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### Examining the Governance Structure of Hartford Schools

Shannon Stormont

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**Examining the Governance Structure of Hartford Schools**

Shannon Stormont

Senior Honors Thesis '02

Advisor: Stefanie Chambers

[Spring 2002, Trinity College]

Shannon Stormont

## **Chapter 1—Hartford Schools: An Introduction**

Connecticut's capital city of Hartford is a struggling city in the center of a thriving metropolitan region. While Hartford was recently ranked among the ten poorest cities in the nation, the Hartford Metropolitan Region, consisting of numerous towns to the south of Hartford including Middletown, was ranked as the country's ninth most affluent region. While many refer to the Hartford Metropolitan Region as a community, this sharp divide in resources and wealth among the towns that comprise the area point to a deep contrast of social, political and economic origin. As Michael Carbone, Hartford's former Deputy Mayor, pointed out, Hartford has long been two distinct cities, "a city of the highway that the commuter sees and uses and the city of the neighborhoods in which people live" (Hartford Primer, 2001).

Hartford's population has rapidly declined over the last several decades, from over 170,000 people fifty years ago to about 120,000 today. For those residents that remain, poverty is rampant; Hartford had a per capita income of less than \$15,000 in 1998. This low income level is due, in part, to a large pool of unskilled laborers and a lack of industry for their services. In addition, half of Hartford's high school students never graduate. One explanation for the high drop-out rates is the cities high teenage pregnancy rate—25% of births in Hartford in 1998 were to teenage mothers. The high drop-out rates are only one of a number of problems that plague Hartford schools, one of the most prominent of which is the racial segregation, as demonstrated by the *Sheff v.*

*O'Neill* case filed in 1988 on behalf of seventeen Hartford school children (Hartford Primer, 2001).

In this study I will examine the governance structure of Hartford schools, focusing specifically on the relationship between the elected school board, the superintendent, and the parents of Hartford school children. I will discuss different parental involvement strategies employed by each of the many administrations of the past decade and attempt to draw broader conclusions based on categorizations of governance structure. In order to come to these broader conclusions I will categorize based on the three main structures: City Control (Pre-1994), Private Control (1994-1996), and State Control (1996-Present).

By examining the history of the Hartford schools and the basic policy strategies of the city, private, and state-run administrations, I hope to paint a picture of the chaos and inefficiency which has plagued Hartford schools throughout each administration. This information will allow for the comparison of each administration and the critique of various school policies and practices, both effective and ineffective. In addition, I will compare test scores and interviews to assess student success, as typically defined by the number of students performing at or above grade-level and drop-out rates. While this may not be an accurate measure of how much students are learning, standardized testing is currently the most widely accepted standard by which student success is judged.

In addition to examining student success under various administrations, my thesis will also use interviews and primary sources to determine the extent to which each administration attempted to involve parents in the schools, leading to further conclusions about the power structure and the extent to which each administration was democratic.

While many claims have been made that parental involvement impacts student success, I plan to assess whether or not this has been the case in Hartford, or whether there is currently enough basis for judgment.

The study of the turbulent history of the Hartford schools and various governance structures and policies will allow policy-makers to focus their methods of improving student's educational experiences. As Hartford faces yet another upcoming change in administration and governance structure when control is handed back to the city in December of 2002, I plan to use the information I have gathered to predict whether or not the transition back to city control will be detrimental to student success and propose certain strategies for avoiding educational setbacks. The successes and failures of past administrations, coupled with the existing literature on the subject, will contribute to my analysis of the strategies employed to involve parents and improve student success. This analysis, in turn, will allow me to develop recommendations as to the most effective and successful policies and those which administrators should consider in the future.

**Shannon Stormont**

**Chapter 2—Hartford’s City School Board—Failing the Children?**

“Across this Nation, we must cultivate communities where children can learn...Where the school is a living center of a community where people care—people care for each other and their futures. Not just in the school but in the neighborhood. Not just in the classroom, but in the home” (Coleman, 1991). While President Bush was making these bold declarations about the future of our schools in 1991, Hartford schools were experiencing tumultuous events, due to frequent changes in the administrative control of the schools. Along with shifts in governance structure came changing ideas for reform, sending students and parents on a whirlwind of reform initiatives that barely lasted long enough to evaluate their effectiveness. It is no wonder that students’ educational achievement suffered as a result.

In this chapter I will explore a number of challenges Hartford schools faced from the period of 1990 until 1994, leading up to the hiring of a private for-profit management firm, Education Alternative Inc., in 1994. The most visible issue Hartford faced was the case of *Sheff v. O’Neil*, which involved a lawsuit brought by seventeen Hartford children in 1989. The children claimed to have been denied an equal education to their suburban counterparts because of residential segregation. In 1994, the state Superior Court ruled that the plaintiffs had failed to prove that the state was responsible for the segregation of the Hartford schools. This decision was overruled in 1996 by the Connecticut Supreme Court, which found that the Hartford schools failed to provide the equal educational opportunity guaranteed in the state constitution (Hartford Primer).

Administrators grappled with the desegregation ordered by *Sheff* and the low educational achievement that was becoming increasingly apparent with the growing emphasis on standardized tests. T. Josiha Haig was hired as superintendent in July 1991 by the Hartford Board of Education on a three-year contract. (Hartford Courant, July 3, 1994). Haig replaced Herman LaFontaine, who served as superintendent for twelve years and resigned citing a tight fiscal climate in the city and the demands of overseeing an urban school district. Haig, a successful black superintendent, brought great promise for reform to Hartford schools; in his six years as head of schools in East Orange, New Jersey he had taken a system that had failed to win certification in almost every area and turned it around. (Halloran, July 3, 1994). In August of 1991, Haig began his work and, on his first day on the job, met with staff and banished memos, cabinet meetings, and created rules forbidding employees from speaking with him without going through the chain of command. In October, Haig protested the city's contract with Vancom Inc., a bus company that was providing poor service to special education children. Haig stood outside of city hall in protest from 10 pm to 3:45 a.m., when the city agreed to review Vancom's contract. Hartford school board President Ruthie B. Mathews praised Haig, saying, "He is not breaking a law; he is standing by his convictions to make sure that children's interests come first. Those of us who are aware should join Dr. Haig" (Adams, Hartford Courant, October 5, 1991).

Haig's supporters speculated that Haig staged such dramas to draw attention to the school system's problems in order to rally community concern and support. By June 1992, Haig faced \$8.5 million in budget cuts (Green, Hartford Courant, June 5, 1992) and called for teachers to give up contractual raises, offering to cut his own salary by

45% and threatening to resign if even one teacher was laid off. Haig also said that teachers “don’t care” because they had refused to give back their negotiated 4 percent raise to prevent some layoffs, a comment which prompted a 600 person rally in front of the school board offices and an apology from Haig (Green, Hartford Courant, June 5, 1992).

While teachers were skeptical of Haig and his appeal to them to trust him, parents overwhelmingly supported him (Green, Hartford Courant, June 5, 1992). At this point the nine elected school board members were also behind Haig—most agreed that the projected layoffs of about 160 teachers would decimate the already struggling school system. While Haig was awarded a “Very good” rating by the Hartford Board of Education after one year in office, problems began to surface between him and board members (Green, Hartford Courant, November 18, 1992) and, as another budget crisis arose and the prospect of 300 teacher layoffs loomed, the board remained critical. In July 1993, Haig’s name appeared on a list of candidates for the job of running New York City schools, and in October 1993, two years after taking office, Haig received a “satisfactory” or “C” grade for his second year on the job. The school board, which was looking for a dramatic increase in student performance on state mastery tests, remained disappointed with student performance and blamed Haig. On January 18, 1994 the board voted 5-4 not to renew Haig’s contract and Haig left office on June 30, 1994. (Hartford Courant, July 3, 1994).

Looking at Haig’s three years in office in terms of parental and community involvement, it seems that Haig managed to impress parents and students while alienating board members and teachers. One board member said that, of Hartford’s many



superintendents in the 90s, “Probably the person who distinguished himself the most as a friend of parents was a man named Josiha Haig” (Interview #2). He outlined plans to set goals for student achievement, parental involvement, and teacher effectiveness, many of which he presented as strategic goals to the board before September of 1993 and were not approved until June of 1994, his last month in office (Hartford Courant, July 9, 1994). Haig also hosted informal meetings with residents and parents and succeeded in merging several parents groups into one organization, Together We Can. Haig also worked hard to establish a program with area colleges that would help public school students go on to higher education. As Shirley West, co-chairwoman of Together We Can, pointed out, “his biggest mistake was when he began to let parents really know what was happening in the school system. His honesty sealed his doom” (Halloran, July 3, 1994). As Merline Clark, President of the Parent Teacher Organization at Annie Fisher School put it, “The parents look at it as a man who at least outwardly is willing to take a stand” (Green, Hartford Courant, June 5, 1992).

In fact, during February and March of 1994 parents and guardians were surveyed on their involvement in their 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, or 10<sup>th</sup> grade child’s education. This survey appeared in the 1993-1994 annual report to the Connecticut State Department Board of Education, the only survey of its kind or mention of parental involvement to appear in the annual reports dating from the 1993-1994 school year through the 2000-2001 school year, demonstrating Haig’s commitment to focusing on parental involvement. Of the surveys returned, 23.2% of parents/guardians of students in Hartford schools volunteered to help out with school-sponsored activities “frequently” or “almost always”, compared with the 26.4% of parents of students across the state. This relatively small discrepancy

between parents of Hartford students and students in other school districts is echoed across most of the questions. For example, 63.7% of respondents in Hartford claimed to “frequently” or “almost always” help their child with his/her homework, compared with 55.6% of state-wide respondents. Similar results were found for percentage of parents that “frequently” or “almost always” checked to see if their child’s homework was complete (89.2% of Hartford respondents compared to 83.3% statewide), who tried to make sure their child was prepared for classwork (90.6% of Hartford respondents compared to 91.6% statewide), and who took an active part in the activities of a parent’s group at the school (24.1% Hartford respondents compared to 24.4% statewide). The shocking result, however, comes when comparing the percentage of parents who the school open house (parent’s night)—only 44.4% of Hartford parents/guardians attend compared to 83% statewide. (Strategic School District Profile, 1993-1994). When faced with these seemingly involved parents, one must then question the reason for this very large discrepancy in terms of Open House attendance.

