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### Graduating Class: Race, Economics and Education in Bloomfield, CT

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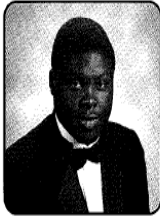












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# Graduating Class

## Race, Economics and Education in Bloomfield, CT

<p><b>Briana R. Leaves</b></p>  <p>High School Accomplishments: Volleyball 11, 12; Cheerleading 11, 12</p> <p><b>Briana R.</b></p>  <p>"Live life with no regrets because you only live once." - Briana R.</p>	<p><b>Jermaine R. Reid</b></p>  <p>High School Accomplishments: Soccer 9, 10, 11; Football 12</p> <p>"All you need in this life is ignorance and confidence, and then success is sure." - Mark Twain</p> <p><b>Gail Deavers</b></p>  <p>"Keep your dreams alive. Understand to achieve anything requires faith and belief in yourself, vision, hard work, determination, and dedication. Remember all things are possible for those who believe." - Gail Deavers</p>	<p><b>Rayanna R. Relford</b></p>  <p>High School Accomplishments: Cross Country 12; Soccer 13, 12; Outdoor Track &amp; Field 10, 11, 12</p> <p><b>Shanicka R. Reynolds</b></p>  <p>High School Accomplishments: Soccer 11, 12; Spanish Honor Society 10, 11, 12; Student Council 11, 12; Volleyball 9, 10, 11, 12; Tennis 10, 11</p> <p>"Life may not be the party we hoped for, but while we're here we should dance." - unknown</p> 
<p><b>Courtney R. Richman</b></p>  <p>"You learn something every day if you pay attention." - Ray LeBlond</p> 	<p><b>Malik R. Ricks</b></p>  <p>High School Accomplishments: Football 9, 12</p> <p>"You can't change the past, but you can ruin the present by worrying about the future." - unknown</p> 	<p><b>Laina R. Rivers</b></p>  <p>High School Accomplishments: Regional Honor Society 11, 12; Student Council 10, 11, 12; Soccer 9, 10, 11, 12; Football 9, 10, 11, 12</p> <p><b>Aaron R. Roberts</b></p>  <p>High School Accomplishments: Indoor Track 12; Outdoor Track 12</p> <p>"Everything I'm not makes me everything I am." - Kanye West</p>  <p>"God did not build you to pull over during the storms of life; He built you to keep going. He just wants to be the one driving." - Kirk Franklin</p> 

Jamil R. Ragland

American Studies Senior Project

Adviser: Professor Davarian Baldwin

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This project is dedicated to my son, Gabriel, in the hopes that the work I have produced here will in some small way help to make his experience as a black and Puerto Rican man in America a little bit easier.

## Introduction

My family moved from the housing projects on Van Block Avenue in Hartford to 110 Darby Street in Bloomfield, CT in the summer of 1994. To anyone on the outside, it looked as if we'd succeeded in fulfilling the promise of the American Dream. We were moving from the drug and crime infested ghettos of the inner city to the peaceful, safe surroundings of the suburbs. In reality, we'd been part of the problem. My father's drug dealing had invited a second raid of our apartment by the Hartford Police in as many years, and an eviction letter soon followed. Homeless, and with our father on his way to prison, my mother, my two brothers and myself were taken in by my great aunt. She'd inherited the Darby Street property from another great aunt who'd recently died, and leased it to us on generous terms to help us get back on our feet, with the option for us to buy the house. It appeared that we had made it, but in reality we were still a poor family, trying our best to fit into a middle class lifestyle that we couldn't afford. The house was almost ninety years old and hadn't been renovated in decades. The sheetrock crumbled as we ran up and down the stairs, crashing into the walls in our youthful excitement. Fuses blew regularly, and half the electrical outlets in the house didn't work. I took baths for the year we lived there, as a showerhead had never been installed. Too much work needed to be done to make the house livable. When our lease expired, we moved for the first of countless times as rent and car payments, medical emergencies and poor decisions found us no matter where we went. We were the urban poor trying to pretend otherwise.

Despite our constant movement, my mother insisted on keeping us in Bloomfield public schools, even during the occasions when we weren't living in the town. If the security of home ownership had proven to be untrue in the jump to the suburbs, the promise of better schools was

kept. I'd been fortunate. As a child, I was accepted into Project Concern, the bussing program which sent children from Hartford to better schools in the surrounding suburbs. I attended elementary school in Simsbury for three years. My younger brother Khalil was not so fortunate. He attended the local neighborhood school, R.J. Kinsella. While I was learning algebra and switching classes as high school students did, my brother's particularly dedicated teacher was making photocopies of textbooks because she didn't have enough for her class. With the move to Bloomfield, I would no longer have to wake up at 6:00 AM to make it to the bus stop on the other side of Hartford for the forty minute ride into Simsbury. My younger brothers would actually receive books to take home.

Once again, my experiences illustrated the age-old wisdom that things in the suburbs were not always as they seemed. There were enough books to go around, and the problems of violence and drugs that plagued the Hartford schools in the 1990's were largely missing from Bloomfield's schools. But something peculiar happened in the transition from middle school to high school. When I began attending Bloomfield High School as a freshman, I noticed that my class had shrunk considerably. We were never a very big class, perhaps numbering at 200 at its maximum. By the time we graduated in 2003 though, only 175 students remained. There were the students who inevitably moved away or dropped out. But many of those who left the high school didn't leave the town. Their homes and families remained in Bloomfield, while they attended area private and magnet schools. A large number of the students who left the schools while remaining in town were white. With their departure, my class, which had always been overwhelmingly minority, became almost exclusively so. Just as I was trying to reconcile my suburban location with the actual experience of my life, it appeared that my school was trying to

do the same. Bloomfield High School was an all-black school for the suburban poor, pretending to be otherwise.

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The town of Bloomfield, Connecticut is a study in contradictions. By any number of economic indicators, Bloomfield is an average, middle class suburb. Its residents enjoy a median income higher than the national average, as well as higher home values. Bloomfield also has the distinction of being the most racially integrated of the inner ring suburbs surrounding Hartford. Approximately 55% of the town's 20,000 residents are African American, while 40% identify as white, with the other 5% consisting of other minority or multi-racial residents.

Yet these indicators of integration and middle class comfort completely disappear when the town's public schools are examined. Bloomfield High School in particular bucks the story of racial harmony and upward mobility. In any given year, 90-95% of Bloomfield High School's population is African American. The school's scores on the statewide Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) lag behind the other inner ring suburbs, falling in line with the performance of traditional high schools in Hartford. Likewise, the percentage of students in the high school receiving free or reduced price lunch is far higher than any other municipality in Greater Hartford, aside from Hartford itself.

The discrepancy between the racial and economic makeup of the town of Bloomfield and its schools demonstrates the ways in which race and class have been linked together, to the detriment of black residents. Discriminatory practices in real estate forged the first bond between race and class in Greater Hartford, leading Bloomfield to become the only majority black suburb in the region during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bloomfield's public schools integrated even faster than the town itself. Today, the clearest expression of these historical trends is the public school system,



which concentrates racialized poverty within the school's walls. Race has shaped the social and economic outcomes of the black residents living in Bloomfield and attending its schools. I will show how racist real estate policies helped to make Bloomfield into a black suburb. Next, I will discuss how the demographic changes in the town shaped the demographics of the schools. Finally, I will show how opinions and attitudes about Bloomfield have changed over time. Bloomfield was turned into a black town purposefully, and has suffered an unfair racial stigma that has negatively impacted the public schools to this day.

There has been a great deal of research done on the re-segregation of public school systems across America. For example, Erwin Chemerinsky of the University of Southern California has argued that the Supreme Court is largely to blame for re-segregation.<sup>1</sup> He states that two eras of court decisions, one in the 1970's and another in the 1990's, reversed real progress in integration by throwing out local desegregation orders.

The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (now at the University of California, Los Angeles) has also published several reports on the topic of re-segregation in the last ten years. In a paper titled *Denver Public Schools: Resegregation, Latino Style*,<sup>2</sup> Chungmei Lee examines the role that suburban districts in the metro Denver area had in concentrating Latino students in the city of Denver. Mr. Lee also contributed to a sweeping study showing that re-segregation has increased in every region in the country over the last twenty years.<sup>3</sup> As with the later paper, a great deal of focus is placed on the urban-suburban divide.

Unfortunately, these studies do not sufficiently explain the factors which have caused Bloomfield public school's economic and racial isolation. The researchers at Harvard and elsewhere characterize their studies as explorations of re-segregation. That is, they are seeking to document the reversal of integration over the last twenty five years. Their analysis does not

speak to Bloomfield's schools, which were already overwhelmingly segregated by the 1980's, the era many scholars point to as the historical moment when re-segregation began. In addition, scholars investigating re-segregation often point to the lack of inter-district solutions in combating racial segregation in urban schools. Once again, Bloomfield does not fit tidily into their analysis. Bloomfield is not an urban school system, and inter-district attempts to combat racial segregation in Hartford through the *Sheff vs. O'Neil* lawsuit settlement have actually led to greater racial and economic segregation in Bloomfield's schools.

The lack of work speaking to Bloomfield's specific history is what motivated me to conduct this research. There are no major studies which examine how school segregation plays out in ostensibly integrated towns and cities. Few works use minority dominated *suburbs* as the setting for their analysis, as opposed to the well-known and comfortable setting of the hollowed out urban core. This research is new and necessary, as it seeks to shed light on the oft-overlooked story of racial and economic isolation in the suburbs. Bloomfield directly contradicts the American myth of suburban living as the ideal, an escape from the racialized poverty that characterizes life for so many in the nation's cities, such as Hartford. As it turns out, this is not the case for minorities who are looking for a better life. For them, the suburb is reconfigured along racial and economic lines to resemble the city, with the trappings of small town life serving as window dressing. This story needs to be told.

I hope to address this gap in the academic body of work regarding modern school segregation with the following paper. I have divided the paper into three chapters, each covering a specific part of the story which explains Bloomfield's current discrepancy between the demographics of the town and the school. Chapter one focuses on how Bloomfield was shaped in the 1960's and 1970's by racist real estate practices into a black suburb. Chapter one also shows

how race and class are bound together by property values, and how this arrangement has led Bloomfield to be less prosperous than the whiter suburbs which surround it. Chapter two is a historical analysis of Bloomfield's public schools. In chapter two, I draw the connection between the real estate practices explained in chapter one, and how they affected the schools. Chapter three explores what it means for Bloomfield to be a black town with a black school system. I compare the opinions and perceptions of town residents, former students and outsiders across the span of Bloomfield's transition to a black suburb.

The story of Bloomfield is important to me personally. I live in Hartford today, but Bloomfield still occupies a place in my heart as my hometown. Attempting to understand the unique set of historical circumstances and current perceptions about the town and its schools has been a desire of mine since I first noticed that my school did not match my town. More generally, understanding Bloomfield gives us a different perspective from which to analyze racial and economic segregation in America today. The problem is often characterized in terms of the city vs. the suburbs. As we will see, the issue of segregation exists within the suburbs as well. Two different populations live side by side in Bloomfield, resulting in the paradox of an integrated town with segregated schools.

## Chapter 1: Bloomfield Becomes Black

My family moved to Bloomfield in the summer of 1993. The town was inching towards a unique demographic threshold, one it would reach less than a year later in 1994, when the percentage of black residents equaled the percentage of white residents in the town (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> In another year, the black population surpassed the white population, making Bloomfield the only town in Hartford County to have a majority black population. As of 2012, Bloomfield's population is 56% black and 41% white. The influx of families such as mine turned Bloomfield from a majority white to a majority black town in less than thirty years, but most of the black people who moved into the town did not do so under circumstances similar to my family. The reasons for their movement, grounded in the racist real estate practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, continue to impact life in Bloomfield, and the schools that serve the town's black majority.

