby	Windsor	Enfield	
	Newington	Locks	Hartland	



The primary sources for this research are newspaper clippings obtained from the Hartford Courant library and the Connecticut State Library, featuring articles from the *Hartford Courant*, the *Hartford Times*, the *New York Times*, and local papers. Starting with over two thousand articles having to do with education in the Hartford area, I was able to whittle the articles down to just under three hundred. These articles were then sorted through by town, year and relevance. Due to the fact that different newspapers take different political stances, it is important to note that the majority of the articles used in this research came from the *Hartford Courant*. Another thing to point out is the fact that some towns had more media coverage than others. Those towns in the Early Participants category are represented with more frequency than those in the other categories. There is almost no coverage of towns in the Non participants category pertaining to Project Concern.

Along with newspaper accounts of suburban reaction and participation in Project Concern I used reports such as the “Harvard Report”⁶ and Project Concern annual reports.⁷ Statistical information also came from the Mary Carroll Papers from the Hartford Studies Program at Trinity College as well as Connecticut State Department of Education. These resources provided a lens to view the reasons suburban towns participated in Hartford’s Project Concern.

⁶ Mary Carroll Papers, “Schools for Hartford”. Hartford Studies Program, Trinity College

⁷ Hartford Public Library, *Hartford Times* collection, via Hartford Studies Program, Trinity College

Factor 1: Racial Composition

With the towns selected, and resources explained a closer look at the factors that influenced these towns is in order. In only one of the eight selected towns is racial composition a prime factor in participation (or in this case lack of) in Project Concern. Looking at the numbers, we can clearly see how this factor affected why Bloomfield did not participate in Project Concern. The Bloomfield school system was already viewed as integrated when Project Concern began. Minority students comprised roughly 14% of Bloomfield's student population.⁸ Although Bloomfield was considered to already have an integrated school system, and did not participate in Project Concern, it was still affected by the program. In 1975 Bloomfield requested \$486,000 from the Title VII federal civil rights funds. The request was rejected due to the fact that Bloomfield was not part of Project Concern; they were approved for only \$80,000 of the requested total. Even though the town had the most racially diverse student population of any suburb in Hartford County, the Bloomfield Board of Education received a letter from a U.S. Representative explaining that funds were cut due to the fact that "Bloomfield is not removing many youngsters from racial isolation".⁹

In the earlier stages of Project Concern a majority of the Hartford's surrounding suburbs were lacking racially diverse student populations. Most towns do not cite wanting increased racial diversity as a reason they participated in Project Concern, but participating town do achieve some racial diversity (albeit not a high rate) with the

⁸ Connecticut State Department of Education, *The Distribution of Minority-Group Pupils and Staff in the Public Schools of Connecticut (Research Bulletin #1, Volume 1, Series 1968-69)*.

⁹ Unknown, "Town May Receive Only \$80,000 In Federal Civil Rights Funds." *Hartford Courant* July 25, 1974

acceptance of Project Concern students. Even in the years of the highest enrollment, Project Concern students never made up more than eight percent of any town's student population. The percentage of minority students being bussed from Hartford to the suburbs was usually between less than one percent and five percent. Towns such as East Windsor did not have integrated school systems, yet did not participate in Project Concern and continued to have a homogeneous educational environment. West Hartford accepted the most students, and even then had a student population of less than ten percent minority students.

Factor 2: Financial Pressure

In participating towns, participation changes as funds dry up or as the racial diversity in the town increases. The financial affect of Project Concern can also be seen in at least one of the towns that was a Non-Participant. As seen in Bloomfield racial diversity sometimes impacted town finances. In most other towns this is not the case, racial diversity is affected by available funds. West Hartford, for example accepted three hundred and eighty four urban students in 1973 (the highest enrollment for that town) when the funding was available. This number shifts dramatically to sixty-two in the late 1990's when funds are no longer easily accessible. As funds decrease so does the racial diversity that is enhanced by Project Concern students.

While some town's negotiated for more money to educate urban students, other towns came up with ways to keep Project Concern students in their schools. In the early to mid 1970's and again a decade later, funds seem to be increasingly in the news. In

1971 Glastonbury asked Hartford for a ten percent increase in per pupil funds along with more money for teachers and transportation. Hartford was unable to meet the request of Glastonbury and the ties were almost severed.¹⁰ On the other side, West Hartford started it's own fundraising drive in order to keep the project going.¹¹ None of the towns benefited financially from Project Concern, but some did feel the weight of the growing cost of the program and decreasing access to funding. In seven of the eight towns used in this study participation in Project Concern was affected by financial pressure.

Factor 3: Language

The language factors were levels of reported racism being voiced in town meetings versus the types of community-centered language used. West Hartford and Farmington received the most news coverage involving racism in town meetings. For example, the town of Farmington was reported as being restrained in their verbal outbursts, but having a racist undertone in a town meeting where upwards of one thousand people attended.¹² Many used community based language to describe issues not motivated by racism such as; needing money for a music teacher, or that one should have to work hard to be able to reap the rewards of living in Farmington, and finally that urban students would feel like “freaks” out of their social element and should be educated when they could feel more self-assured¹³. Others were much clearer about how they felt about the racial aspect that

¹⁰ David S. Barrett, “Glastonbury Is Out Of Project Concern.” *Hartford Courant* September 1, 1971