One answer may point to the difference in percentage of surveys returned—20.9% in Hartford and 41.7% statewide. This discrepancy most-likely demonstrates that the most involved parents are the ones returning the surveys, particularly in Hartford, where only slightly more than 1/5 were returned. Given this fact, it is still remarkable, however, that of these most involved parents, who are otherwise comparable to the average parent statewide, so few (44.4%) attended the school Open House (Strategic School District Profile, 1993-1994). These discrepancies can be characterized as individual versus collective participation. Individualistic participation involves parent energies that are targeted directly at their own children while collaborative participation involves the

harmony of parents' goal and activities with those of others within the local education community, such as teachers, parents, and administrators (Henig, 158). Parents in Hartford seem to be involved in individualistic participation such as helping children with their homework, rather than collective participation, such as encouraging reforms in the broader school system. The strongest empirical research linking parental involvement to educational success points towards the importance of individualized family support, which correlates to socioeconomic class, particularly parents' level of education, which tends to be particularly low in Hartford (Henig, 158). In 1997, the city of Hartford had the highest teen birth rate in the nation with 114 births per 1000 teens (Report to the CETC Youth Committee, Teen Parents and School Dropouts, 2001) and roughly 41% of Hartford's adult population could read only at Level 1, which is characterized by the inability to fill out a form, read a food label, or read a simple story to a child (Hartford Primer).

In order to be fully effective, an urban school district's attempt to truly involve parents into their child's educational experience must take these factors into account. In terms of educational reform, parental support, or lack thereof, often determines whether or not the reform is successful. Oftentimes, collective involvement provides the greatest benefits to those students whose parents are not involved on an individualized level. This benefit, while constituting a public good, also helps to explain the difficulty of maintaining collective involvement of parents because, assuming that parents are rational and self-interested, their time is better spent devoted to the improvement of their own child's educational experience. From a community standpoint, this systemic approach to reform through collective involvement is beneficial for the city as a whole. By helping

those students whose families cannot help them, parents who tend to have the greatest inclination and ability to participate improve their children's education by bolstering the city's educational system rather than by taking their energy to the surrounding suburban schools (Henig, US Department of Education, 1996).

An interview with one Hartford Organizer reveals the state of the Hartford schools during this period. She points out that in 1994 schools did not even have the tools necessary to teach:

They literally didn't even have books. You would have a math class with one book, maybe two books. Literally, no books for the children. Teachers had to do those mimeograph things and they mostly had to pay for them themselves (Interview #1).

The state of disarray of the schools accounts, in part, for the poor student performance. District-wide, 12.3% of students performed at or above the state goal in reading, compared to 53.4% state-wide. In writing, 10.9% of the district performed at or above state goal, compared to 34.2% of students state-wide. Math scores reflected similar results; 8.4% of Hartford students met or surpassed state goals compared to 48.3% of students across Connecticut. While one must recognize that these results are based on the Connecticut Mastery Test, which is not immune to standardized test bias, which tends to favor white, suburban students, these scores serve as further evidence that education in Hartford was severely inadequate. In addition, only 23.4% of boys and 11.4% of girls passed four physical fitness tests, as compared to 30.2% and 22.2% of students statewide. Similar inadequacies are reflected in dropout rates; from the fall of 1992 to 1993, 17.1% of Hartford students dropped out compared to 4.6% state-wide. Student attendance can also serve as an indicator of student success. While Hartford elementary students

demonstrated similar attendance patterns to those observed state-wide (92.3% to 95.7%), high school attendance rates showed a more dramatic difference (81.4% to 92.6%). In addition, only 33.7% of Hartford's high school graduates went on to pursue degrees from four-year colleges, compared to 53.9% of students state-wide. Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) scores were similarly below-par; the average verbal score of Hartford students was 315 and math score was 353, compared to 423 and 467 state-wide (Strategic School District Profile, 1993-1994).

The fact that Haig's contractual negotiations were left entirely to the board to decide makes a closer look at the make-up of this board integral. The board was comprised of nine members, roughly 2/3 of whom were parents. When questioned about parental response to the decision not to renew Haig's contract, one member of the board who served during Haig's administration said that, "I think that by the time that his contract was ending, I think most people, including parents, had determined that he probably was not the strongest choice for superintendent" (Interview #2). The 5-4 decision not to renew Haig's contract, however, was reflective of deeper divisions among board members. Relations between board members were fragmented, resulting in small factions within the nine person group. When asked about these factions, one board member classified them as:

Those who wanted to bring about change versus those who wanted to bring about the status quo. But probably more fairly, everyone was trying to bring about change and everyone was concerned about result. I think that the factions generally were created because different groups had different ideas on the kind of changes that were required and the strategies needed to implement those changes. (Interview #2).

While Haig worked to combine parent groups into one group, Together We Can, parent organizing in Hartford never seemed to take off. As one Community Organizer said of Haig, “He tried to get parent stuff going. The fundamental question about mobilizing parents is who should do it” (Interview #1). This fundamental question of who should be responsible for organizing and involving parents seems to point to many different answers, including parents, school board members, and the Superintendent’s Office. One must examine the source of support for parent organizing and consider their agenda and its influence on reform, keeping in mind that “the impulse to reform may come from public officials and civic leaders (top-down) or from grassroots community pressure (bottom-up), but it is likely that sustained and effective reformed efforts require a little of both” (Henig, 189). Research has pointed to the importance of viewing educational leadership as a process that involves leaders, teachers, students, parents, and community members.

While Haig was taking small steps towards involving parents in their children’s education, among school board members “there was a strong belief that parents needed to be involved in the educational process in order for schools to work” (Interview #2). When further examining this belief, it seems that the board emphasized parental involvement on paper while doing little to actually encourage parental involvement or discourage it. As one board member points out:

Both in the long range strategic plans of the entire school district as well as in the site based school improvement plans that got developed, there was a heavy emphasis on having significant parent involvement. Beyond that, our meetings were not only open to the public but we encouraged a lot of public discussion both at the board level and in the board committees as well (Interview #2).

While these meetings were open to parents, little was done to recruit or involve parents, beyond those who were elected members of the school board. One effort involved a Parent Leadership Training Institute offered by Leadership Greater Hartford, which trained three parents who, with the training and support provided them, ran for and got elected to the school board (Interview #2). While this was a small-scale effort to involve parents, it centers on the role of the school board and its power rather than parents and their power. The school board's lack of an attempt to grant parents a role in the process, despite Haig's apparent interest in involving parents, points to a lack of communication and cooperation between the school board and the Superintendent's Office, which could account for the ineffectiveness of Haig's attempts to involve parents. Policy leaders have pointed to the importance of communication between the superintendent and school board, arguing that "a superintendent must understand the board members' views and be able to work with the board to pursue a common vision for the district" (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). While Haig may have been trying to balance the bottom-up and top-down notions of reform, Haig's inability to involve the powerful school board in these reforms may have also led to his ultimate dismissal and the subsequent failure of his reforms to have any real impact.

The school model at this time reflected a strong school board/weak superintendent model, a result of a combination of "a leadership vacuum in the Superintendent's Office [and] people's individual styles of governance" (Interview #2). This school-board centered model makes the examination of school board policies and goals equally important to the examination of the superintendent's policies and goals. While the superintendent is the "highly visible figure on the front lines of education who articulates

the vision for and oversees the activities of a large organization...school board members set the policies that make or break the achievements of other leaders and teachers” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The school board members “have considerable power over the things that matter in a local school system, but often they are the leaders who have the least formal training for their roles” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999), complicating the issue of accountability. While school board members “felt accountable to students, their families, and the voters of Hartford primarily” (Interview #2), in terms of parental involvement “some people were probably more serious about [it] than others” (Interview #2). Parental involvement, however important, often seemed to fall behind more pressing concerns such as failing buildings, and lack of supplies. School board members set out “to reform the school system in a way that would bring about far better academic success for children and do it in a way that was fiscally responsible and in a way that would produce sustainable results” (Interview #2), a tall task for a board faced with limited resources and growing problems.

After Haig’s contract expired, Eddie Davis, Principal of Weaver High School, was named as acting superintendent on a one-year contract. The board decided to hire Davis and wait to look for a permanent successor so that they could focus their energy on working with Education Alternatives Inc., a process that could be considered undemocratic because of the lack of community input. Under state law, the board could, with the approval of the State Education Commissioner, appoint an acting superintendent for a period not to exceed 90 days but multiple 90-day extensions could be granted for good cause so long as the board reported their progress on superintendent searches. (Halloran, November 3, 1994). At this point Hartford was exploring the option of



bringing in private employees to serve as teachers, social workers, and psychologists, an idea that eventually grew to include administrators and the hiring of Education Alternatives Inc. (EAI) in 1994. In “an era of increased expectations with diminishing resources to meet those expectations” (Interview #2), EAI seemed like an innovative alternative and the only chance for Hartford’s failing schools. Davis’ appointment would signal the beginning of the hiring of EAI. and the subsequent long string of temporary superintendents that followed.

Shannon Stormont

### **Chapter 3—EAI: Privatizing a Public Service**

The overarching debate over the merits of private control of public schools has been reenacted in struggling education systems across the country for years. Advocates argue that underperforming schools should be handed over to nongovernment authorities, either for-profit or not-for-profit management firms. While public schools often contract with private firms for services like transportation, food, textbooks, maintenance, and professional development, advocates have wanted to extend private control by offering contracts to educational management organizations (EMOs) to operate the entire school. EMOs, once hired, would then have the power to hire and supervise staff and teachers, develop the curriculum, determine the organization of the schools, and assess student progress (Levin, 2001).

As Hartford schools struggled to produce results, the idea of hiring a private company to run the schools surfaced. While several school systems, including Baltimore, had handed over several schools to for-profit management firms, no system had ever been entirely turned over, as was being proposed in Hartford. The front-runner in the pool of private firms was Education Alternatives Inc. (EAI), the leading private and for-profit school management company that claimed to be able to take over and make dramatic improvements (Green, Hartford Courant, July 23, 1994).

While the school board ultimately had the role of deciding whether or not to hire EAI, a public battle waged between EAI supporters and teachers and staff in schools to win public support. Opponents argued that the schools should try again to reform from

within and that the lack of any documented improvements in other EAI schools raised doubts as to how EAI would make a profit in Hartford. EAI, however, had more to gain from signing Hartford than an immediate profit; a contract with Hartford schools would “provide a positive jolt to the company’s [already struggling] stock—possibly doubling its value” (Green, Courant, July 8, 1994). Experts believed that EAI could use Hartford schools to create a model school system to sell to districts across the country, worrying less about profit and more on improvements (Green, Hartford Courant, July 8, 1994).

Opponents of EAI pointed to the Baltimore school system’s decision not to turn over more control until after improvements in the nine schools EAI managed had been assessed by an outside firm. They also pointed to the larger class size in EAI-run schools, the complete inclusion of special education students, and the replacement of all paraprofessionals with interns who received lower wages and no benefits. EAI’s main opponent was the Hartford Federation of Teacher (HFT), who threatened to challenge the legality of the process that led to EAI’s selection if they were hired. The National Education Association (NEA), the nation’s largest teachers union, also waged a war against privatization of schools through its Center for the Preservation of Public Schools. Judy Behnke, director of the Center, argued that schools “[are] not like General Motors. We cannot recall the child if the child has not been successful” (Frerking, The New York Times, July 24, 1996).