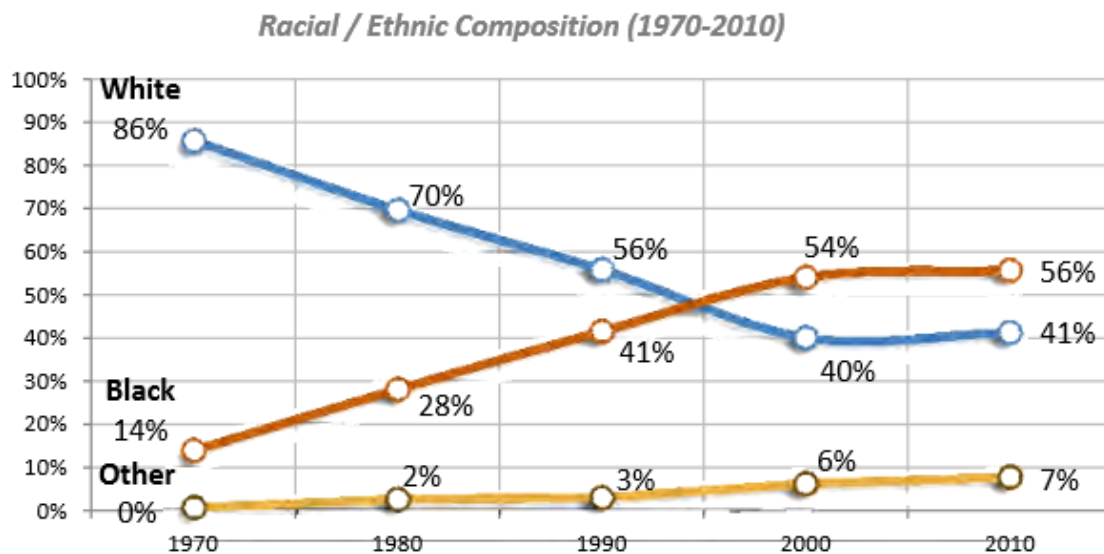


Figure 1. Racial Change in Bloomfield, 1970-2010<sup>5</sup>

To understand how Bloomfield became the first and only black suburb in Greater Hartford in the 1990's, we must first look back ninety years to the birth of the real estate industry. It is difficult for us to imagine now, but the buying and selling of property, especially homes, was not always facilitated by the national corporations we know today, such as Century 21 and Remax. Instead, homes were sold between individuals, with a lawyer hired to handle the contract details. In 1908, the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) was founded as "the first organized alliance of builders and real estate agents in the nation."<sup>6</sup> Agents under the NAREB umbrella sought to convince property sellers and buyers to use their services, as they could better ensure the value of land and its potential to appreciate in value. NAREB accomplished this feat by tying the value of property directly to its racial makeup. Property that had been owned by whites, and subsequently sold to other whites, increased in value, while property held or sold by blacks decreased in value. This was not simply a practice of a few dishonest real estate agents, but a core component of NAREB's strategy and real estate value in general. According to the NAREB code of ethics, "a Realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood...members of any race or nationality...whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood."<sup>7</sup> For blacks, their property value was negatively impacted by the color of their skin, while whites benefited from the arrangement. Scholar Kevin Fox Gotham has called this arrangement "exclusionary real estate ideology."

The marriage of property value and race dominated real estate throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Segregation has mainly been understood as institutionalized racism, and that racism is assumed to be seated in irrational hatred and fear. However, it's critical to understand that there has always been an economic argument that has accompanied the intense emotions of racism. Whites didn't keep blacks out of suburban neighborhoods simply because they hated them in

theory; due to exclusionary real estate ideology, having a black family in their neighborhood literally brought down the value of the property surrounding it. These real estate practices grounded feelings of racial hatred in financial terms, and attached them to tangible results if a white family decided to sell their home at a later date.

Compounding the effects of racial real estate ideology was the fact that the benefits of the post-World War II housing development boom and wave of suburbanization which followed were explicitly distributed along racial lines. The practices of real estate agents were private actions regarding private property, but it is only half the story. The federal government also played a critical role in establishing the link between race and property through its dispersal of funding for housing in the suburban boom of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. The loans the federal government made available through the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) and Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) to finance mortgages in suburban areas across the nation were distributed along explicitly racial lines. 60% of all homes bought in the United States between 1930 -1950 were financed by federal loans, yet only 2% of those loans went to non-white home buyers.<sup>8</sup> This gross disparity was justified by the use of residential security maps, in which the HOLC rated the financial security of neighborhoods across the United States. In a process known as redlining, mixed race and all black neighborhoods were consistently rated lower than all white neighborhoods, making black residents in those neighborhoods ineligible for loans from the federal government.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the use of racial restrictive covenants throughout the suburbanization era locked in the triangle agreement between realtors, residents and developers. Racial restrictive covenants were legally enforceable contracts which prohibited the lease or sale of property to non-white residents, usually meaning blacks.<sup>10</sup> Racially restrictive covenants were often written into the

property deeds of housing developments before they were even built, ensuring that the property would begin, and remain, white only. These covenants were used all across the United States, including the Greater Hartford area. For example, a racially restrictive covenant for the Dryad's Grove residential development in West Hartford read, "No persons of any race other than the white race shall use or occupy any building or any lot, except that this covenant shall not prevent occupancy by domestic servants of a different race domiciled with an owner or tenant."<sup>11</sup>

The effects of exclusionary real estate ideology, racial loan policy from the federal government and racial restrictive covenants led to an unexpected outcome known as blockbusting. According to Nicole Sagullo, "Blockbusting is the term used to describe the practice of encouraging existing homeowners living in primarily white neighborhoods to sell their properties to a real estate agent at below market value."<sup>12</sup> Real estate agents accomplished this by scaring white residents with the prospect of blacks moving into their neighborhood and causing property values to decrease. White residents would then engage in panic selling, letting their homes go at a loss. The real estate agent would then sell the home to a black family at a markup, thanks to the limited housing options they had, and reap substantial profits by essentially stealing from both the white resident who sold the home and the black resident who bought it. Bloomfield became the preferred target for real estate agents engaged in blockbusting, due to a small minority population already in the town working in agriculture<sup>13</sup>. For example, in the early 1970's, white residents of Alexander Road reported receiving phone calls from realtors urging them to move. This same neighborhood experienced a property turnover rate of 41% from 1970-1975.<sup>14</sup> The data has also been mapped by the University of Connecticut<sup>15</sup>, showing how Bloomfield became a majority black town over the decades in a manner consistent with blockbusting. Blacks have largely been contained in the eastern part of the town, particularly the southeastern section of

Blue Hills Avenue which, not coincidentally, is contiguous with the large black population in the North End of Hartford (see Figures 2 and 3).

Curiously, there was another side effect from these unethical, and in some cases illegal, real estate practices. In the March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1971 issue of *Look Magazine*, the eleven All-America City award winners for 1970 were listed.<sup>16</sup> The award is given annually by the National Civic League for

...outstanding civic accomplishments. To win, each community must demonstrate innovation, inclusiveness, civic engagement, and cross sector collaboration by describing successful efforts to address pressing local challenges...All-America Cities have shown the ability to innovate in such areas as job creation, neighborhood revitalization, crime reduction, new housing for low income people, improving education, and engaging youth.<sup>17</sup>

Among such well-known cities as Dallas and Indianapolis was Bloomfield, CT as one of the eleven noteworthy cities in America. This honor was directly tied to Bloomfield's "inclusiveness," in the form of the town's increasing integration of blacks<sup>18</sup>. It is ironic that the greed of realtors would lead to Bloomfield receiving national accolades for inclusiveness. It is an honor the town continues to trumpet, as evidenced by its mention in Bloomfield's most recent Plan of Conservation and Development.

Although the town of Bloomfield took several actions throughout the 1970's to combat blockbusting<sup>19</sup>, the percentage of black residents continued to grow, nearly tripling to 41% by 1990. An article in the October 1989 *New York Times* explored this demographic shift, noting the town's desire to maintain its diversity. The connection between Bloomfield's schools and the town's racial makeup was on the minds of town officials, who were concerned that rising minority enrollments "will lead to white families moving out and to reluctance of new white families to move in."<sup>20</sup>