¹¹ Louise Axelson, “West Hartford Tries To Save Project Concern Program.” *Hartford Courant* June 2, 1982

¹² William E. Farrell, “Busing a Problem in Hartford Area,” *New York Times* May 20, 1966

¹³ see footnote 12

would come of participation in Project Concern. “These Hartford Children have a place in the North-End let them stay there...damn it you get them (negroes) together and you got hell”¹⁴ In one West Hartford meeting a Rabi in favor of Project Concern participation was told to “take your congregation and go home”.¹⁵

Meanwhile in the Simsbury town meetings opponents cited fear of harming the autonomy of their school system as the reason they were against the program.¹⁶ West Hartford, Farmington and Simsbury residence used different approaches to voice their reservations about town participation in Project Concern. In these examples, as with all the Early Participants language usage varied, but did not influence participation at the onset of Project Concern. In all eight towns there is no evidence that language used in town meetings had an impact on town participation.

Factor 4: Leadership

Leadership looks at which towns had official and citizen leaders that were vocally in favor of, against, or publicly neutral about Project Concern and how that affected participation in the program. Many town leaders publicly took a neutral position on participation. West Hartford school board chairman John Conard was publicly an advocate for the program in the early stages of Project Concern. He was the head of an Advisory Board that proposed recommendations to Hartford suburbs to continue to educate the students already in their school systems, and in some cases increase their

¹⁴ see footnote 12

¹⁵ see footnote 12

¹⁶ Muriel Winzer, “Simsbury Opinion Divided On Student Bussing Plan.” *Hartford Courant* 1966

participation. Other town leaders took an active role in supporting the continuation of Project Concern. Joining Conard on the Advisory Board were: Dr. Raymond Dry from the Simsbury school board, Farmington assistant superintendent Dr. William Striech and South Windsor superintendent Charles Warner. All of the towns that were represented by a town leader on the Advisory Board continued participation in Project Concern.

In some cases ordinary citizens took on a role as leader. Glastonbury made the news, not only because of town decisions regarding Project Concern, but because the opposition of this program was organized and noisy. James O. Sullivan leading the “Voters for Glastonbury” was the loudest opponent. While Sullivan was not a town leader, he was able to affect how the town leaders voted on the topic of Project Concern. Leaders that were said to be neutral voted with the popular voice. In 1966 he circulated a petition that made news, getting his view to even more people than he could door to door. Even though there was controversy about the validity of the petition, Glastonbury did not get the votes it needed to approve participation in Project Concern.¹⁷ Two years later Glastonbury voted to participate in Project Concern. The newspaper account of this town meeting illustrates the change in Sullivan’s leadership role. The voice influence he had in 1966 was gone in 1968. “Sullivan in 1966 was a key citizen spokesman for the group of some 1,900 petitions-signers opposing Project Concern, but Tuesday he stood alone”¹⁸

In all the towns that had public support or opposition by official leaders or unofficial leaders in the form of individual citizens that voiced public opinion, the

¹⁷Denton L. Watson, “Busing of Pupils Rejected At Hearing in Glastonbury.” *Hartford Courant* April 22, 1966 and “Busing Opponent Praises Supporters.” *Hartford Courant* April 23, 1966

¹⁸ Pamela Larratt, “Glastonbury Says ‘Yes’ on ‘Concern,’” *Hartford Courant* February 11, 1968

outcome of Project Concern participation was affected. In the towns where those in favor of the program got the most publicity Project Concern was implemented. When those opposed were heard over the rest the program died or was delayed. As we have seen in the case of Glastonbury, the role of leader can quickly change as public backing diminishes.

In *Sheff v. O'Neil*, the plaintiffs called for a desegregated educational system in Hartford. The settlement in January 2003 called for increased racial diversity in schools. The goal is to build eight magnet schools by the year 2007 that will house forty-eight hundred students. The racial makeup of students needs to have twenty-five percent of the student population of a different race than the remaining seventy-five percent in order to be in compliance of the Sheff verdict.¹⁹ The plan is to achieve this by an open choice policy, in which suburban parents would enroll their children in the city magnet schools and urban students would be enrolled in the suburbs. There are those who feel that desegregation in Hartford County cannot happen without implementing busing.²⁰ Even if busing is seen as a last resort to desegregate schools, we must be prepared to implement a busing program that has a chance to work. In order to see this settlement come to fruition, it will be helpful to look back to the way former busing programs were implemented. If we can see where other (especially local) programs, such as Project Concern, have succeeded and failed we would be closer to compliance with the Sheff verdict and benefit

¹⁹ Robert A. Frahm and Rachel Gottlieb, "State Expects to Fall Short On Sheff; Commissioner: Magnet School deadlines Unlikely To Be Met". *Hartford Courant* August 4, 2004

²⁰ Laurence D. Cohen, "Can You (Or Anyone Involved In The Sheff Case) Say 'Busing'?" *Hartford Courant* Editorial August 11, 2004

from school desegregation. It is important to look to history for factors that may increase the chances for success in the possible future programs.

Even though some factors became more important at different points in history, the suburbs continued to act as individual branches rather than follow one suburban entity. We have seen how the factors of racial composition, financial factors, language, and leadership affected Project Concern in its thirty-two years of operation. While financial factors and leadership were the most influential factors in participation, and racial composition was directly linked to non-participation it is important to note that factor importance changes as the times change. The problems faced by the Project Concern program may differ from those of future city-suburban desegregation busing programs.