Parents, who were left to sift through these muddled and conflicting reports, were left confused by it all. As Sara Oyola Bowman, principal of Sanchez School pointed out, “We hear EAI talking and saying one thing and we hear the unions talk, we hear something else...It’s confusing for parents and everyone” (Green, Hartford Courant, May

29, 1994). As one community organizer pointed out, as people began to debate privatization of schools “the whole issue there became not educational reform. It just got cut pro EAI and anti EAI. Most of the city council was pro” (Interview #1), as was demonstrated in their 6 to 3 vote to hand over control of all 32 Hartford schools to EAI on July 22, 1994 (Green, Courant, July 23, 1994). The board agreed to have EAI start work in the city’s schools by August 8<sup>th</sup>, and possibly as early as the following week. The decisions about how much EAI would be paid and exact limits on control were left up to a special contract negotiations committee.

The committee meetings resulted in a controversial contract giving EAI total control of the \$200 million budget. The contract also put EAI in charge of recommending who to hire and/or fire and advising the board on union contract negotiations. Under the contract, the superintendent would remain in control and any disagreements between the superintendent and EAI would be resolved by the school board. EAI could also pay its operating costs out of the school budget and would receive a percentage of all money saved in running the schools. The contract, a five-year agreement, was subject to annual renewals and could be terminated at any time with 90 days written notice. EAI would also advance the city \$20 million to install computers and upgrade city schools over five years and the city would repay the loan, with interest, over the life of the contract (Hartford Courant, September 27, 1994).

The contract was then to be voted on by the school board and the city council and signed by the city’s corporation counsel. The city council, maintaining some doubts about the contract, requested a delay on the vote, asking school board members to put off voting from Thursday, September 29, 1994 until Monday, October 3. Hartford’s

corporation counsel, Pedro Segarra, said that he would not sign the contract until a consensus had been reached between the school board and the city council and that he “would hope that the board of education would postpone taking action tomorrow” during their scheduled meeting (Green, Hartford Courant, September 29, 1994). Segarra, who signs all city contracts, went on to say that, “given the degree of differences that exist, absent a good degree of cooperation to make this contract work, I don’t know how I can say in good conscience that this contract is viable” (Green, Hartford Courant, September 29, 1994). Despite his concerns and opposition from the city council that the contract granted EAI too much control over city funds, the board voted to hire EAI, resulting in a refusal by Segarra to sign the contract (The Baltimore Sun, October 4, 1994).

Segarra’s refusal to sign began another important struggle between the school board and the city council. While Mayor Michael Peters tried to broker a deal between the two, finance officials continued to say they wouldn’t process payments to EAI without Segarra’s signature. Finally, in October, city officials and EAI agreed on a contract under which the city would receive a share of any profits EAI were to make in Hartford (Hartford Courant, October 26, 1994).

As this contract became legally binding, new information began to surface. EAI, who took over control of nine Baltimore schools in 1992, announced in August of 1993 that its 4,800 Baltimore students had gained nearly a full grade. Stock prices rose until ten months later when the Minneapolis Star Tribune published an expose revealing that the dramatic progress was limited to a small, unrepresentative group of students, and came not on citywide standardized tests but on an exam administered by an EAI

subcontractor. Instead, standardized reading and math scores went down during EAI's first year (Kean, Newsday, October 31, 1994).

EAI seemed to redeem itself in June of 1994, in the heat of Hartford's decision to hire them, when Baltimore's education department announced that official standardized scores had improved for EAI's second year. Then, in October, after contract negotiations were complete, an unusual clerical error was discovered and new scores were released showing a decline in reading and math scores in EAI schools once again. Ironically, the new scores also showed improvements in non-EAI run Baltimore schools, despite a lower per-pupil budget than the EAI schools (Kean, Newsday, October 31, 1994). Philip E. Geiger, divisional president for EAI, said, "I have no idea why the city [of Baltimore] issued one set of cores in June and one set of scores now. We are absolutely not involved in issuing those test results" (Green, Courant, October 19, 1994). Board members did not comment publicly on the scores, but Gregory A. Humphrey, Executive Assistant to the President of the teachers' union, commented that, "The timing is very curious. When they released the scores in June, it was the height of the argument over the contract. Now, after the contract is signed, they release the [revised] information" (Green, Hartford Courant, October 19, 1994).

When determining the success of privatization, commonly used measures are student outcomes, costs, parental voice, accountability, and equity (Ascher, 1996). Educational outcomes are primarily measured by standardized test scores, especially because privatizers are interested in securing "quick, easily definable, and inexpensive measures of success" (Ascher, 1996). In Hartford, no stipulation was included in EAI's

contract regarding test scores. EAI did, however, promise dramatic improvements over three years in student test scores.

The issue of cost is also often associated with privatizing schools. Many urban education systems suffer lack of funds because of a funding system based on property-based taxation, which creates drastic inequalities in school between property-poor and property-rich districts (Ascher, 1996). Due to increased state funding in Hartford, however, the amount per pupil per year exceeds the amount spent in many Connecticut suburbs. Despite these seemingly large resources, Hartford schools lack adequate buildings and supplies when compared to its suburban counterparts. As one former school board member pointed out:

The state legislature, partly because all of the problems the Hartford schools were having, would approve these very big increases but then those dollars would be sent to city hall. The city council would take most of the additional dollars. Probably about 80% of the additional dollars that were given, were kept by the city and they used it for other city services and in some cases to give tax breaks to the taxpayers and only send us a fraction of what the state had recommended and intended (Interview #2).

These problems with funding helped pave the way for the hiring of EAI and thus would be a main indicator of success. The profit EAI was able to make would be a prime indicator of its business potential and would thus be its main concern, along with an increase in test scores. One way to cut costs that is commonly associated with private management firms is the adaptation of the model used by Catholic schools, which have traditionally managed to maintain lower costs than public schools because of lower administrative expenses, narrower curriculum offerings, and much lower teacher salaries (Ascher, 1996).

Another measure of success in privatization is parental voice. Advocates of privatization often argue that parents want effective schools and that in a market-based system only effective schools will survive. This theory is most applicable under privatization attempts that involve school choice. It is argued that school choice gives parents power over their children's education, however, others argue that "instead of helping to improve schools through their participation, dissatisfied parents are simply to take their children elsewhere" (Ascher, 1996), which does not really constitute true parental involvement. In the case of Hartford and EAI, parent choice was not involved in the contract, leaving "parental voice even more limited than in traditional public school systems" (Ascher, 1996).

Another indicator of success in privatization is the level of accountability. "One of the central arguments advanced by privatizers is that public schools are unaccountable; that is, they are not effectively answerable to anyone—parents or taxpayers in general" (Ascher, 1996). This unaccountability is due, in large part, to a bureaucratic system that requires compromise between competing interests. Removing this level of bureaucracy is, in essence, removing the publicness from public schools by making schools more autocratic. A great deal of the bureaucratic accountability structure governing public schools was put in place to guarantee a level of equal opportunity, raising questions about how freeing schools from regulations affects the rights of students historically denied equal opportunity (Ascher, 1996).

Equity is another tool used to compare traditional public versus privatized schools. Although public schools are supposed to be equal because of universal access, academic achievement is often impacted by socioeconomic status, race, and gender.



Advocates of the privatization of public schools argue that equity-related objectives will be better maintained through free enterprise rather than government. Opponents, on the other hand, argue that equality is undermined by the desire to make a profit in privatized schools. One such example would be EAI's decision in Baltimore to discard all special education programs in favor of complete inclusion in the classroom. One could argue that this decision favored the majority of students by shifting funds from special education programs to traditional classrooms at the expense of students in these programs, thus impeding these students' ability to succeed in school.

When using these tools to analyze the success of EAI's privatization attempt in Hartford, it is clear that privatization was not a clear solution. In December of 1994, EAI released a 100-day plan that promised to improve worker productivity, retrain employees, reorganize departments, retrofit schools, install new technology, and improve financial management (Green, Courant, December 7, 1994). EAI also outlined four key areas for improvement, none of which focused on improving parental involvement: financial; those related to non-instructional areas such as school maintenance; technological; and educational. Despite these claims, results in February, nearly four months after EAI was hired, were mixed. As one Hartford Courant article explained:

Systemwide, there are some custodians who complain that they have not seen or heard from EAI, despite some dire shortages of supplies and calls for help; some parents and teachers say they have waited for EAI to reach out to them; most schools still await the new computer that EAI has said will help transform education in the city. But at some schools – and in some other key areas – EAI is making substantial progress, supporters and company officials says (Green, Hartford Courant, February 19, 1995).

In fact, EAI had only installed computers in 3 of 32 schools by February, leaving 29 schools frustrated and beginning to doubt the promises made by EAI (Green, Hartford Courant, February 19, 1995).

EAI, who promised to increase parental involvement by March (Green, Courant, December 7, 1994), had shown little effort to involve parents by February. Cesar Mejia, president of the Spanish American Merchants Association, head of a parents' advocacy group involved in 16 city schools, president of the Parkville Community School's parent-teacher-community organization and a member of the school's governance team, said that "They have not talked to me" (Green, Hartford Courant, February 19, 1995). Ana Velez, a member of the parent-teacher-community organization at Parkville echoed his sentiments when she declared that "Nobody knows the program" (Green, Hartford Courant, February 19, 1995). June Wilkins, project director for EAI, and EAI Chairman John T. Golle acknowledged that more needed to be done, pointing out that EAI had recently hired an outreach coordinator to work with parents and other community groups. At the same time, the school board directed acting Superintendent of Schools Eddie Davis, who had formerly discouraged the hiring of EAI, to work harder at getting information out about the partnership with EAI (Green, Hartford Courant, February 19, 1995). The shifting of blame from EAI by parents to Davis by the board shows the lack of a sense of accountability, even under the privatization model.

The public perception of EAI's success was only further confused as time passed. At a gathering marking EAI's first 100 Days in Hartford, EAI supporters told their stories to members of Leadership Greater Hartford. Accomplishments at the schools that had seen the new computers were shared by members of the panel and the only person

representing doubt on the panel was Rawson School Principal Gerald Martin, who questioned EAI's impact and claimed that "the communication level has been miserable as far as I'm concerned" (Green, Hartford Courant, March 7, 1995). No members of EAI's staunchest opposition, the teachers union, were represented on the panel and criticism was kept to a minimum, despite EAI's announcement that most schools would not receive computers by the end of the academic year (Green, Hartford Courant, March 7, 1995).