## Racial Change in the Hartford Region, 1900-2010

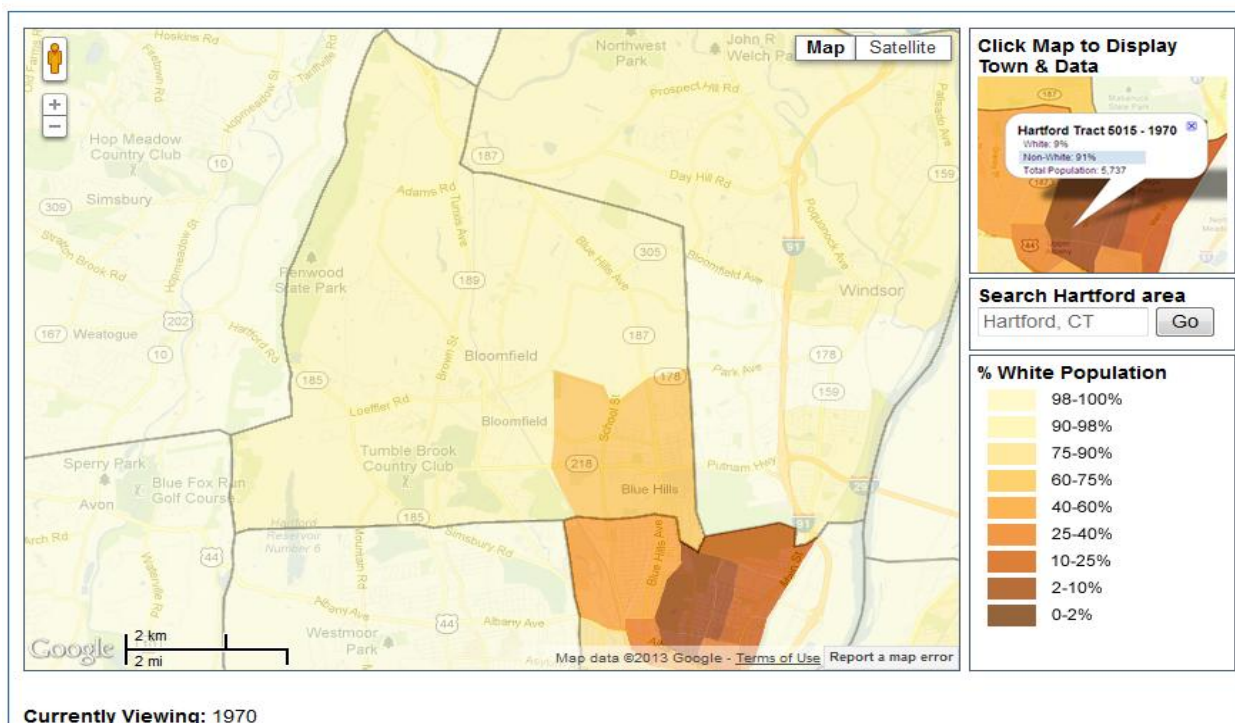


Figure 2. Bloomfield’s demographic makeup, 1970<sup>21</sup>

## Racial Change in the Hartford Region, 1900-2010

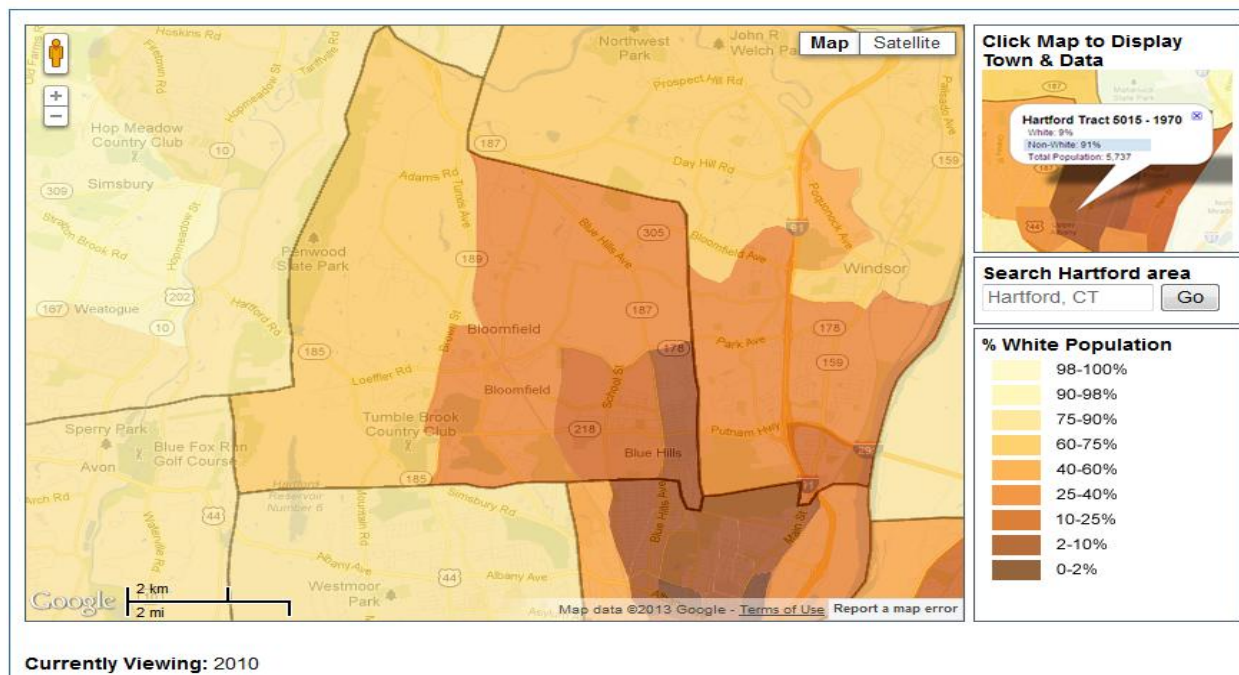
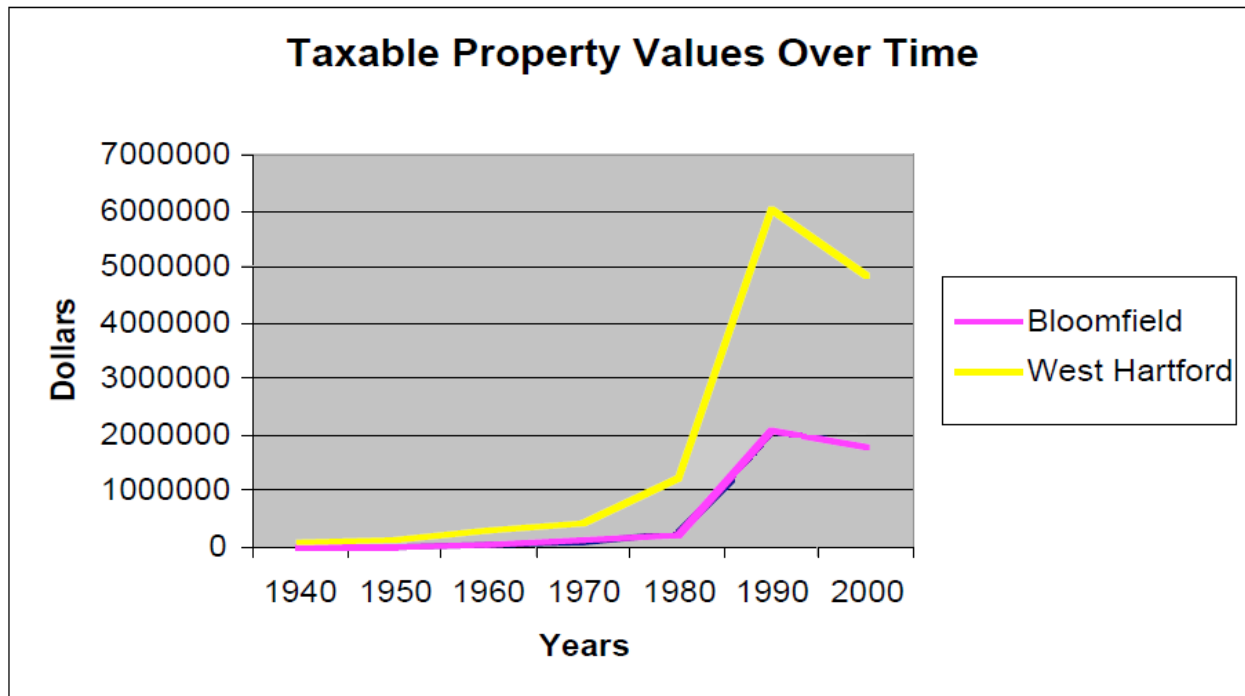


Figure 3. Bloomfield’s demographic makeup, 2010<sup>22</sup>

The town official's fears about white families leaving became reality. As Bloomfield's black population increased dramatically since 1970, the data shows that the town's overall population has barely grown. Bloomfield added almost nine thousand black residents from 1970-2010, but there has only been a net gain of 2,185 residents for the town over that time period.<sup>23</sup> The slow growth of the last forty years is a far cry from the nearly 13,000 residents added from 1950-1970. Bloomfield's status as a majority black suburb has as much to do with a decrease in white residents as it does an increase in the black population; blacks simply comprise more of what is a largely unchanged demographic pie in terms of overall numbers.

Today, Bloomfield has a higher percentage of black residents than even Hartford. Thanks to the link between race and property value, the town's population has had a drastic impact on personal wealth and taxable property when compared to the other suburbs in Greater Hartford. To be sure, Bloomfield has fared better than Hartford in many ways, including retaining property value. The median value of an owner-occupied unit in Hartford was \$186,000 in 2010<sup>24</sup>, compared to Bloomfield's median value of \$225,900.<sup>25</sup> This figure pales in comparison to the median value for an owner-occupied unit in West Hartford, a suburb which shares a border with both Hartford and Bloomfield. Owner-occupied units in West Hartford, with a population that is 82.1% white, have a median value of \$312,900.<sup>26</sup> While it is difficult to draw a direct causal relationship between increased property value and West Hartford's whiteness, scholars have already shown that the integration so highly touted in Bloomfield's past has significantly reduced the tax base. In a study tracking taxable property and per-pupil expenditures over time, Kelli Perkins has demonstrated the vast difference between West Hartford and Bloomfield (Figure 4).



**Figure 4. Taxable Property Values Over Time for Bloomfield and West Hartford<sup>27</sup>**

In addition, Ms. Perkins has shown that in Bloomfield, “for a one percent increase in the minority population, the taxable property value decreased \$905,850 over time.”<sup>28</sup> For Bloomfield, the price of integration has been a significantly lower tax base than its whiter suburban neighbors.

There is another demographic trend which heavily impacts the schools in Bloomfield, and that is the aging of Bloomfield’s population. This change is not driven by nefarious schemes, like racialized property values, but there are clear racial implications for the town, especially in terms of the public schools. While not as dramatic as the increase in the black population, the percentage of residents in Bloomfield over the age of 55 has also grown rapidly, doubling from 19% in 1970 to 39% in 2010<sup>29</sup>. Once again, we must consider this shift as a result of an outflow of younger families as opposed to a sudden influx of older residents. It is therefore necessary to understand Bloomfield in the larger context of Greater Hartford. Bloomfield’s percentage of

residents over age 62 stood at almost 27% in 2010.<sup>30</sup> West Hartford's share was just over 20%,<sup>31</sup> and Hartford's was just under 12%.<sup>32</sup> Just as Bloomfield's residents of the late 1980's feared, younger whites and their families have leaked out of the town into the surrounding suburbs such as West Hartford, Simsbury (93% white with an over 62 population of 16%<sup>33</sup>) and Avon (88% white with an over 62 population of 20%<sup>34</sup>). The exodus of young whites has left Bloomfield both blacker and older than the other suburbs of Hartford.

The demographic shift in Bloomfield from a white town in the 1960's to a predominately black town in the 1990's was a direct result of blockbusting and the ensuing flight of white families from newly integrated neighborhoods. Bloomfield paid a hefty price for integration, thanks to the link established between race and real estate value, in which land owned by blacks is worth significantly less than white property. As Bloomfield's black population increased, naturally the population of black students in the schools increased as well. That increase in the schools occurred, but at a rate far faster than the rate of overall integration for the town. Falling property values and white flight drastically shaped the makeup of the public schools. As we will see, the demographic change to an all-black school system had dire consequences for education in Bloomfield which are being felt to this day.

## Chapter 2: Integrated Town, Segregated Schools

It is worth asking if the integration that Bloomfield has achieved is worth the cost that black residents have paid, both literally and figuratively. For many, the answer to that question is a resounding yes, as evidenced by the panel discussions held in February at Prosser Library in the town's center. Titled "Bloomfield is Still an 'All America City'," and described as a commemoration of Black History Month<sup>35</sup>, the two discussions laid out the history of Bloomfield and how it achieved the honor so many still hold dear. Ironically, despite the title of the discussions, there was little talk of Bloomfield's present accomplishments in maintaining its diversity, except to lament the difficulty of doing so. Shirley Thompson, a long time member of the school board, mentioned the aging white population of Bloomfield as a key source of frustration in maintaining integrated schools, "because they stay here" and occupy homes that could be sold to younger families with children. By the end of the night, she seemed to concede the argument in saying, "Let's educate what we have and let's make the [Bloomfield school] system the best black school system in the north."

That a Bloomfield resident who lived in the town during the "All-America City" era, who seeks to claim that mantle for the present day as well, admitted to the Bloomfield public school system being a "black" school system is striking. Yet it is simply an acknowledgement of what began back in the 1970's as Bloomfield received its award. What Ms. Thompson leaves unsaid though is that not only is Bloomfield a black school system, it is also a largely poor one as well. The history of housing discrimination in Bloomfield has resulted in a public school system which concentrates race as well as poverty. While the concentration of race was accomplished largely by housing, in recent years the constantly growing magnet school system in Greater Hartford has

helped to leave behind poorer students in the traditional public schools. In essence, Bloomfield's schools have been transformed into a modern urban school system in the heart of the suburbs, with all of the attendant problems of racial and economic isolation.

Education Scholar Jack Dougherty shows how the quality of local schools grew in importance during the era of suburbanization, and how Bloomfield suffered from the arrangements NAREB set down so many years before. Dougherty tracks the desirability of schools in West Hartford, Avon and Bloomfield across the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before the suburban boom of the 1950's, the Hartford public school system was regarded as the best in the region, drawing attention and praise in a survey from Columbia's Teacher College in 1937.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, the public schools in West Hartford were described as "mediocre" in a report from the State Department of Education.<sup>37</sup>

Schools did not lure residents out of the city. Today, the language surrounding housing and schools gives the false impression that good schools attracted residents. In fact it was the arrival of parents from the city, accustomed to the high standards of Hartford schools, who demanded that schools in the suburbs improve. Mr. Dougherty quotes Clifford Davis, a man who moved from Hartford to Avon in 1952, who says plainly, "We didn't come to Avon because of the schools."<sup>38</sup> Better schools became a contest between fiscally conservative established residents and new families who wanted more spending on services from the suburban towns they moved to. The new families eventually triumphed, and the rewards for everyone in Avon were substantial. Kelli Perkins shows that in Avon, "for a one percent increase in school spending per pupil, taxable property values rose \$41,336,000 over time."<sup>39</sup> The increase in taxable property value created a cycle which benefited every aspect of the town, as today Avon has one of the

highest ranked school districts in the state<sup>40</sup> and a median home value of \$406,500.<sup>41</sup> These benefits were created together, one reinforcing the other over the years.