Criticism grew quickly, however, and by May turmoil had ensued. EAI proposed laying off 300 teachers, a decision the school board was left to make. Meanwhile, the relationship between the board and acting Superintendent Davis deteriorated as Davis resisted EAI's proposals to cut teachers and ignored school board recommended reforms in his own budget proposal. Shirley West, a parent activist who had initially opposed EAI and then supported it, seemed to raise the issue of clear accountability at a board meeting, saying, "I am sick and tired of people talking about money, money, money. For God's sake quit putting the blame on everybody. I'm sick of it. I have seen so much insult going around" (Green, Hartford Courant, May 21, 1995). The school board was also receiving some of the blame with Stephanie Lightfoot, Thelma Dickerson, Candida Flores, and Ted Carroll, its members who staunchly supported EAI, being accused of selling out the school system to EAI in board meetings attracting hundreds of people. Others blamed the teacher's union for encouraging teachers to speak about EAI in class (Green, Hartford Courant, May 21, 1995).

On May 23, 1995, a meeting was held at Bulkeley High School to try to begin planning for the following school year. Board members, having to keep in mind

November elections, favored compromise, while EAI, desperate to maintain its contract, was ready to forego changes it recommended in an attempt to maintain its contract. Many looked at the emerging relationship between the school board and EAI and were left asking themselves why EAI was here at all if their recommendations were going to be ignored. Board members seemed to be considering the same question; on May 23 they voted to give EAI a very limited role in the coming year's budget. The board's decision reflected the heavy pressure from the Hartford Federation of Teachers, in addition to EAI's submission of bills to the city for questionable services (Green, Hartford Courant, May 25, 1995). One Hartford organizer explained the situation:

The company comes to town, I think they're based in Minnesota. Bottom line is that the city started challenging all these expenses of flying executives back and forth from Minnesota, high priced hotels here, cost going up, savings not happening, bills going to the city, the city having to pay all of this money. Until the relationship finally fell apart all together (Interview #3).

The school board vote was overturned by Hartford Mayor Michael Peter and city council leaders, who were worried that EAI's departure would be politically costly and jeopardize the year's tax cut. They advised Superintendent Eddie Davis to make sure EAI had a significant role in the schools, despite opposition from the board, because if the contract with EAI was broken, the city would be legally obligated to pay more than \$4 million in EAI bills. In addition, the school board did not want it to appear that the teachers' union dictated school policy (Green, Hartford Courant, May 25, 1995).

This move on the part of the Mayor established a stormy relationship with the school board, with board member Thelma Dickerson arguing that it was a "slap in the face" to have a policy-making meeting with the superintendent and EAI and exclude the

board. Another board member, Elizabeth Brad Noel, arrived uninvited at the meeting but was asked to leave. In addition to Dickerson's sharp words for Peters, she also criticized Davis, saying, "I know what side Eddie is on. Eddie is not on the side of what the board wants to see happen" (Green, Hartford Courant, May 25, 1995). While Dickerson may have been clear of what side Davis was on, it is unclear what the board was looking for; they rejected an initial proposal by Davis for not including EAI but then voted to virtually eliminate EAI's role in its own proposal (Green, Hartford Courant, May 25, 1995). Ironically, city hall, which had resisted EAI a year earlier, was all that was keeping it in Hartford at this point.

Seeking compromise, the school board approved a resolution on June 19, 1995 telling EAI to focus its attention on five city schools. The plan to shift the focus to only five schools was originally suggested by Dickerson as another chance for EAI to prove itself. The struggle between the teachers' union and the board heated up before the board meeting vote, when hundreds attended a rally by the teachers' union and a separate meeting conducted by Dickerson, in which she ridiculed retired teachers who drive "Jaguars...[and] Mercedes" on their way to vacation homes (Green, Hartford Courant, June 20, 1995). Board member Ted Carroll defended the move, arguing that it was not a case of the board's backing off on school reform, but a phasing in of EAI's work (Green, Hartford Courant, June 20, 1995).

Adding to the emerging confusion about EAI's role in the Hartford schools as elections approached in November, the candidates for election to the school board remained divided pro-EAI and anti-EAI. Pre-election, the nine-member board was split 7-2 in favor of the contract but each of the five seats up for reelection was held by an EAI

supporter. The anti-slates consisted of the Children First Slate, organized by an anti-privatization group of parents and teachers called Citizens for Better Schools, and the Hartford Issues Committee, organized by the two anti-EAI school board members. The pro-EAI slate, which was backed by the mayor and included school board President Thelma Dickerson, was known as the HOPE slate (Hartford's Organized Parents for Education). The Rev. Michael C. Williams, part of the Citizens for Better Schools slate, claimed that "the community is against the privatization of public education" and said that he was "deeply offended" when the board chose to hire EAI without more discussions with the community (Green, Hartford Courant, September 6, 1995).

In the midst of planning for the upcoming elections, things grew more complicated when EAI demanded that they immediately take over full control of the school board's \$200 million budget. Although the contract with EAI gave them full control of the budget, no move was ever made on the part of EAI to begin taking over control until this immediate demand in October. Top city finance officials responded by saying that the company had not shown it was capable of handling the budget and that the contract required EAI to "establish an overall system of internal controls" to demonstrate it could safely manage tax dollars and pay bills before it could assume control of spending (Green, Hartford Courant, October 6, 1995). EAI also claimed that it had spent more than \$5 million to help manage the school district and had not been reimbursed by the city, an argument to which city officials replied that EAI had not found any savings in the budget as was specified in its contract. Board and city hall officials agreed that EAI and the city would have to operate a dual system for a few months to ensure that EAI was up to the job of handling a budget of \$172.7 million, plus about \$27 million in grant

money. EAI's sudden hurry to claim the Hartford School Board's \$200 million budget as its own operating revenue could be attributed to its financial problems and that fact that such a move would increase the value of the company (Green, Hartford Courant, October 6, 1995).

The superintendent's response to EAI's demands came in a letter dated October 6, 1995 that told the company that the city would not comply with its demands and that it had until October 18, 1995 to prove it could and would live up to its school management contract with the city. Davis went on to say: "I appreciate that EAI is now saying that it is finally prepared to assume all of its contractual obligations. However, its failure to do so, or even to demonstrate that it is capable of doing so, raises the question of whether EAI truly has such capability or intent" (Green, Hartford Courant, October 10, 1995).

The fact that, a year into its contract, EAI officials never met with city auditors to review documentation and systems or taken any real steps in handling the budget, was puzzling to people on both sides of the issue. EAI had at first estimated it would take six months to hire a payroll company, purchase financial and other software, train staff and duplicate the tasks the city performs regularly to ensure that bills are paid and money is properly managed. John T. McLaughlin, editor of Education Industry Report and author of a recently published booklet, *Guidelines for Contracting with Private Providers of Education Services*, had this to say: "It is more than the \$64 million question. It is mystifying to me why a company could bust its chops to get a high-profile contract...and then be so inattentive to something so fundamental" (Green, Hartford Courant, October 22, 1995). It seems that EAI moved slowly, not only in taking advantage of the authority its contract gave them, but also in implementing its plans. Most of its "first 100 days"

plan was revised and little was ever fulfilled. “They were really more focused on trying to be accepted and doing things to seem helpful” said board member Stephanie Lightfoot, who talked of the amount of time EAI spent getting copy machines into the schools (Green, Hartford Courant, October 22, 1995). However helpful, these small moves were not what EAI was brought into Hartford to enact and the company, seemingly overwhelmed by the 32 school district, simply did not assume the role it had been hired to assume.

Results from the election showed the HOPE candidates winning three seats and opponents winning two, giving the pro-EAI forces a 5-4 majority on the board. Interestingly, the new board included no Hispanic members, despite a student population that is 51% Hispanic. It seemed that many voters pointed to Mayor Peters endorsement as the main reason for voting for the HOPE slate, despite increasing problems for EAI, such as the Chief Operating Officer resigning a week before the election because of a dispute with company Chairman Golle (Green, Hartford Courant, November 8, 1995). The election results, however, caused a 13.3% percentage point jump in EAI’s stock prices the day after the election, leaving some hope for EAI’s success as an Education Management Organization (Walsh, Education Week, November 15, 1995).

Despite this jump following the election, EAI announced a \$2.5 million loss on November 15, 1995 for the financial quarter ending September 30. In addition, Baltimore announced in November that it was ending its contract with EAI after 3 ½ years of the five-year contract. To terminate the contract, Baltimore school board members needed a majority vote and 90 days notice. The meeting was held on November 30 and district



officials said they planned to serve EAI with official notice by December 1 (Walsh, Education Week, November 29, 1995).

After termination of its contract in Baltimore and the earlier decision by a school managed by EAI in Florida not to renew its contract, EAI was left with only one contract—the Hartford Schools. When news came shortly after Baltimore’s decision that scores in EAI-run Baltimore schools had improved, EAI used the scores to show Hartford “that there is definitely a way to improve student performance. But you have to have the ability to make things happen” (Green, Hartford Courant, December 13, 1995). In response, Hartford approved on December 29 the payment of \$3 million to EAI, disputing EAI’s claims to another \$3.9 million. District officials pointed out that EAI was supposed to be paid only out of the savings it made through more efficient management of the school system, of which there had been none. The news of the \$3 million payment came at a crucial time for EAI after another key official, chief financial officer Franklin K. Kuhar, resigned on December 22 (Gamble, Education Week, January 10, 1996).

On January 23, 1996, just a few weeks after approving the \$3 million payment but paying only \$343,000, the Hartford School Board voted to end its partnership with EAI. The school board members said they were “tired of working on the 1 ½-year-old relationship—which faltered largely over money issue—instead of concentrating on improving the schools” (Green, Hartford Courant, January 24, 1996). Board members, seven of whom were in favor of ending the contract with EAI, said that they hoped to settle matters with EAI without resorting to lawsuits. EAI reacted with surprise to the decision, telling reporters, “We have no sticking points that we can’t negotiate. We are not convinced that we cannot do things for these kids. What we see today does no seem

logical. We were that close” (Green, Hartford Courant, January 24, 1996). One of the main reasons that the contract was terminated was because of the refusal on the part of city council members and the city’s lawyers to pay EAI anything except as was dictated in the contract. As City Councilman Anthony F. DiPentima pointed out, “The whole premise was that EAI was 100 percent, absolutely certain that with a budget of \$170 million they would be able to find savings. They were cocksure of it, absolutely smug about it” (Green, Hartford Courant, January 24, 1996). In fact, to pay EAI the school-management contract would have had to have been amended, which would require city council approval, a highly unlikely occurrence (Green, Hartford Courant, January 24, 1996).

While EAI officials may have seen its progress as “so close”, the termination of its project in Hartford, its last public-school management contract, proved otherwise. EAI’s stock, once at a high of near \$50, closed at \$4 a share on January 23, after dipping as low as \$3. Trading was even suspended for a time after reports of Hartford’s pullout (Green, Hartford Courant, January 24, 1996). EAI officials, angered at the board decision, charged that the district was breaching its contract and threatened to close the computer labs the company had installed in five schools if it did not receive its \$3.6 million. As for EAI’s future, Golle announced that it would no longer be in urban education systems but in “less political and less volatile suburban districts (Walsh, Education Week, January 31, 1996).

In an odd twist, however, barely two weeks after the board vote, Hartford city officials announced that they might keep the company on to oversee finances of the school district. The school district, on the other hand, had locked EAI out of schools

where it had installed computers and office equipment, resulting in a tug of war between city officials and the school district (Walsh, Education Week, February 14, 1996). Peters' idea of having EAI handle "just the financial part and let the educators educate" was due, in large part, to the legal mess surrounding the termination of the 1 ½ year old contract and EAI's claim that Hartford should reimburse them \$11.5 million in expenses (Walsh, Education Week, February 14, 1996). John B. O'Connell, the chairman of the city council's budget committee said that the continued partnership between EAI and the Hartford schools would "settle the financial impact, and it gets the city and the board and education system moving forward" (Walsh, Education Week, February 14, 1996). This deal did not materialize and in March EAI threatened to sue the city for \$100 million for breach of contract. Meanwhile, on April 1, 1996, Superintendent Eddie Davis announced that he was leaving Hartford to become superintendent of schools in Manchester, Connecticut. (Green & Fraham, Hartford Courant, May 20, 1996). In the end, Hartford agreed to pay EAI \$6.3 million, including the \$343,000 it had already paid and the \$2.75 million it had already agreed to pay. The final \$3.25 million was to be paid out over five years in return for EAI's promise not to sue the city. O'Connell called the partnership with EAI "a rather expensive mistake" and said the final \$2.5 million payment was "blackmail" (Hartford Courant, July 23, 1996).

After leaving Hartford, EAI changed its name to Tesseract Group Inc. and moved to Scottsdale, Arizona in 1998. It began to focus on running charter schools, which were particularly popular in Arizona (Welsh, Education Week, February 9, 2000). By the spring of 2000, Tesseract's stock value had dropped to less than \$1 per share and it was kicked off the NASDAQ stock market. In addition, it had laid off much of its staff, and

fired and subsequently re-hired Golle, its CEO (Miner, Rethinking Schools Online, 2000).

The plight of EAI points to the problems with school privatization attempts and the difficulty of bringing about reform. EMOs often tend to underestimate the difficulty associated with bringing about reform; back in 1992, Golle told Forbes magazine that “we figure we can reduce operating and administrative spending by 25 percent and put 20 percent back into the classroom...There’s so much fat in the schools that even a blind man without his cane could find the way” (Virshup, The Washington Post, April 7, 1996). Golle, underestimating the simplicity of school reform, never did seem to find the way.

While it is impossible to assess the effectiveness of EAI in Hartford because of their slow and limited involvement and the short duration of their stay, it seems that “private management of public schools has often led to cleaner buildings, greater access to computers, and more individualized instruction. But it has yet to show academic improvement anywhere” (Walsh, Education Week, May 29, 1996). In addition, no attempt was made by EAI to involve parents, thus further alienating parents and community members and creating even further doubt as to the competency of the Hartford Board of Education.

Shannon Stormont

#### **Chapter 4—State Control: A Way to Ensure Hartford will “Never be last again”?**

After EAI was finally removed from the picture in Hartford, new questions arose as to the future of the Hartford schools. On February 1, 1996 Mayor Mike Peters threatened a state takeover if he was not satisfied with the board of education’s plans to improve the schools. This idea of a state takeover raised important questions about authority and accountability. Board President Stephanie Lightfoot commented:

We do not need the state to come in. I don’t know what the mayor means. There is no [provision] in the Connecticut statutes allowing this. I don’t think the mayor has the authority. The board has a plan. It is called a strategic plan (Green, Hartford Courant, February 2, 1996).

The increasing tensions between the Hartford School Board and Mayor Peters were echoed with other board members’ comments. Newly elected Don Romanick, a lawyer who formerly worked for the city, said: “Obviously, it’s Mayor Mike spouting off. The state has the ultimate authority to educate the kids. It’s been a crazy week” (Green, Hartford Courant, February 2, 1996).

What may have written off by many, including these school board members, as empty threats turned out to be more serious as time passed. When standardized test results were released, indicating that the city’s 25,000 students performed at the worst level in Connecticut, these threats were taken much more seriously. In May of 1996, the city council voted 6 to 2 to declare a state of emergency for the Hartford schools, which was usually reserved for natural disasters or civil unrest. This step was the first in having the state takeover administration of the schools (Washington Post, May 15, 1996). In

response to this vote, Governor Rowland expressed concern about the state of Hartford's schools but an unwillingness to take over the system. This unwillingness was echoed by Education Commissioner Theodore S. Sergi. Sergi argued that he did not believe the state should force any changes upon the Hartford schools but should offer assistance if local officials requested it (Frahm & Green, Hartford Courant, May 21, 1996). This statement raises questions as to what constitutes a request for assistance since public statements by the mayor and the city council had already been made requesting a takeover.

Rowland's response to the problem seemed to offer no more promise than Sergi's. He questioned "what...the state and the federal government [could] do that they are [were] not doing at the local level" (Frahm & Green, Hartford Courant, May 21, 1996). His only proposal, however, for helping at the local level involved the promotion of a character-building program that he was involved with called "Character Counts". This nationwide program pointed to a lack of ethical training as the source of schools' problems. Based on the tenets of trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship, the creators believed that the program crossed cultural lines and was said to have produced results in several cities throughout the country, decreasing truancy and gang-related violence (Frahm & Green, Hartford Courant, May 21, 1996). Rowland's response again points to the question of responsibility; rather than focusing on ways to improve the system and administration of the Hartford Board of Education, Rowland seemed to hold parents and the students themselves accountable, pointing to a lack of character. As Chris Powell, the managing editor of the Journal Inquirer in Manchester pointed out, "the real question here is whether state government wants the responsibility

or whether it just wants to keep tinkering ineffectually and criticizing people who don't have the power, resources, or capacity to succeed" (Powell, the Networker).

Rather than opt for a state takeover, the state education department decided in the Spring of 1996 to form a new partnership with Hartford schools and promised to come up with a reform agenda. Pressure for reform mounted in July of 1996 when a decision was reached in Hartford's *Sheff v. O'Neill* case, in which the Connecticut Supreme Court ordered the legislature to come up with a plan to both improve failing city schools and desegregate the region's schools (Green, Hartford Courant, March 8, 1997), where 95% of students were from minority backgrounds (Kuczkowski, Hartford Advocate, 1997). The 4-3 decision said that, "the public elementary and high school students in Hartford suffer daily from the devastating effects that racial and ethnic isolation, as well as poverty, have had on their education" (Bernhard).

In the fall of 1996, Commissioner Sergi presented the board with his 48-point plan to improve schools, which contained many ideas that came from the board itself. The Board's reaction, however, was cool and board members claimed they needed time to analyze it and set priorities. Finally, after attending numerous board meetings and stressing the importance of each point, Sergi convinced the board to back the entire plan (Kuczkowski, Hartford Advocate, 1997).

Despite this victory, the situation did not improve for Hartford schools. On December 3, 1996 Lightfoot was reelected Board President. Later, board members Dickerson and Hall accused Lightfoot and Carroll of brokering a deal to reelect Lightfoot in private meetings, resulting in the backing of Romanik for President by Dickerson, Hall, Brouillet and Villalobus. The remaining four board members, however, together

with Romanik himself, remained in support of Lightfoot. On December 11, Lightfoot resigned as President because she did not want to lead a divided board. She remained a member of the board and Romanik was elected in her place. This entire charade was played out before the public, resulting in a public outcry for the board's resignation. On December 16, 1997, the City Council considered a resolution asking the board to resign, which did not pass. The last straw came on December 17 when, at a packed meeting at Weaver High School, board member Fournier launched into a series of personal attacks, resulting in a parent jumping onto the stage and knocking a pitcher of water onto Fournier (Kuczkowski, Hartford Advocate, 1997). This chaotic scene illustrated the divisiveness that existed within the board. As one board member said of the disagreements among board members and with Superintendents:

And a lot of the tension between the board and Superintendent got played out in the public arena which then created more tension and more anxiety in the district. Frankly, it didn't make either the Board or the Superintendent or the district as a whole look like it was functioning very well, which of course contributed to the decision on the state's part to takeover the system. The good news was that there were a lot of debates and they were in the public. The bad news was that they often got out of hand and they often kept us from conducting from conducting business and certainly kept us from moving forward as fast as we would have liked (Interview #2).

Later that same month the Board again demonstrated its indecisiveness when it came to the "particularly contentious and divisive process" of hiring a new superintendent, Patricia Daniel (Green, Hartford Courant, March 8, 1997). Black community leaders expressed their disappointment with the three finalists for the job, urging the board to begin a new search process. The board remained intent on hiring Hoboken school Superintendent Edwin Duroy but eventually backed down amidst



pressure from the community. The swing vote in that decision was Lightfoot, who claimed she chose Daniel to try to stop the fighting within the board and between the board and others (Kuczkowski, Hartford Advocate, 1997). One community organizer described the pressure applied by the community and the board's inability to make a decision:

The real community packed the room that night at a Board meeting. A press release from the Board was handed out in advance of the meeting giving the reactions of Board members to select Candidate A as Superintendent of schools and so that was distributed. However, because of the pressure of the people that night for the elected body, the elected Board of Ed picked Candidate B as the Superintendent instead. It upset the political orchestrators of the original plan. This Candidate B turned out to be a black woman brought in as Superintendent. Well the bottom line is she came in as Superintendent and had no support at all from the City government and the political leadership of the city and interference from Day One in her attempt to gain control of the school system ensued. The political machine then kicked in to the next level and said okay, they made a mistake. They picked the wrong person as Superintendent who we did not support for political leadership, challenging the question of a bipartisan elected Board of Education. So that political leadership then passed an ordinance or resolution begging the state legislature to abolish the Hartford Board of Ed and as part of that process they forced out the appointed Superintendent of schools. (Interview #3).