For Bloomfield, those decisions meant that the public schools experienced the opposite of what was happening in districts in Avon, West Hartford and other suburbs surrounding Hartford. In other towns, the focus on the quality of education became a precursor to growing wealth and prestige. In Bloomfield though, the discussions about schools was centered on the growing racial imbalance between the various neighborhood elementary schools. These issues arose in the early 1960's, serving as the canary in the coal mines regarding the practice of blockbusting. A racial survey of Bloomfield's elementary schools found that the Blue Hills School, located in the southeastern section of Bloomfield, had a nonwhite population of 42.7%. In contrast, Vincent Elementary had a nonwhite population of 1.5%, Laurel Elementary was 1.7%, Wintonbury school was 8.2% and Metacomet was at 10.2%.<sup>42</sup> As blockbusting was occurring in the neighborhoods that served as feeders for the Blue Hills School, the nonwhite population of the school was wildly out of sync with the elementary schools found in the whiter neighborhoods in Bloomfield.

Redistricting was considered, but rejected by parents who did not want their children to endure long bus rides across the town. Instead, a voluntary busing program was instituted to mitigate the racial isolation of Blue Hills School, but only nine white students from other elementary schools participated.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, a new middle school was built in the early 1970's to bring together student from across the town into one building, sidestepping the need for redistricting all together. While this incomplete solution did not address the isolation of the elementary schools, the town's willingness to take steps towards addressing racial imbalance, especially without the imposition of lawsuits or state level laws, was one of the major

contributing factors in Bloomfield winning recognition as an All-America City. The article in *Look* magazine which announced the award noted that, in regards to integration, Bloomfield was one of the community which "[has] learned, often in the face of taxpayers' skeptical show-me attitudes towards costs, how to raise the money that is needed, how to rouse active citizen participation in place of city hall directives."<sup>44</sup>

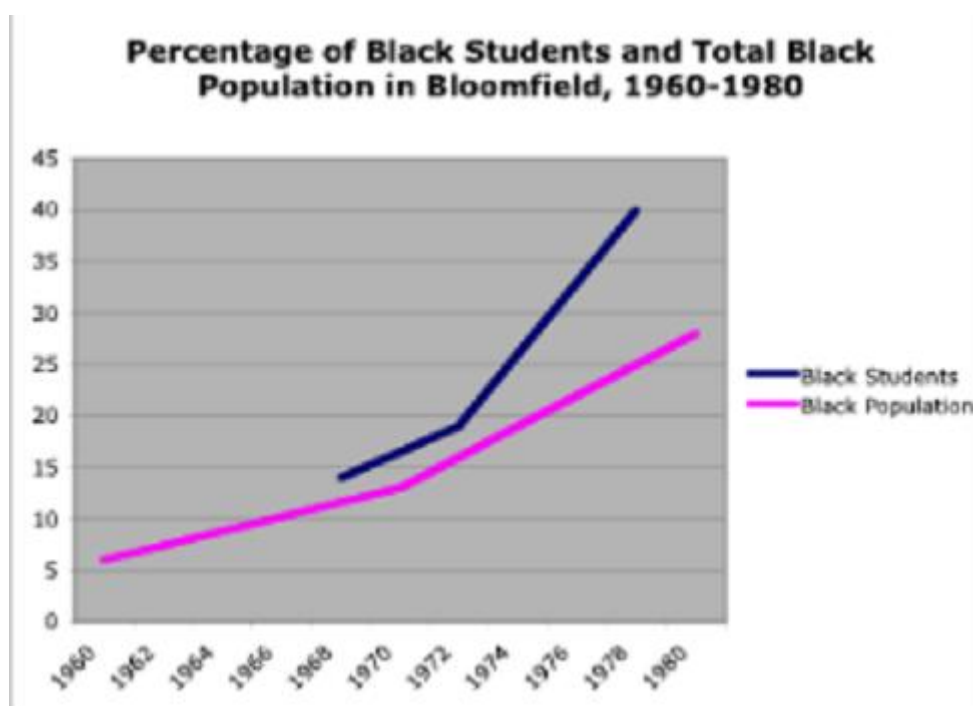


Figure 5.<sup>45</sup>

It is disheartening, then, that despite the best efforts of Bloomfield's leaders and residents to combat school segregation, the problem began to accelerate rapidly in the mid 1970's (Figure 5). In 1972, blacks made up 20% of the town's population and 30% of the public schools. In 1980, those numbers had increased to 25% and 40%, respectively<sup>46</sup>, and by 1989, blacks were a commanding majority in the schools. Despite only making up 30% of the town, blacks made up 70% of the public school population,<sup>47</sup> a full six years before they would become a majority in the town. The rapid demographic shift is explained not only by the arrival of new black families,



but also by white families leaving Bloomfield. From 1970-2010, over 7,000 residents left Bloomfield. The exodus consisted largely of young white families with children, leaving the town for neighboring suburbs such as Simsbury. These residents were fearful of race mixing and the prospects of their children not achieving academically.<sup>48</sup> However, older white residents who no longer had children in the public schools did not leave, preventing a wholesale disappearance of Bloomfield's white population. Older white residents help keep Bloomfield's white population stable at 40%, but the disappearance of young white residents with children has resulted in the town's student body being almost 90% black. One can see this drastic change in the high school especially, as evidenced by the dramatic change in the demographic makeup of the school's soccer team between 1979 and 2012 (Figures 6 & 7). White children are no longer found in the school because their families are no longer found in Bloomfield.

The demographic shift of the town's schools from white to black also carried economic repercussions for the makeup of the school system. West Hartford, Simsbury and Avon were appealing yet pricey choices for white families looking to leave Bloomfield. Those families who left could afford to do so, draining the town of their income and tax money. Yet Bloomfield still maintains several economic indicators that place it around the median values for the state in per capita income, home value and other indicators of wealth. These values are maintained by the older white residents who have remained in Bloomfield. Looking at the town of Bloomfield critically, we can see that income is not evenly distributed across the town, and that the distribution of income correlates strongly with the racial makeup of the town (see Figures 8 and 10). Areas with high concentrations of residents who identify as white clearly have higher per capita incomes. Not coincidentally, the whiter and more affluent areas of Bloomfield are also the oldest parts of the town in terms of median age (Figure 9).