Hartford's problems mounted when Hartford High School was threatened with a loss of its accreditation in April of 1997, which would have made it only the second unaccredited high school in New England (Weizel, New York Times, June 1, 1997). In addition, the City Council passed a resolution to hire an auditor to investigate the school board's finances. Hartford Councilman John O'Connell expressed his distrust of the board, vowing to, "expose [their] petulance and [their] corruption. I will expose the board's malfeasance" (Kuczkowski, Hartford Advocate, 1997).

On March 10, 1997, leaders of the city council and board of education, along with key legislators, announced support for the creation of an independent panel that would manage all but curriculum and instruction in Hartford schools. The panel would maintain “near-total control of the city schools, including the authority to open union contracts for renegotiation, to hire and fire employees and to oversee administrative matters, such as finances and management of buildings and ground” (Green, Hartford Courant, March 8, 1997). With the failure of EAI still fresh in the memories of school officials, it seems surprising that they would be willing to hand over such a large amount of control so willingly.

This panel, unlike EAI, would be appointed by the legislature and the governor, pointing to new statewide accountability for the success or failure of Hartford schools. Despite this ruling that the segregation was unconstitutional, the opinion gave no deadline for action and no guidance to state officials regarding a remedy (Bernhard, [www.bernhard.norwalk.ct.us/issues/kbschlaws.html](http://www.bernhard.norwalk.ct.us/issues/kbschlaws.html)).

The proposed takeover was seen by many, including board present Donald V. Romanik, as “an acknowledgement that the problems of the system are so significant that the current structures just don’t seem to work” (New York Times, March 11, 1997). One board member expressed his feelings about the takeover:

Members of the Board, including myself, signaled to the State legislature that we thought it would be a good idea and we said that it would be even a better idea if two conditions were included and both of the conditions were included in the final legislation. And those conditions, first of all, I said that the employment contracts that we have with our employees needed to be revised in ways that gave more management authority to the superintendent and to the board. Our contention was that it would be hard to bring about changes unless there were some modifications to the collective bargaining agreement. And the principal change that came about

in the legislation was that an arbitrator was deciding between a union position and a management position would take into account first and foremost what was the interest of the students. Previous to that they would take into account first and foremost what was the precedent, what was the history. And because we had such a lousy history, we had been making very bad decisions or the arbitrator was making very bad decisions, we had successfully argued that they should have as their most compelling criterion what is in the best interest of the students. So that's now in the state law (Interview #2).

The recommendation was met with both criticism that it was going too far and not far enough. It was opposed by the Connecticut State Federation of Teachers, who argued that the state had already teamed with Hartford to produce the 48 recommendations on improving the schools. President George Springer raised the question: "Why do we in the middle of this process want to jump in and create another panel?" (New York Times, March 11, 1997). Parents, on the other hand, echoed Shirley West's sentiment that, "if you're going to have this advisory panel, it should be able to help make some drastic changes. Everyone knows what the problem is—it's the management" (New York Times, March 11, 1997).

In an attempt to review the recommended plan, Governor John Rowland took a trip to the Hartford Public Schools with Sergi and decided to allow the legislature's Education Committee to work on a bill that would set parameters for a state takeover of a school system. This decision reflected the decision by the Commission on Secondary Public Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges to revoke the accreditation of Hartford Public High School because of funding problems, crumbling facilities, and graduation rate of 40 percent. Dean Pagani, spokesman for the governor, discussed accountability in public, arguing that "the current board of education and

previous boards of education haven't done a good job running the system", setting aside any statewide accountability for the failure of the capital city's schools (The News Times, April 11, 1997).

The proposed law regarding school takeover continued to gain steam in the General Assembly because of Hartford Public's loss of accreditation. The law would make the Superintendent of Hartford schools responsible for answering to the appointed board of trustees, raising questions about the voters of Hartford's democratic rights to have the person they elected Superintendent run the schools. State Rep. Kenneth P. Green of Hartford viewed the bill skeptically, arguing that it was too early for a takeover. He argued that the bill "takes away local control" and that "we have a new Superintendent and I'd like to see what she can do. We also have the 48 recommendations [for improving the schools] from the state and I'd like to see what movement we are making" (Green, Hartford Courant, April 9, 1997). Superintendent Patricia Daniel also spoke out against the state takeover, arguing that she had only been given a month to produce any changes. She pointed out that "the people of this community elected a nine-member board to provide leadership for the children of this community" and that little research had been done about the effectiveness of state takeovers, particularly with regards to student performance (Green, Hartford Courant, April 10, 1997).

One key change that evolved in the legislation was the provision that all labor contracts would remain in place until they expired, when they would then be renegotiated by the new board of trustees. Despite this change, the legislation was intensely lobbied against by the Connecticut State Federation of Teachers, who wanted the board to try other reforms (Green, Hartford Courant, April 10, 1997). Hartford Federation of Teachers

President Cheryl Daniels said, “If there has to be a [takeover], we can accept that, but we don’t feel taking away our rights that aren’t any different than any others should happen” (Green, Hartford Courant, April 10, 1997). Daniels said that the existing teachers’ contract prevented excessively large class sizes and had its own mechanisms for contract negotiations, making the change to three neutral arbitrators unnecessary.

As the union’s lobbying against the bill picked up, board member Stephanie Lightfoot stepped down from the board and joined those calling for a state takeover of city schools. In her resignation letter, Lightfoot acknowledged that “to simply remove the current board and replace it with another that has to work within the same restrictions as the current board will do nothing to help Hartford. Create a panel that really has some authority or leave it alone...The days of half-stepping have passed” (Green, Hartford Courant, April 10, 1997). Lightfoot’s departure added more pressure on the state to takeover schools, especially following board member Stephen Fournier’s resignation in January of 1997 and board President Romanik’s statement acknowledging that he saw his role as that of caretaker until the state stepped in.

Two days after Lightfoot acted, the Legislature’s Education Committee voted 28 to 1 to dissolve the Hartford Board of Education and replace it with a seven-member board of trustees (Kuczkowski, Hartford Advocate, 1997). The bill passed 27-9 in the Senate and 135-7 in the House (Archer, Education Week, April 23, 1997). This legislation had always had the support of education committee co-chairmen Sen. Thomas Gaffrey (D-Meriden) and Rep. Cameron Staples (D-New Haven). Originally, however, the bill lacked the support of House Speaker Tom Ritter and Senate President Kevin Sullivan, who instead supported a weaker bill placing Hartford on probation and created a

mechanism for the board of trustees to takeover management of failing school districts when necessary. Their support was eventually won over for the stronger bill when the City Council refused to accept \$1.7 million in state funds for education because it feared the city would have to raise taxes next year because of a complicated state grants formula. Others believed that they simply refused the funds because of disagreements between the city council and the board of education. Opponents of the bill became further convinced when it became known that Hartford Public was losing its accreditation (Kuczkowski, Hartford Advocate, 1997). The final bill also received the backing of the Hartford Federation of Teachers, who split with its affiliate, the Connecticut State Federation of Teachers (Green, Hartford Courant, April 17, 1997). In the end, this legislation passed with the support of House Speaker Tom Ritter and Senate President Kevin Sullivan (Kuczkowski, Hartford Advocate, 1997), in addition to Superintendent Daniel, who reversed her opposition to the bill during the last week before it passed (Green, Hartford Courant, April 17, 1997). Governor John Rowland also agreed to sign the bill when it got to his desk (Kuczkowski, Hartford Advocate, 1997).

The takeover was the first in Connecticut but state takeovers had occurred in other cities, namely Newark, N.J. and Cleveland, Ohio (Archer, Education Week, April 23, 1997). The takeover in Hartford raised some very important questions of accountability, since the board of trustees would seem to only be accountable to the politicians that appointed them. Others, including trustee Diane Alverio, believed their lack of accountability to be an asset. She pointed out that, “We weren’t elected, so we don’t owe anybody anything, other than the children of Hartford, who we are obligated to provide the best possible education. Every special interest group has a political mandate, and I

have already been approached by those who think the old political rules still apply” (Weizel, The New York Times, June 1, 1997). While a second seven-member advisory panel comprised of parents and teachers was created to heed parent comments, residents also lost access to a locally elected board of education. The panel was also not required to include any Hartford residents, adding to the concerns of Senator William Aniskovich that “we are going to take [nine] democratically elected people and give the power that they exercise to seven appointed people. This bill is a very serious change in the principal of self-government” (Green, Hartford Courant, April 17, 1997). These concerns were echoed by Senator Anthony Guglielmo, who argued that “what [the takeover] says is you can’t solve your own problems...that some outside group of elite people are going to come in and solve your problems” (Green, Hartford Courant, April 17, 1997).

Parental responses were mixed as well. Rev. Michael C. Williams, a parent of three children in the Hartford school system, expressed his doubts about the takeover, saying “I don’t think anything is really going to change, I don’t see this board as having the skills or sensitivity needed to truly understand the problems these urban children are facing. We’re either moving out of the city or putting them in private school, I don’t want them subjected to any more educational experiments” (Weizel, New York Times, June 1, 1997). Another parent, David MacDonald, president of the Hartford Parents Network, a citywide organization of parents’ groups, said of the trustees:

They are a good group of people, and they certainly don’t seem to carry with them the kind of political baggage as the previous board, so that makes us very hopeful. But if they don’t act boldly and quickly, they’re going to lose some of the positive feeling the community now feels towards them (Weizel, New York Times, June 1, 1997).

The seven trustees included: Robert M. Furek, 54, the board chairman and a retired chief executive of Heublein Inc., a Hartford-based spirits company; Diane Alverio of New Britain, vice president and general manager of WLAT-AM in Hartford and a former television reporter; Lorraine Aronson of Manchester, assistant to the chancellor at the University of Connecticut at Storrs and a former State Deputy Education Commissioner; Ana-Maria Garcia of Hartford, chief executive officer of the Greater Hartford Y.W.C.A.; Maria Spivey, vice president of community relations at Hartford Hospital; Henry Frascadore, a former principal of South Catholic School in Hartford and former assistant to the superintendent of school for the Hartford Archdiocese; and Richard Weaver-Bey, a Hartford real estate investor, apartment manager, and radio show owner (Weizel, New York Times, June 1, 1997). Of these seven trustees, the only one with children in Hartford schools was Ana-Maria Garcia, who had a daughter at Hartford High School, as compared to 2/3 of the elected board who had children in the school system (Interview #2).

Although it is unclear at which point they were instituted and to what extent, several respondents in the study acknowledge the board's introduction of school governance teams into Hartford. These teams, comprised of parents, teachers, students and administrators, were discussed by one school board member:

I'd say probably from 1994 until about 1997 when we left we were operating the school governance teams, probably about a three year period. We thought that decentralizing decision making, i.e., moving more and more decision of the Central Office and into the school sites made a lot of sense. So we were trying more responsibility, more resources, and more authority to the principals and what we called the school governance teams. And those teams would be comprised of teachers, parents, community members, as well the Principal. We were successful to the extent that we set up school governance teams and we gave each of them



what we called executive coaches, people who could assist them with running their meetings and establishing their plans. But they were not around long enough nor did they work well enough for any of the changes that we had hoped would come about in terms of student performance, remember the whole goal here was to improve student performance. I think that we probably would have had to have a Superintendent who understood better how to build and operate a decentralized decision making system and we would have needed more time to try that on before we could have seen results. But the fact is, I'd say the public was pretty restless for greater results quicker. We probably saw some improvements, particularly over a 3 or 4 year period, we were seeing on average 3-4 percentage point gains on most measures but the public was looking for more dramatic improvements than that (Interview #2).

Another interview with a Community Organizer revealed a different view of the school governance teams:

All the time, by the way, this was in the strategic plan, this idea of school-based management, which had been tried in Chicago. So every school was to have this school-based management team that included parents and they were going to decentralize some of the decisions and they started to do a little bit of that but it had nothing to do with making any decisions in the schools. They had no authority to do anything and nobody was going to give them any (Interview #1).

After the state takeover, the Hartford schools remained involved in scandal. The new board of trustees began to feel that Superintendent Daniel was not in support of their ideas for reform, including more charter schools, better fiscal management and increased and faster decentralization of the central office (Weizel, New York Times, June 28, 1998), resulting in a resignation by Daniel after only 14 months in office. Daniel, under pressure and with a \$290,000 buyout, resigned as superintendent of schools on May 19, 1998. The trustees then created the position of chief administrative officer to run the fiscal and other noneducational aspects of the system, allowing the superintendent to concentrate solely on classroom improvements, and named Ana-Maria Garcia, a member of the trustees, to the position. In addition, Superintendent Daniel was replaced by

Benjamin Dixon, the state's deputy secretary of education, who was appointed interim superintendent. The city failed, however, to thoroughly check out these appointments and only nineteen days after Dixon was appointed he announced his plans to take a job in Virginia in August. This embarrassment only heightened when it was revealed that Garcia had very little background in the finance and accounting that her position required, in addition to having very questionable financial records (Condon, Hartford Courant, June 11, 1998). After her appointment, news surfaced that Garcia had failed to pay over \$15,000 in local, federal and motor vehicle taxes, had defaulted on more than \$36,000 in college loans, and had charged thousands of dollars in personal expenses to an agency credit card while serving as chief executive at the Hartford region YWCA (Green, Hartford Courant, June 16, 1998). In addition, Garcia's ethics were questioned when reports were raised that she had penciled in someone else's address on a form so that her child could go to school in another town (Horgan, Hartford Courant, June 26, 1998). The State Ethics Commission was also investigating whether Garcia violated state law by accepting her new job after the board of trustees, of which she was a member, had removed Patricia Daniel as superintendent (Green, Hartford Courant, June 16, 1998).

The board of trustees appointed Interim Superintendent Matthew Borrelli during the summer of 1998, who served until April 1, 1999 when Anthony Amato, former superintendent of District 6 in New York, took over as superintendent. A quarterly report prepared by the state Department of Education assessing Borrelli's time in office showed administrative and budget progress—for the first time in years, the system was running on a surplus and hadn't had to impose a spending freeze during the year—but reminded that work still needed to be done on student achievement (Rodriguez, Hartford Courant,

May 6, 1999). The city's overall scores on the Connecticut Mastery Test were still ranked last in the state, with 17 of 32 schools scoring within the state's lowest level of performance. While test scores had been demonstrating steady gains over the prior three years, the 1998 test results showed a drop in reading scores and no change in math scores. In addition, the schools did not have a uniform approach to student literacy and some elementary teachers did not have the necessary curriculum guides for their classes (Rodriguez, Hartford Courant, May 6, 1999).

Amato made clear upon his hiring that his immediate focus was on districtwide improvement on the mastery test in the fall of 1999 (Rodriguez, Hartford Courant, May 6, 1999). On his first day as superintendent he vowed that Hartford would never be last again on the CMTs (Gottlieb, Hartford Courant, March 2, 2002). In an attempt to meet that goal, he added an hour of reading to class schedules and more than 2,500 students attended CMT-focused classes over spring vacation. Teachers and community agencies were also preparing for an expanded summer school program that focused more on academics and less on recreation (Rodriguez, Hartford Courant, May 6, 1999). While these changes signaled hope for better scores, the test-based teaching approach raised important questions about the bias of standardized tests and their ability to accurately measure student achievement.

Amato was well-received in Hartford because of his public speaking ability and inspiring personal story. He was the son of a single mother who worked as a flamenco dancer and was moved from school to school between Puerto Rico and the South Bronx. Amato set to work right away on improving literacy in Hartford, installing a highly structured reading program called *Success For All* (SFA), which opponents suggested

stood for "Somebody Fire Amato." Many of these opponents were teachers who complained that the program didn't allow for creativity because of its scripted nature and focused too heavily on improving CMT scores and less on learning (Gottlieb, Hartford Courant, March 2, 2002). One community organizer pointed out that, "It's scripted. It's totally scripted. Too bad if they have any questions, we're not taking them. The question is: Are we educating them?" (Interview #1). In addition, the program required all teachers to teach reading for 90 minutes a day, including art and music teachers. Parents and teachers also complained about the loss of time for science, social studies and recess. These complaints, according to one Hartford community organizer, were limited:

[Amato issued] gag orders that no City of Hartford employee can speak against the policy of the Board of Ed. You can't speak to the press, you cannot speak in a public meeting. I mean this is a Memorandum that went out to every teacher and employee that said that you cannot speak negatively about any public policy or it is equal to insubordination (Interview #1).

The autocratic policies enacted by Amato have resulted in a lack of available information on teacher and staff response to his reforms. *Success for All*, while maintaining criticism for being rigid and stifling creativity, has also received praise for presenting a standardized curriculum that allowed students in Hartford, who are often subject to frequent moves, to change schools and avoid a loss of momentum. In addition, the program has been credited with boosting test scores each year. In the 2001-2002 school year, the regular education students gained 5.5 points overall in the Connecticut Mastery Test, leading many to hail Amato a hero (Gottlieb, Hartford Courant, March 2, 2002).

In addition to his commitment to improve test scores, Amato also implemented new strategies to involve parents. He got rid of the school governance teams and the notion of decentralized governance of schools and instead focused on using parent liaisons in each school to reach out to parents. These liaisons, who were mostly parents themselves, were paid to serve as the connection between parents and schools. Many of these liaisons had been employed by the schools under other administrations to serve a similar function but “[the] principals totally took them over and had them doing truancy kind-of stuff that had nothing to do with parental involvement” (Interview #1). When Amato came into office his autocratic approach carried over into his efforts to improve parental involvement. As one community organizer noted:

[Amato] put together a person in his office who [would] supervise all of these parent liaisons so...they're doing what Amato wants them to do, not even what the principals want them to do. But again Amato's version of parent involvement is: "I want parents who will listen to what my agenda is and agree with it"...Parent involvement to him is to develop a group of parents who believe in what he's doing. So he in fact had his staff pull together select parents and they meet in the summer and he basically feeds them his agenda so that they become advocates for him. His idea of parent involvement is to train a group of parents who believe in what he's doing so that they then will advocate for his agenda. And in the schools everybody is just scratching their heads trying to figure it out. Everybody wants parent involvement but nobody is putting in the effort to do it... [Real] parent involvement in all of this has just totally been ignored. There are very few schools in the city where the PTO can generate more than 2 parents or 3 parents at a meeting (Interview #1).

While Amato's approach to parental involvement is questionable, many believe that he has brought some improvements to Hartford's schools. In addition to improved test scores, he has helped provide necessary materials in schools and has sorted through administrative problems (Interview #1). It is because of these triumphs that on September 21, 1999, the state-appointed board of trustees voted to request a two-year extension of its

management of Hartford's public schools through June 30, 2002. At the special meeting during which the vote took place, only a dozen administrators and residents were present, a stark contrast to the controversial and widely attended meetings under the school board a few years earlier. Superintendent Amato supported the extension, saying that, "One of the strongest elements that maintains stability in any district is a continuous board" (Rodriguez, Hartford Courant, September 22, 1999). The proposal to extend state control was passed and in June of 2001 the state legislature agreed to return a great deal of school governance power over to the city after another brief extension of state control. This decision extended the term of the state trustees by six months until December of 2002 and created a hybrid school board of four elected members and three members appointed by the mayor in consultation with the governor and approved by the city council (Gottlieb, Hartford Courant, June 7, 2001).

After a growing period of progress, people seemed relatively confident about this transition until a new twist added to the saga; Superintendent Amato announced his resignation on March 1, 2002. After three years as superintendent, Amato said that "Hartford is in a great position to keep moving forward" and that he was looking for a new challenge (Gottlieb, Hartford Courant, March 2, 2002). Critics argued that Amato was abandoning a challenge he had only begun to tackle in his three years and during a very critical transition period. In addition, Amato's announcement of his resignation came in March and said he might be leaving before the end of the school year in June (Gottlieb, Hartford Courant, March 2, 2002). This resignation, by a popular and yet imperfect leader, could signal yet another long string of superintendents and chaos for

Hartford school children or hope for a more decentralized system of governance that truly involves parents. Unfortunately, only time will tell.

Shannon Stormont

## **Chapter 5—Policy Implications—The Future of Hartford’s Schools**

When examining Hartford schools over the past decade, it is difficult to truly assess parental involvement and student success under different administrations because of the absurdly high turnover rate of superintendents. When looking, instead, at parental involvement and student success under different governance structures, one can categorize these structures as: City Control (Pre-1994), Private Control (1994-1996), and State Control (1996-Present). It seems that under none of these governance structures was parental involvement particularly emphasized, with the most prominent effort coming from Josiha Haig pre-EAI, whose contract was not renewed by the school board. Student success, on the other hand, seems to be strongest under Amato and state control, at least as far as standardized testing goes. Does this mean that student success and parental involvement are not linked? I would argue that it does not, but that, given the information I have found, parental involvement has not truly been emphasized to an extent in Hartford that would constitute assessment.

Test scores seem to indicate that student success has been greatest under the administration that is farthest from the local level and parents—Amato and the state-appointed board of trustees. I would argue that this seemingly misleading data must not be exaggerated to say that Amato’s administration has done an excellent job. Instead, one must look at the administrations with which we are comparing it to, none of which emphasized community or parental involvement and none of which had the support of both the school board and community.



The most long-lived, and noticeably effective, reforms have come under Amato, leaving many questioning what will happen when he departs Hartford and the city takes back control in December of 2002. Judging from the past, this transition seems to invite chaos; the current board will have to appoint a new superintendent who will then serve under the newly appointed board, a transition that was unsuccessful in the case of Superintendent Daniel.