# SOCCER



Figure 6. Bloomfield High School's Soccer Team, 1978-1979<sup>49</sup>



Figure 7. Bloomfield High School's Soccer Team, 2011-2012<sup>50</sup>

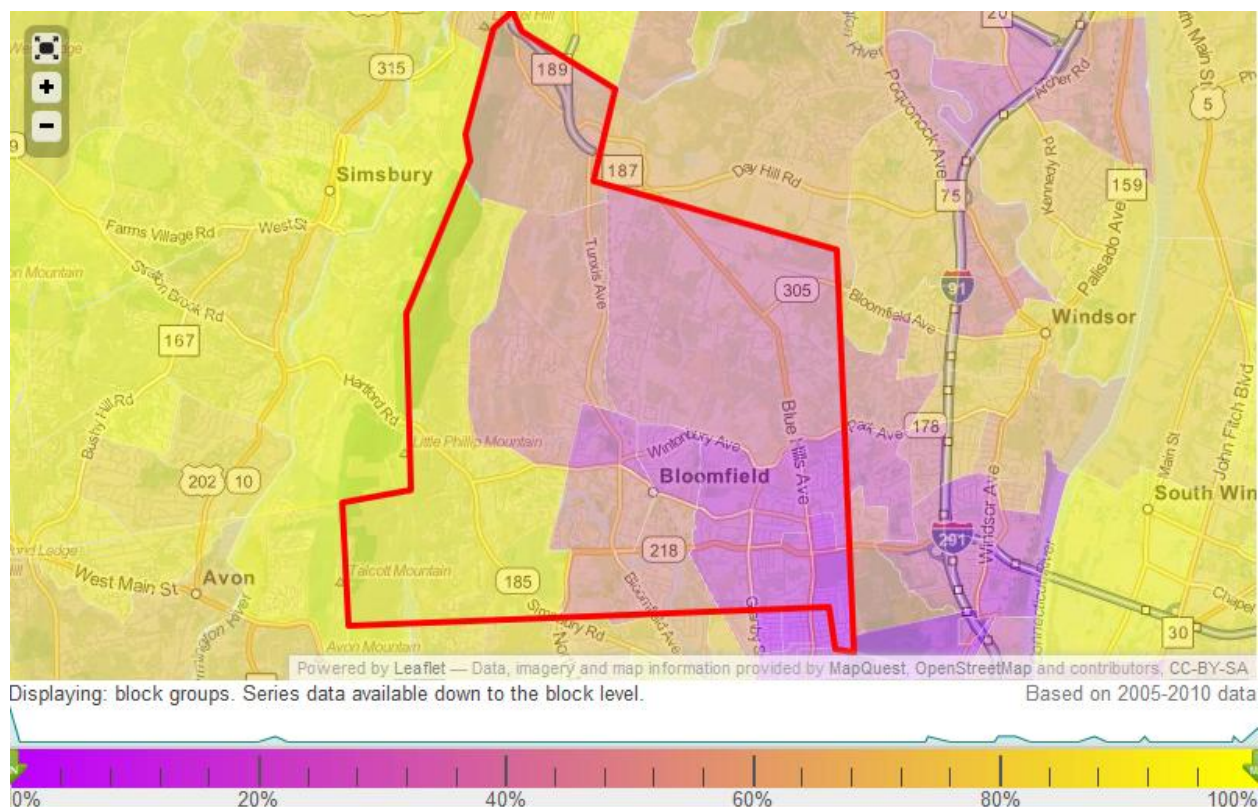


Figure 8. Percentage of Residents identifying as White<sup>51</sup>

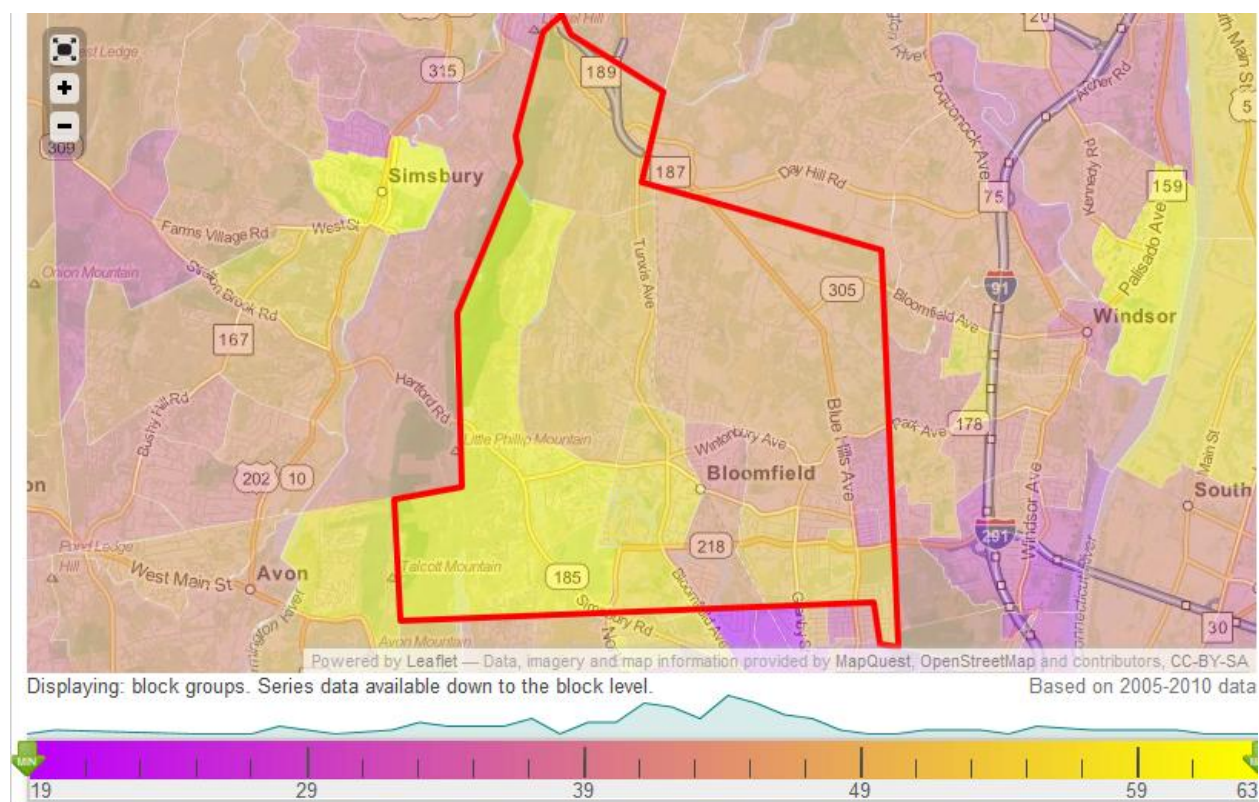


Figure 9. Median Age<sup>52</sup>

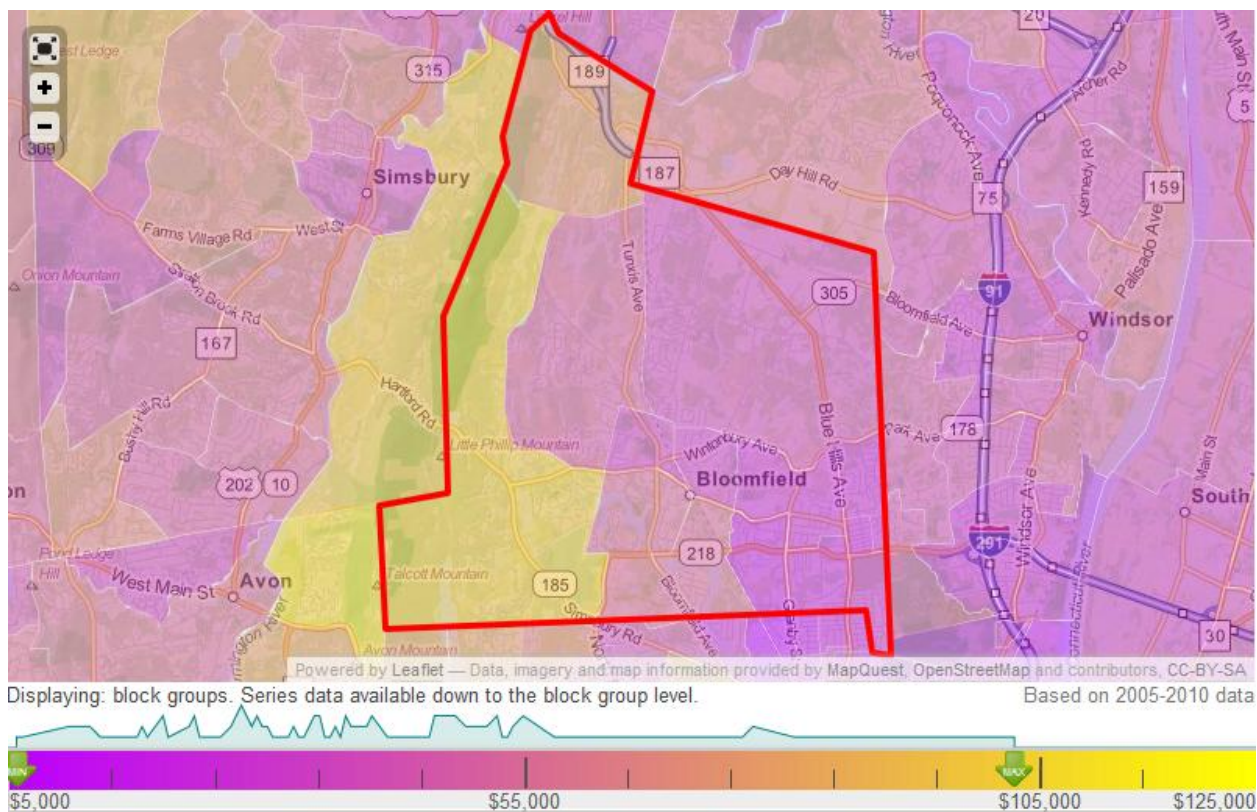


Figure 10. Median Per Capita Income<sup>53</sup>

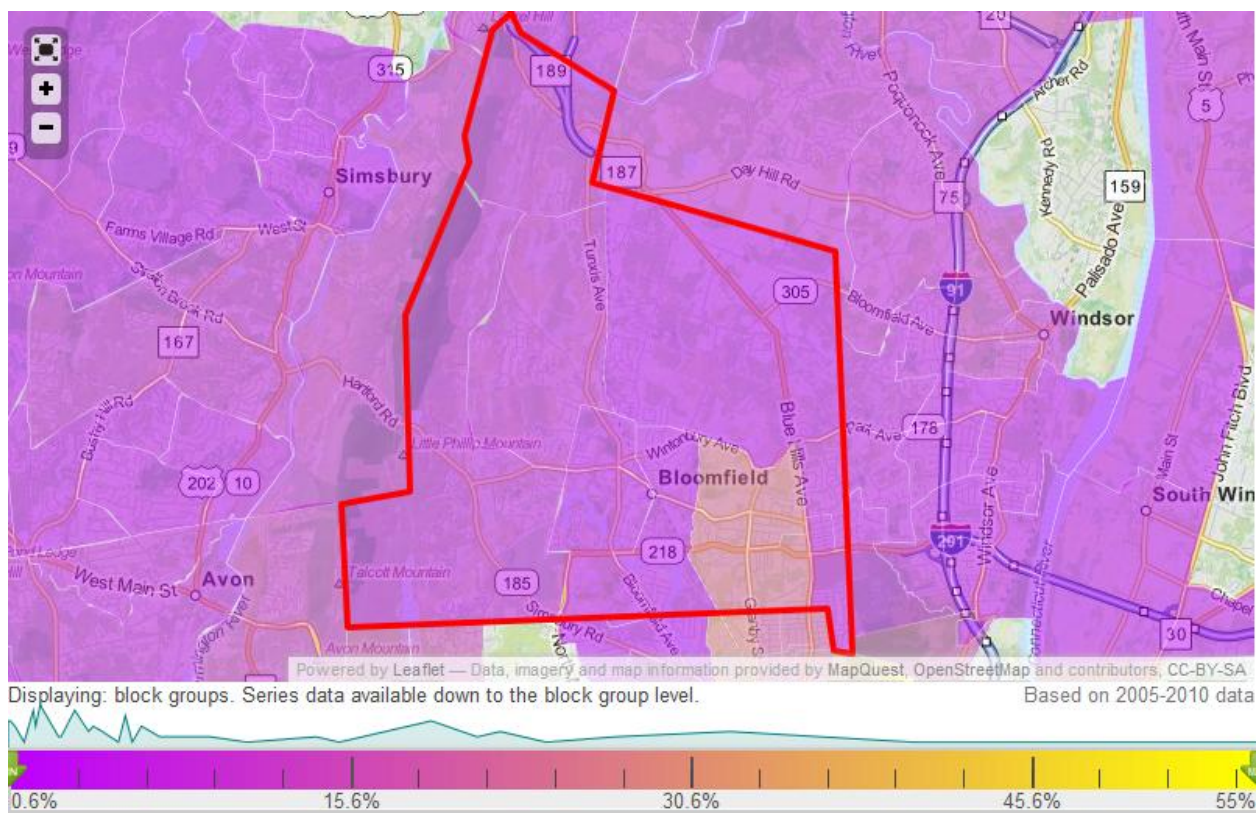
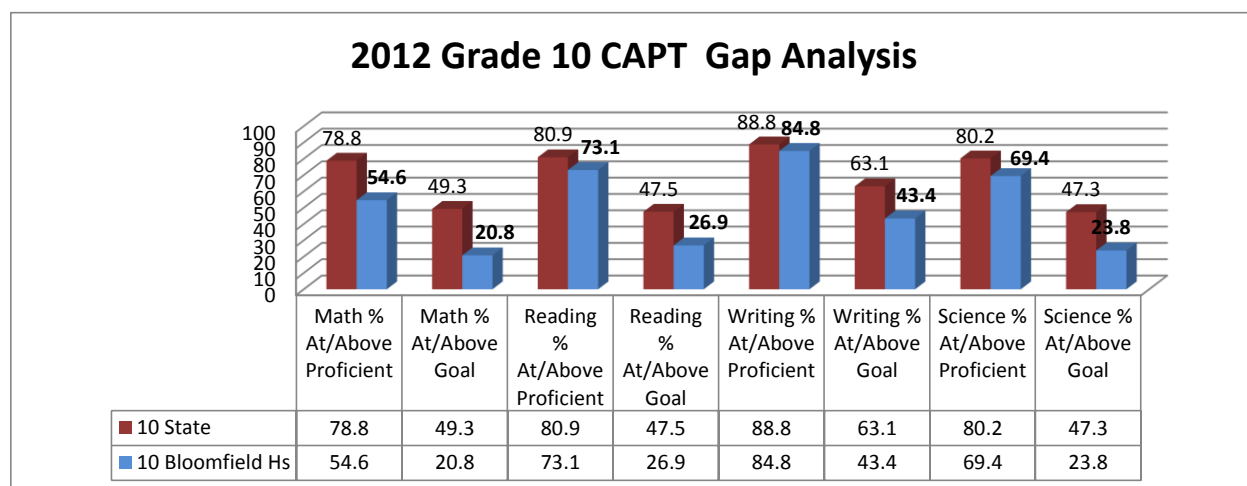


Figure 11. Percent of Children Living Below Poverty Line<sup>54</sup>

These residents no longer have school-aged children. Meanwhile, the children of younger and poorer black families are the only ones attending the public schools, concentrating race and poverty within those buildings. We can see that the sections of the town with the highest rates of children living below the poverty line are also found in the black areas of Bloomfield (Figure 11). These data sets almost perfectly match the racial change maps in Chapter One. Lower income black residents moved into block-busted neighborhoods in the southeastern corner of Bloomfield in the 1970's. As more affluent white families left the town, the poorer black families remained, and the public school's shift from white and middle class to black and poor kicked into high gear. In its Accountability Plan for 2012-2013, the Bloomfield school system reports that a staggering *eighty-four percent* of students at Bloomfield High School qualify for free or reduced price lunch.<sup>55</sup> That figure firmly places Bloomfield High School in the realm of Hartford Public Schools, where 90% of the student body qualifies for free or reduced price lunch.<sup>56</sup> This, in a town where the median per capita income is \$41,504.<sup>57</sup>

The link between poverty and school performance as measured by standardized tests has been established,<sup>58</sup> and in this area Bloomfield more closely resembles Hartford than its suburban neighbors as well. The State Department of Education has recently adopted a new measure of the effectiveness of schools, called the School Performance Index (SPI). Described as “an average of student performance in all tested grades and subjects for a given school,” the SPI is designed for “the evaluation of school performance...on CMT/CAPT tests.”<sup>59</sup> Bloomfield High School's SPI was 62.1 over the three year average from 2009-2012<sup>60</sup>, higher than Bulkely's (44.9) and Hartford Public High School's (36.8) SPI scores.<sup>61</sup> Yet the school lagged far behind high schools in bordering suburbs, such as Hall High School (88.1) and Conard (85.8) in West Hartford,<sup>62</sup> Avon High School (91.4)<sup>63</sup> and Simsbury High School (93.4).<sup>64</sup> Still, the SPI is an

opaque number which many people have difficulty understanding. Once again, the Bloomfield High School Accountability Plan paints a clearer picture of the dire situation in the school:



**Figure 12. CAPT Score Analysis**<sup>65</sup>

The concentration of racialized poverty in the town's high school gives it a racial, economic and academic profile that is usually attributed to failing schools in large urban districts such as Hartford and Bridgeport. Bloomfield's racial stratification along residential lines manages to conceal this reality though, and it makes it difficult to find solutions.