The hailed success of Amato's reforms also raise important questions as to the definition of success. While test scores showed improvements, it seems that Amato favored a rigid style of teaching that catered to the CMT's. While Hartford is no longer last in CMT scores, a sign of improvement for many, I would question whether this jump in scores really shows that students are learning more. Are more students learning how to read or are they learning how to take standardized tests? One parent and former school member expressed his concern, noting:

I guess my worry is, quite candidly, is that the disproportionate emphasis on test scores is causing kind-of a drill and kill mentality that is long term, I don't think encourages the kind of creative teaching and learning that we want to encourage. I think we've lost a lot of our best teachers and I know we've lost a lot of our best students. You can make the argument and I've heard the argument for standardized teaching and testing but the flip side for that is that that's really not for everybody. I think ultimately the district would have to shift back to a more central position that is balanced and that recognizes the individual teaching styles of kids and teachers frankly and allows for that even as there is some consistency in the curriculum and scheduling and so forth (Interview #2).

In addition to standardized teaching, it seems that Amato's style has alienated many teachers and parents alike, bringing us even farther away from turning schools into true communities of learning. Instead, we have a superintendent using threats of insubordination to silence criticism, leading to less chaos and a false sense of unanimity

and confidence in the system. While this change arguably led to a renewed sense of confidence in schools, we must remember to question at what cost, and the answer here seems to point towards the children.

With all of the criticisms Hartford schools have faced over the last ten years, one would expect a slew of proposed reforms. Instead, however, one has seen that all reforms have been short-lived, with citizens and city officials impatient for quick and dramatic results. This impatience seems to explain, in large part, the many short-lived superintendents. As one former school board member pointed out:

I think part of it was an era of increased expectations with diminishing resources to meet those expectations created lots of tension. And the Superintendent is the guy in charge so if not enough change is happening quickly enough or exactly in the direction that you'd prefer, it doesn't take too long for one person, then two persons, and then three and ultimately, five persons to say, "All right enough. You've lost my support." And once you lose the support of 5 people, you're gone (Interview #2).

When examining the politics of school reform, it is obvious that racial politics play a large part, as demonstrated by the community's support for Superintendents Haig and Daniel, both African American, and the lack of support from the school board. The school board, while composed mostly of parents before the state took control, was replaced with business men and women who, with the exception of one trustee, did not have children in the school system. As one community organizer pointed out:

We organized to stop EAI; they forced it down our throat anyway. We pushed and we got a new black Superintendent in there and they ran her off and turned it over to this committee of primarily white business leaders. And so there's nothing out there right now in organizing to prepare for the return of public control over public education. So what we're planning here is to launch series of community education activities. To have people understand the new structure that's coming into play, powers and relationships and authorities. To try to bring in the focus on activities and processes that might help glean the kind of information that

people need to understand better how education should work (Interview #3).

What does the lack of effort to include parents and community members in the selection of the board of trustees say about state control? It seems that, in an attempt to bring about reform, efforts to remain true to the will of the electorate, who had already elected school board members and rallied behind Superintendent Daniel, were lost. In addition to the presence of racial politics, a growing urban conservatism has factored into school politics, as demonstrated by the EAI controversy (Simmons, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 1998). The hiring of EAI was heavily supported by the local business lobby, which was also a source of support for Mayor Peters. In fact, one former board of education member who spearheaded the move to hire EAI is employed by the chamber of commerce in a leadership development program. The chamber also works closely with the local media, including the *Hartford Courant*, which adamantly supported the hiring of EAI and gave candidates with similar positions significant backing during the 1995 school board primary and general election. Mayor Peters also backed the hiring of EAI publicly in an attempt to maintain a majority of school board members who supported privatization in theory. Even as it became clear that EAI was doing a poor job in Hartford schools, many of these elected officials defended their place in Hartford, making the issue more about privatization as a strategy and less about properly educating Hartford's children (Simmons, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 1998).

When looking at reform efforts over the past ten years, there are two different models of governance at work—a strong school board/weak superintendent model and a

strong superintendent/weak school board model. As one school board member pointed out:

Basically I'd say that in the past you had, for better or for worse, a strong board/ relatively weak superintendent model. Now you've got a strong superintendent/relatively weak board model. There are advantages and disadvantages to both. My own view is that ultimately you want a balance of power—I'd say probably the board took too much responsibility in the past, part of that was the function was a leadership vacuum in the Superintendent's Office, part of that was just people's individual styles of governance. I'd say that today the board of trustees has probably seeded too much authority to the superintendent and hasn't offered him enough of a check and balance either. I think the best path lies somewhere between those two extremes (Interview #2).

If so many would agree that the best path runs between these extremes, what makes it so difficult to strike this balance? It seems that the chaos and division among elected board members did not help them form a unified path for reform but instead prompted a power struggle among factions. In effect, it seems that the politics took precedent over the well-being of the children, which was lost in the struggle. The decision to hire EAI, and then be non-committal, eventually having to pay them \$6.3 million to leave, was characteristic of the board's inability to take a decisive stance. It seems that they were afraid of true reform, as evidenced by their inability to choose a superintendent after EAI or even a board president. These squabbles, when put up to the public eye, became magnified to raise even more serious doubts about the future of the schools, leading to the eventual declaration of a state of emergency that prompted the state takeover.

As Hartford once again faces a period of transition and the return of power to the city, it is time to look towards proposed reforms, including attempts to involve parents in schools. Some proposed ideas for reform that include parental involvement are detailed in

the U.S. Department of Education's *Putting the Pieces Together: Comprehensive School-linked Strategies for Children and Families*. This guide points out that:

Traditional programs tend to approach their clients in terms of problems that need treatment, without helping them develop long-term skills or preventive behaviors. Their complex service delivery systems and eligibility requirements are confusing and intimidating for many families, especially those who have low levels of literacy, are not native English speakers, or are newcomers to this country. And many traditional programs are simply unavailable to those who lack transportation or child care or who work schedules conflict with program hours (US Dept of Education, 1996).

Instead, comprehensive strategies for reform are designed to help children, parents and families solve immediate problems and develop the capacity to avoid future crises. In addition, these programs would build collaboration among all of the community's major groups, including parents, churches, and agencies and organizations, involving multiple stakeholders in all stages of program planning, design, and implementation. A comprehensive attempt at reform would communicate in languages accessible to all partners and stem from a shared vision about improving long-term conditions for children, families, and communities, rather than focusing solely on providing services or treating a problem (US Dept of Education, 1996).

It seems that these comprehensive reforms can only come about when either school leaders or the community become aware of an urgent need for change. While Hartford seems aware that change and improvement are necessary, school leaders and policy makers do not seem to be willing to invest the time and money into establishing long-term community partnerships, instead focusing solely on improving test scores. While it has been shown that both children and school staff benefit from comprehensive

strategies, little has been done in Hartford to demonstrate the commitment to parental involvement that the strategic plans would imply exist. It has been shown that:

Children and families benefit from comprehensive strategies on many levels: they get help facing immediate challenges, learn lifelong methods for improving their own circumstances, gain access to an integrated and streamlined system of continuous human development, and become better able to participate in their own learning. Teachers, principals, counselors, nurses, and other school staff also benefit from comprehensive, school-linked strategies. Every day, these practitioners and administrators see that hunger, lack of medical care, inadequate child care, poverty, teen pregnancy, violence and other social conditions create barriers to students' learning. Through comprehensive strategies, school staff gain allies they can turn to—both inside and outside the school—to help address these challenges (US Dept of Education, 1996, p.4).

Given these advantages, it is surprising that more has not been done to make schools about more than the isolated aim of education but instead part of a larger effort to improve children's lives in many regards. When examining the possibility of such a partnership in Hartford, it seems that parents would need to organize to initiate collaboration and force administrators to make good on their promise to involve parents. One Chane, one grassroots organization in Hartford, is now attempting to organize parents to prepare them to be heard as the upcoming transition back to local control approaches. This organizing prompted by parents and community groups seems to work best in the long run, because, as one community organizer pointed out:

My contention is if you have the school system organizing parents, you can always question the legitimacy of, "Whose agenda is this?" So the effort of the schools to organize parents is usually, "We're going to make you better parents. We're going to straighten you out. We're going to give you parenting skills. We're going to talk about raising your children." And so you have this clash of values. And so for parents to even come to those kind of meetings, they're implicitly, at least, agreeing that something is wrong with them, that they're deficient in some way. It's just not the same

dynamic as you have in more suburban, more affluent schools (Interview #1).

While funding has oftentimes gone to waste in the past because of a lack of organizing skill on the part of parent groups, one can only hope that this will change with One Chane's new attempt at organizing parents. The community organizer I spoke with also pointed out that "it is extremely difficult to organize low income parents around education issues without it being totally independent and extremely well funded. With professional organizers" (Interview #1). For the sake of families in Hartford, hopefully One Chane can achieve what so many other organizations trying to organize Hartford parents have failed to do—bring about true reform.

In addition to requiring parents to mobilize, comprehensive school-based reform would require a receptive school board that was willing to push real reform. As the current board of trustees shifts back to a school board, four members will be elected by the local community, while three will be appointed by the mayor in consultation with the governor and approved by the city council. These plans for a hybrid board raise some concerns about unity among board members and similar agendas. Hopefully, board members will be able to join together to build off of Amato's successes, possibly using his standardized curriculums, which do help ease some of the problems associated with the highly transient nature of Hartford students, while beginning to bring parents into the picture.

In order to be effective, reforms aimed at improving parental involvement need to be geared towards involving parents and using them as a resource, not improving parents. In a recently published report by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement,

part of the U.S. Department of Education, parental involvement is once again deemed necessary in location where “families and communities are weak” (Coleman, 1991). This statement serves as a prime example of what many school systems, including Hartford have been unable to do—move away from judging parents and communities and focus instead on involving them and truly hearing what they have to say. This publication goes on to suggest that “the effectiveness of schools in settings where the social capital of family and community is weak depends upon the rebuilding of that social capital” (Coleman, 1991). This belief that it is the school system’s job to “save” or “fix” parents only further alienates parents and community members. True comprehensive reform will come only when school systems learn to acknowledge the culture of a particular community as an asset and not an obstacle and learn to involve parents in a form of shared decision-making. Administrators must realize that while they may favor experimenting with our schools, the biggest shareholders in education are parents and their children, whose future depend on the success of schools. The ultimate goal cannot be about boosting administrators’ political careers or egos, but instead about providing children with the equal education that is guaranteed under the United States Constitution.



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Interview #2, Former School Board Member, February 19, 2002

Interview #3, Community Organizer, February 21, 2002