Unlike the 1970's, the will to correct these problems seems to be nonexistent. The older population of Bloomfield does not have school aged children in the public schools. This has the double effect of not only increasing racial and economic isolation in the schools, but also of making it difficult to invest money back into the school system. It has been notoriously difficult to pass referendums in Bloomfield related to school expenditures. For example, a referendum to raise \$90 million to renovate the public schools was placed on the ballot in 2002, but it did not gain enough votes to pass until 2006.<sup>66</sup>

In fact, one of the few ways to get any amount of money for education spending, in Bloomfield and throughout the Greater Hartford area, is to ask for funds for magnet schools. In 1989, Elizabeth Horton Sheff and other parents in Hartford sued the state of Connecticut on the grounds that separate city and urban school districts resulted in racially segregated schools and unequal educational opportunities for Hartford residents.<sup>67</sup> The state Supreme Court found in favor of the defendants in 1996,<sup>68</sup> declaring that “the Hartford public schools were racially, ethnically and economically isolated and that, as a result, Hartford public school students had not been provided a substantially equal educational opportunity under the state constitution...” However, the court did not specify how Hartford’s schools should be desegregated. The approach to desegregation was not finalized until 2003, when the settlement of the *Sheff vs. O’Neil* segregation lawsuit went into effect,<sup>69</sup> creating dozens of magnet schools across Greater Hartford. These schools are designed around specialized curriculum to act as “magnets,” drawing white suburban students into Hartford in an attempt to ease the racial and economic isolation that has plagued the schools. Bloomfield has jumped in as well, building two magnet schools, the Wintonbury Early Childhood Magnet School and the Global Experiences Magnet School (GEMS) in the last five years.

While the effectiveness of magnet schools in creating diverse schools is very much open for debate, the effects on the traditional public schools have been disastrous. In Hartford, comprehensive high schools have been forced to rebrand themselves as magnet-like institutions, often splitting themselves into smaller “academies” to compete with specialized magnet schools in the era. Bloomfield has followed suit. While new magnet schools opened, a traditional elementary school, J.P. Vincent, was closed. This closure was made in conjunction with refocusing the remaining two elementary schools, Laurel and Metacomet. They have been

transformed from neighborhood schools into schools that serve grades K-2 and 3-4, respectively.<sup>70</sup> Carmen Arace Middle School has followed this example as well, reorganizing itself into an Intermediate School for grades 5-6 and the Middle School proper for grades 7-8. Whereas similar changes were made in the 1970's to combat segregation, these changes have little to do with that ideal and are instead designed to fit into the craze for specialization driven by magnet schools.

In Bloomfield's traditional public schools, the magnet school craze has become the new primary drain on the student population. In the past, families who didn't want their children to attend Bloomfield High School were forced to either move or pay to send their children to expensive private high schools such as Northwest Catholic or Kingswood Oxford in West Hartford, or Loomis Chafee in Windsor. However, the increase in magnet schools since 2003 has given parents other options. As a result, Bloomfield High School has seen a 17.6% drop in the school's population over the last ten years, from 658 students in the 2002-2003 school year to 542 students in 2012-2013.<sup>71</sup> The high school saw a shocking population drop of 10% from 2011 to 2012 alone, when 62 students left. Not coincidentally, 2012 was the year GEMS opened, and 58 of its 123 high school aged students hail from Bloomfield. It is almost a one-to-one loss/gain for the traditional high school and the new magnet school.

The drop in population has also coincided with Bloomfield High School's ascension into the ranks of the poorest schools in Greater Hartford. Like the flight of white families from Bloomfield in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the flight of students from Bloomfield High School now is increasing the school's economic isolation. Scholars have shown that magnet schools often engage in "creaming," a process by which students with more involved parents, higher economic status or better test scores abandon the traditional public schools in favor of magnet schools.<sup>72</sup>



Bloomfield High School has experienced this phenomenon, as higher income and higher performing students have left, leaving an economically and academically disadvantaged core. It should come as no surprise then that GEMS has a more diverse student body and a lower percentage of students receiving free or reduced price lunch.<sup>73</sup> The laudable goal of increasing diversity in Hartford's public schools has had the exact opposite effect in Bloomfield's.

As Bloomfield tries desperately to cling to the "All-America City" distinction, it becomes clear that the public schools undermine the image of racial harmony. The flight of students from the schools, along racial lines in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and now due to magnet schools, has dramatically increased racial and economic isolation in the school system. However, there is still one component missing from this analysis, and that is the role of opinion. After all, a real estate agent can say that one property is worth less than another, just as they can say that one school is better or worse than another. For it to carry any weight though, homebuyers and residents must believe what they are hearing. This becomes a classic case of the chicken and the egg, especially for public schools: did the schools become poor, and parents reacted accordingly by leaving? Or did the parents leave, thus causing the schools to become poor? Either way, what residents in Bloomfield have thought about their town and their schools over the last forty years is key to putting together how the town has arrived at its current state, segregated both by race and class.

### Chapter 3: For Whose Sake?

“My role here is to outperform the magnet schools.”<sup>74</sup> That is how Principal Sam Galloway of Bloomfield High School characterized his job when we met to discuss the issues of race and class in his school. An imposing man with glasses and an easygoing presence which belie his years of experience as a state trooper and a stint embedded with the military in Iraq,<sup>75</sup> Principal Galloway is well aware of who his enemy is in the battlefield of urban public education. To my surprise though, while he acknowledges the difficulties of competing with magnet schools across Greater Hartford, he cites his primary concern as the parents of elementary and middle school students in Bloomfield, or more accurately, their opinions about the high school.

Before coming to the high school in 2010, Principal Galloway served as the principal for Carmen Arace Intermediate School (CAIS), a school for fifth and sixth graders, for five years. He described meeting with parents who were hesitant to move their children into his school from Metacomet and Laurel elementary schools. Principal Galloway met these parents himself, giving them a guided tour of the school, answering their questions and laying out an array of information, from test scores to disciplinary data, to ensure them that CAIS was a safe and constructive environment. He was able to convince many parents to remain in the Bloomfield public schools for a few more years. He could do nothing about their opinions of the high school though. “These parents had already made up their minds that they weren’t sending their kids to the high school. ‘That place is out of control,’ they’d say to me.”

Principal Galloway's time at CAIS has given him unique insight into the challenges he now faces in convincing the town's parents to remain in the traditional public high school. Whereas there was room for Principal Galloway to make his case in keeping students in the lower grades, as the principal at BHS, he knows he must contend with ideas that have hardened over the years. He displays the same mastery of data that he used so effectively at CAIS. "When parents bring their safety concerns to me, I inform them that we had zero fights in the high school last year. When they bring their academic concerns to me, I tell them that our SAT scores are higher than Capital Prep's.<sup>76</sup> We have Advanced Placement classes; Capital Prep has none." Principal Galloway has even set up a student ambassador program, in which high performing graduating seniors describe their experiences at the high school to prospective parents, and ensure them that it is possible to gain entrance into the best colleges around the country. In the wake of "school choice,"<sup>77</sup> Principal Galloway "must market the school to middle schoolers." He is aware of the demographic and social problems that afflict the high school, and laments the fact that a broad base of support does not exist for the high school as parents refuse to send their children there. Still, he remains undeterred. "We have to perform in spite of, despite of, those issues."

Yet Bloomfield High School's enrollment continues to decrease, and is projected to fall again in the 2013-2014 school year.<sup>78</sup> As this happens, the student body becomes more racially isolated and economically disadvantaged, exacerbating the issues of education policy. Perhaps more importantly, the opinions about the public schools of those inside and outside Bloomfield grow more negative, leading to both a refusal of new families to move into the town and for current residents to flee the schools. It is a classic example of a vicious cycle. Principal Galloway is struggling valiantly to sell his school in this new era of education, but he is not simply fighting

against the preconceived notions of parents he met five years ago. He is battling against forty years of perceptions that explicitly tie together race, class and schools. History is not on his side.

The negative perceptions about Bloomfield High School often run headlong into the reality of life in the school. From the era of blockbusting down to today, there are many residents and former students who both fought against racist real estate practices and vocally defended the reputation of the schools. It's critical to balance their voices against the torrent of naysayers. Whether they realize it or not, Bloomfield's detractors are often repeating lines from a racial script which automatically assumes the worst about towns and schools with predominately minority populations. Their opinions must be actively refuted.

The negative portrayals of minority towns and schools has deep roots in history. One of the main narrative threads of American history has been the consistently perpetuated notion that black Americans are inferior to whites. From the era of slavery down to today,<sup>79</sup> a significant number of whites continue to believe that black Americans are less intelligent. Combined with stereotypes about laziness, fears of racial violence and miscegenation<sup>80</sup> that, until recently, were majority opinions, blacks have been characterized in broadly negative turns. These attitudes have helped to both create and justify the physical conditions which have comprised the black experience in America. The fears and stereotypes listed above are what allowed real estate agents to classify black-owned property as worth less, and eventually led to the belief that majority black schools are another drain on property values and the quality of education itself. These twin factors provide the reason that young white residents fled Bloomfield in second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Aleesha Young has conducted several interviews with residents who lived in Bloomfield during the era of blockbusting and the ensuing demographic change which swept the town. Many of them were aware of the practice as it occurred, and even took steps to combat racial real estate practices. The residents were coordinated through the Human Relations Commission and the Intergroup Council, organizations tasked with exposing unjust real estate practices and fostering positive relations between black and white residents. Norma LeFebvre, a member of both the League of Women's Voters and the town's Board of Education, described the strategies the Intergroup Council pursued. "A whole group of us got together," she explained. "There were blacks and whites that were truly as a group. One of the main focuses of that group was to work on racial steering in terms of real estate. Actually, some of the people went and blind looked at houses, blind testing.<sup>81</sup>" The council would then use the results of the "blind testing" to prove that realtors were steering residents into different neighborhoods and towns based on their race. The Council's investigations led directly to the town placing prohibitions on the behaviors of real estate agents.<sup>82</sup>

The reactions to these well-meaning actions were decidedly mixed. Adelle Wright, a white woman who is the former chairwoman of the Human Relations Commission, recalls being labeled as racist at times. "When we tried to slow down the process of selling houses on a certain street, we were accused of being racist, that 'You don't want any more black people.' No, we'd say, 'Go three streets over and have a black family over there. Just give this neighborhood a chance to churn awhile and see if they can live together.' But the blacks didn't want to hear that and the whites didn't either."<sup>83</sup>

Despite these efforts, it became clear that other municipal action would be necessary. The voluntary busing program was instituted, and once again good intentions fell short. Edward

Stockton, the mayor of Bloomfield when the town received the All-America City award, laments the failure of the busing program he personally invested in. “We were gonna...our kids were gonna go to Blue Hills School and they were gonna bus some kids from Blue Hills School to Laurel school, but we could not get enough people to make any difference.”<sup>84</sup> Instead, Mayor Stockton helped to push through the comprehensive middle school that all the town’s students would attend.

What becomes most frustrating about the alleged connections between race and the quality of schools is that, without exception, the residents Ms. Young interviewed all expressed pride and satisfaction with the Bloomfield schools of the early 1970’s, even as the black population began to increase rapidly. Louis Schiavone, another member of the Human Relations Council and a former principal of Bloomfield High School, described his son’s education in Bloomfield as “excellent,” and recounts that BHS was the first school in the state to offer Advance Placement courses in conjunction with the University of Connecticut for college credit.<sup>85</sup> Mayor Stockton also praised the AP/UConn program for allowing his children to complete a year’s worth of college before entering the university while receiving a “whiff of diversity.” Both of his children went on to earn PhDs in their respective fields. Diane Janusz, a teacher’s aide in Metacomet Elementary School, also lauded the school system for exposing her daughter to a multicultural setting.<sup>86</sup>

Success was certainly possible at Bloomfield High School, but this fact rarely stood in the way of preconceived notions about the school. Ms. LeFebvre recalled the flight of white families from the town:

Alot of people used to take their kids out of Bloomfield schools at the high school level. Two reasons, they didn’t want them dating blacks and they didn’t think they could get into good schools coming from Bloomfield. I know a lot of people moved to Simsbury, that was one of the places in particular.

The desire for racial purity was likely the main motivating factor behind the flight of the residents Ms. LeFebvre described. Bloomfield's status as the only school in the entire state offering classes for college credit was a strong incentive for academically-minded families to remain in the town. It clearly wasn't strong enough to overcome fears of miscegenation.

Likewise, Ms. Wright, who lived in Newington for nine years before moving back into Bloomfield, remembers the reaction she received from some of her neighbors in Newington when they learned of her decision:

I was just, I loved Bloomfield and my husband had come to care for it and so we really, by choice, came back to town, with the voice of one prominent citizen in Newington ringing in our ears, saying, "Why do you want to go back to that nigger town?"... that comment, from the Newington man, he was just more outspoken than some people. Lots of people were thinking that, I'm sure. But he happened to be a big mouth, so he expressed himself.

These anecdotes make it clear that the problem of segregation in towns and schools is only such as far as minorities are concerned. After all, Bloomfield and Hartford are hardly the only municipalities in the region that have high amounts of racial isolation. Simsbury as a town is 93% white, with a school makeup which reflects those demographics. Avon is 88% white. There are no lawsuits to desegregate these school systems, and there are never many questions asked about segregation there, unless from people on the outside looking in. Apparently, white racial isolation is not an issue that needs addressing. Whites have not been marked in the same ways that blacks and other minorities have. Their property isn't worth less. Their segregated schools are celebrated, not condemned. Their exclusionary practices are justified by market language and other code words. Being white ensures access to the kinds of economic and social resources not present in Bloomfield. The residents who left Bloomfield in the 1970's and 1980's were not

concerned about segregation at all. Indeed, they welcomed it; integration was the great terror they fled.

If nothing else, it is imperative that the distinction between white segregation and minority segregation remain clear, because that distinction sits at the heart of what truly plagues segregated schools in Bloomfield. The question seems to be on the tip of many tongues, but most dare not ask it: why are all-white schools better than all-black schools? Unless we acknowledge that historical policies, actions and decisions have explicitly created circumstances that place black schools at a disadvantage, then we are left with only one other possible answer: that black students simply cannot perform at the same level as whites. It is from the refusal to acknowledge the past that explanations such as cultural deficit theory spring forth. Cultural deficit theory “attributes students' lack of educational success to characteristics often rooted in their cultures and communities.”<sup>87</sup> The stereotypes used to describe black people become the basis for explaining the failure of divested and marginalized school systems, and places the blame entirely on the backs of students, their families and their communities. Stereotyped assumptions about blacks become self-fulfilling. As demonstrably wealthier whites leave and spread negative information about the schools and towns they've left behind, school systems collapse, and the seemingly impossible becomes real, a school for the urban poor in the heart of a middle class suburb.

As a result of history, demographics and opinion, Bloomfield has fallen quite far from its status as one of the exemplars of America's municipalities in the 1970's. In an article from November 2011, *Connecticut Magazine* rated the towns in the state with a size of 15,000-25,000 residents.<sup>88</sup> “The top finishers in this population group enjoy the best educational test results in Connecticut, the most robust local economies, the greatest number of cultural and social



amenities per capita, and most likely a wonderful feeling of security,” gushes the description accompanying the chart. Of 32 towns which fall into the size group, Bloomfield finishes 27<sup>th</sup>, managing to score dead last in education and crime, and 29<sup>th</sup> in economy. Not surprisingly, the town scores 4<sup>th</sup> in terms of affordability. The negative attributes of the town make it a less desirable place to live, particularly the way the schools are characterized as failing. It should also come as no surprise that Bloomfield is the only majority black town on the list and rates at the absolute bottom in terms of education. Even Ansonia ranks higher than Bloomfield, despite the fact that its high school is on the Department of Education’s Review School list for the “lowest performing” schools,<sup>89</sup> and Bloomfield has already taken steps towards improvement as a “Turnaround” school.<sup>90</sup>

Bloomfield’s reputation as an underachieving school system has spread from being confined to residents of the town, the region, or even the state. Thanks to the internet and enterprising data aggregators, anyone in the world can see how Bloomfield stacks up against other Connecticut schools. Sites such as GreatSchools.org have become incredibly popular among parents looking to send their children to the best schools, as determined by aggregated test scores. The site ranks schools and districts on a scale from 1-10, using the most recent state level standardized test scores.<sup>91</sup> GreatSchools.org has taken advantage of the willingness of parents to relocate their families for access to good schools by including links to homes for sale in the school district in which they are searching.<sup>92</sup> These listings are provided by Realtor.com, billed as the official website of the National Association of Realtors, which is, of course, the modern name for the National Association of Real Estate Boards: NAREB.<sup>93</sup> The connection between race and property value, and now race and school quality, endures to this day, as the organization which formalized that arrangement has partnered with a school data aggregator

which rates Bloomfield High School at a dismal two out of ten.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, the two most prominent pieces of information on the GreatSchools.org webpage for BHS is the score the site gives, and the pie chart showcasing the racial makeup of the school (see Figure 13). As in the time of Ms. LeFebvre and Ms. Wright, the opinions of those who had no personal experience with the high school are being used to influence how others perceive it.

The screenshot shows the GreatSchools.org page for Bloomfield High School. At the top, the URL is [www.greatschools.org/connecticut/bloomfield/90-Bloomfield-High-School/](http://www.greatschools.org/connecticut/bloomfield/90-Bloomfield-High-School/). The school's name is "Bloomfield High School", and it is a public school serving 646 students in grades 9-12. The GreatSchools Rating is 2 out of 10. The page includes a map showing the school's location at 5 Huckleberry Ln, Bloomfield, CT 06002, with a phone number (860) 286-2630. There are social media links for Pinterest, Facebook, and Twitter. The page is divided into several sections: "About the school" (describing it as a public school serving 646 students in grades 9-12), "Add photos" (with a call to action to join today), "What schools are available to you?" (with a link to find attendance zones), "Community ratings" (showing 4 stars), "Community reviews" (with a review snippet: "My daughter is a freshman at BHS. This is her first year at a large public..."), "Student diversity" (with a pie chart showing 89% of students are Black, not Hispanic), "Finding the right school" (with a link to "What to look for in a high school"), and "District information" (showing 7 schools in the Bloomfield School District, grades PK-12). There are also sections for "Compare this school to nearby schools", "Nearby schools" (listing Oakridge School, Hebrew High School of New Engla, and Weaver High School), and "Find nearby homes for sale" (with a search bar and a "Search" button).

Figure 13. GreatSchools.org's page about Bloomfield High School<sup>95</sup>

Through Ms. Young's work, we've seen that the opinions and perceptions of parents who sent their children through the Bloomfield public schools in the 1970's did not match the ideas that were popular among non-residents and those who left the town. What of the people who

have firsthand experience with the Bloomfield public schools today? GreatSchools.org also includes a tab for a community-based score of the schools, and community based reviews. Bloomfield High School has received a score of four out of five stars based on 29 user-submitted ratings,<sup>96</sup> in stark contrast to the official score from the site. Most interesting though is the fact that the scores from users are based on a more holistic rubric than the strictly test score-derived metric used by the site itself. Users can rate the high school in terms of teacher quality (BHS received four out of five stars), principal leadership (four out of five stars), and parent involvement (three out of five stars). Likewise, user-submitted reviews, while decidedly mixed, do paint the high school in a more positive light at times. One reviewer, a parent whose daughter entered the school in 2011, wrote, "...the teachers and school guidance counselor have been very helpful in making [my daughter's] transition uneventful... I believe the new Principal, Mr. Galloway is the right person to bring about the necessary changes to make BHS a first rate post secondary school." A student from 2008 also referenced the improvements, and took exception to the single-minded focus on test results:

I am a student at BHS and I believe that the administrators, faculty and students are trying to make an improvement. They are becoming more strict and focusing more on academics, providing students with free tutors, SAT study sessions and etc... Statistics mean nothing, CAPT scores seem low but for those who tried they did very well. The school is only as good as each individual student and BHS is working on helping every student get a great education.

Not all of the reviews are as glowing. One parent allows the happenings of an after-hours social event at the school to essentially confirm the stereotypes that mar the high school's reputation, writing, "I had planned to send my children here, but after seeing the disgusting behavior of the students at a talent show, I do what a number of Bloomfield parents have to do, and that is spend the tax money for a failing school and send a child to a private school. The parents are not involved in this school." Another parent simply declared that "Bloomfield High School is not qualified nor equipped to teach or prepare our children for success now or years to come."

Fortunately for these parents, the magnet school system in Greater Hartford has largely negated the need to pay for private schools. Those who no longer wish to send their children to traditional high schools can opt into a nominally public magnet school if selected.

Reading anonymous reviews on a school rating website is hardly a comprehensive means for trying to determine the perception versus the reality of Bloomfield High School.<sup>97</sup> This method also shares a problem that Ms. Young's interviews, while substantive and well done, also suffers from. It is true that these are the parents of students who are making observations about Bloomfield schools, but they are still second-hand accounts of the experiences of their children. Both interviewees and reviewers can only report on what they see and hear as non-students, either from their children, school officials and teachers, or other parents. How do the people who actually passed through the doors of the public schools view their experiences? In other words, what do the students think? This is the question I wished to answer when I reached out to my former classmates from Bloomfield and asked them to reflect on their experiences in the public schools. Their recollections about the schools are varied and sometimes contradictory, but importantly, they offer a counterbalance to the universally negative depiction of Bloomfield's schools which is widely disseminated.

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In the seventh grade, I was friends with a young man named Andrew. We sat next to each other in Mr. Tripp's math class, a balding man with a thick mustache and genuine excitement for math. Andrew was white, with sandy brown hair and brown eyes. He was a few inches taller than me (in fact, most students were, as I was one of the last students in my class to hit my growth spurt), with a loud, goofy laugh that often got us reprimanded as we made jokes at Mr. Tripp's

expense. Andrew had a real gift for math, and excelled in it while I struggled. In the eighth grade, our paths diverged as he moved into the honors level math class, but we still managed to maintain our friendship. When we moved on to the high school though, I moved on alone; Andrew was going to a private school instead. I haven't seen him since.

The names of many classmates who suddenly disappeared over the summer between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade come to mind: Andrew, two students named Chris, two students named Deshaun, Thomas, David, Peter, Ari, Brian. It was 1999, still a few years shy of the *Sheff vs. O'Neil* settlement that would lead to the explosion of magnet schools in Greater Hartford and their status as the main drain on Bloomfield's public schools. Back then, the only option was to send children who wanted to get out of attending BHS to private schools in the area, primarily Northwest Catholic High School in neighboring West Hartford. This trend broke down along both racial and class lines, but it was not strictly a case of white flight. Almost all of the white students in our class did leave before reaching BHS, but they were not the only ones. Several of the students who left were students of color. My own family considered sending me to another private school, Loomis Chaffee in Windsor. These discussions never amounted to anything more than idle conversation though, as it was inconceivable that my family could afford such a place. I wouldn't have gone anyways, as the bond between my friends and I was far stronger than my desire to receive a "better" education.

My time in the BHS was characterized more by my lack of motivation as a student than any problem with the school itself. I often skated through my classes, settling for good grades when I was capable of earning great grades. My AP English teacher wrote in my yearbook that I'd "elevated procrastination to an art form." I was kicked out of class far more often than I'm comfortable admitting now, and was sent to in-school suspension twice for silly behavior on my

part. I graduated with a 3.2 GPA which, while not terrible, was lower than what I could have earned with even a little more effort. For the most part, my academic malaise was a result of my own choices, with two notable exceptions. BHS left me utterly unprepared to perform math above the level of basic algebra, a fact demonstrated by the three times I've failed calculus. The guidance office was also unable to offer me any real assistance. I applied to colleges through a program outside of the high school, and ultimately chose to attend Virginia Commonwealth University for what can accurately be characterized as non-academic reasons. Still, I loved BHS. I felt the surge of Warhawk pride at our pep rallies and football games. In 2002, the statewide Teacher of the Year was Ms. Nelson-Kauffman, my history teacher. I had the best friends anyone in any school could hope for. I was captain of the cross country team and the distance team for indoor track, the band president, the training and operations officer for our JROTC program, as well as being involved in the school's writing club, drama club and Model United Nations. I never felt like I was missing anything, at least not while I was in the high school. I would idly wonder where all the white kids had gone, but never dwelled on it.

The experiences of my classmates mirror my own in some ways, but diverge in important ways as well. For Brittany Shropshire, a member of the class of 2003, her experience at BHS was "one of many contradictions."<sup>98</sup> Ms. Shropshire comes from a long line of family members who attended BHS, and is highly critical of many aspects of the way the high school ran. She described the building as having the look of an "insane asylum," and was not pleased that one of the only major improvements to the high school since her parents attended was the renovation of the football field, which she notes was handled poorly as well, resulting in the field flooding and becoming unusable when it rained. She also had harsh words for the schools administrators, describing then principal Donald Harris as a man who strutted through the halls like a dictator.

“Neither [Principal Harris nor Assistant Principal Ronald Theriault] had any idea how to properly handle and work with young adults or their staff. They had no idea that the curriculum that we were being taught was not on the proper level for what we would need to prepare us for college courses.” Ms. Shropshire faults their lack of leadership as one of the main reasons the school’s college preparatory role was severely underdeveloped. “The education I received from Bloomfield high did not prepare me for life after graduation,” she said. “If it was not for a program I enrolled in, right after graduation, at UCONN that prepared you for the transition from high school to college I don't believe I would have made it through my freshman year of college... It scared me that I was that behind in the simple things...”

Rachel Arnett (*née* Fichman) agreed. “...I remember the distinct impression that they were ‘dumbing-down’ expectations for the students, behaviorally and academically...I rarely felt challenged by my classes, and left having developed some very negative study and work habits. I don't think attending Bloomfield High School prepared me academically for college, because I rarely had to engage study skills or exert a great deal of effort to achieve ‘good’ grades.”<sup>99</sup>

Stacey Doukas described other academic issues pertaining to teacher retention. “...There were some years that our school could not find a steady and qualified teacher. In my own experience it was in my freshman year of high school, I was without a physics teacher ... and the 2nd year we had this same problem when the English teacher decided to leave our school to pursue bigger [and] better opportunities after being there for more than a decade.”<sup>100</sup> Other students were more positive in their assessment of the high school’s academics. Jessica Sanchez-Cowan attended BHS through her junior year, until her family moved to Windsor and she was forced to attend Windsor High School for her senior year. “I loved my high school experience,” she enthused. “I loved the guidance counselors as well because I spent a lot of time in there because they became

friends to me and people I felt confident in discussing everyday issues with. “<sup>101</sup> Several other students expressed their satisfaction with their academic experience at BHS as well.

School may be primarily considered a place for learning, but the social aspect of high school is just as important, especially for young people navigating the difficulties of the physical and emotional transition from childhood to adulthood. None of the former students I interviewed mentioned the racial makeup of Bloomfield schools as having any effect on their education. However, it greatly affected the social landscape for some, and in distressingly negative ways.

This was the case for Jessica DeLeon. Ms. DeLeon and I share a unique connection, as we were often in the same classes together, and along with another student in our class, shared the same birthday. Thanks to three students celebrating together, we had the best array of snacks and favors to share with our classmates when the big day came. Our birthday celebrations were diminished by one-third though when Jessica left the public schools to attend Northwest Catholic. For her grandparents, the decision was influenced by concerns over the high school’s academic reputation, but for Ms. DeLeon, her desire to go to Northwest was driven mostly by social concerns.

“...At Northwest Catholic, my sister and I would no longer be in the minority. I was bullied a lot at Carmen Arace Middle School for being white and some days I was too afraid to ride the school bus because that is where I received most of the taunts. One time I had an entire bottle of water poured over my head on the school bus home because I was the only white kid on the bus. Even though I would miss my friends that I had made in elementary and middle school, I was beyond excited to go to Northwest Catholic so I would no longer be one of about 8 white people in my grade.<sup>102</sup>

These concerns trumped even the financial difficulties of paying for private school. Ms. DeLeon described her grandparents as lower middle class, and recalls that they ended up spending all of the money they’d saved for college to send her and her sister to Northwest instead. Ms. DeLeon still thinks it was the right choice for her. “Although I had to pay for college myself and now



have a mountain of student loans, I regret nothing about going to NWC.” She says. ”I have met some lifelong friends there and I will cherish my high school memories forever. I hated going to school every day at Carmen Arace and I have a feeling it would have been the same at BHS. Those 4 years at Northwest Catholic were some of the best 4 four years of my life so far”. She also appreciated the better racial balance of Northwest Catholic, which she described as 60% white and 40% minority, and enjoyed wearing a uniform to school, which she felt “helped in making the school one big family. No one judged anyone for what they were wearing.” It is a policy that Bloomfield public schools have adopted.

Ms. DeLeon’s experience in middle school is an inversion of the usual narrative about racial harassment, but it is no less a ringing denunciation of the pernicious and destructive influence that racial segregation and isolation has on both the dominant group and those who stand out, no matter which race fills those roles. Majority populations often exploit minority populations, no matter if the example is a school, a town, or a country. In the case of Bloomfield, past policies and current attitudes have led to a town which held the promise of integration becoming an ironic example of how the abused can become the abusers. And unfortunately, Ms. DeLeon was not the only former student I spoke with who experienced racial isolation for being different.

For Desiree Ravencraft (*née* Jacobs), it was social concerns which kept her in Bloomfield High School. She had the opportunity to attend Northwest, but decided against it because she didn’t want to be in the same school as her older brother, and she didn’t want to leave her friends.<sup>103</sup> This decision backfired for Mrs. Ravencraft though, as the social pressures of an all-black school weighed down on her as a student of mixed race. “It was so strange how the Jamaicans hung out with only Jamaicans...I felt like I only hung out with mixed girls, like I

wasn't 'black' enough to hang out with the black girls. So the only place I felt like I fit in was with the other girls that were mixed as well." After a nasty series of rumors spread throughout the high school about her, Mrs. Ravencraft made the decision to leave BHS in her senior year to enroll in a program that allowed her to complete her senior year of high school and freshman year of college simultaneously. Unlike Jessica though, she has second thoughts about leaving BHS. "Some days I wish I didn't do that," she admits. "I don't talk to anyone from high school any longer, and I feel like I didn't have the whole senior year as everyone else."

Racial issues were also a problem for Ms. Doukas, but of a different kind. Due to her Greek heritage and the ambiguity of her appearance, she could not find anywhere to fit in. "...I was left out of [the] cool black kid's sphere in high school...The few Hispanic students thought I was Latina and the moment I told them I'm not, they stopped communicating with me. Also the few white kids that were around had their own identity issues. Some welcomed me in their group while others didn't find me American enough. They would say, 'Well you're not really white like American White, you're Greek, that's like near the Middle East.' I guess you can say I was too white for the non-whites and too ethnic for the whites."

For other students though, the racial segregation of the schools wasn't an issue, so much as economic and other problems. Jennifer Paradis believes that most of the teasing she experienced in her early years in the Bloomfield schools was a result of her lower economic status, not because she was white.<sup>104</sup> She convinced her parents to allow her to attend Northwest Catholic, going so far as to pass the entrance exams and even purchase her uniforms. Money became an issue though, and not only was she unable to attend Northwest, after her freshman year at BHS her parents moved out of the town. It was at this point that Mrs. Paradis made an incredible decision. "I actually decided to stay at Bloomfield High because [it] was familiar and

comfortable to me, and truly because I didn't want to attend a school so completely different on a cultural level than the one I has grown up with. For the remaining three years of high school I lived separately from my parents and eventually completely independently." She struggled financially for the rest of her high school years, but thanks to help from friends and teachers, Mrs. Paradis graduated from BHS in 2005. She describes her experience at BHS as "unbelievably unique," and credits her time there with helping her to learn to relate to people across racial, ethnic and economic lines.

Kadine Mitchell was a black student of West Indian descent, and didn't face the same racial issues as the other students. She still wanted nothing to do with BHS, as the common fear of upperclassmen overshadowed her 8<sup>th</sup> grade year.<sup>105</sup> Ms. Mitchell recalls "begging my mom to send me to... Northwest Catholic...my mother was not able to afford it and claimed I could not provide good enough reason for her to try." Ms. Mitchell's mother worked two full time jobs, and Ms. Mitchell got her own job at fifteen to help pay for her own school expenses. Although it wasn't her first choice, as with Mrs. Paradis, Ms. Mitchell grew to love BHS. She described herself as a "social butterfly" in school, and excelled both academically, achieving high honors and membership in the National Honors Society, and socially, helping to organize the high school's first Step Show and, in her words, to "[throw] the best parties."

The experiences of these students are at times heartbreaking, and at times triumphant. They represent a range that is too often completely ignored in the popular characterization of Bloomfield schools. There is no discussion of what these students have gone on to achieve after school, because there doesn't need to be. That would simply be an *ex post facto* justification of their decisions. Instead, we should strive to understand their lived experiences as they recall

them, and to see that there is much more complexity in this segregated school system, and much more at stake than just the results of standardized tests.

It must be acknowledged though that the cause of integration is losing the battle. Whether we look at Bloomfield, Hartford, Simsbury, Avon, or any other town in Greater Hartford, we will see the same thing: isolation along racial and economic lines. That integration is an intrinsic, self-evident good is often taken for granted. We cannot continue to treat integration as such. The history of Bloomfield has shown that many actors have viewed integration as an unmitigated negative, and have reorganized the town to prevent it, in conscious and unconscious ways. In addition, the self-evident argument is not carrying the day. Re-segregation has already happened,<sup>106</sup> and if there is to be a new wave of progress against it, coherent arguments outlining its ills, and the benefits of integration, must be made.

First, is there even an audience for these arguments? For whose sake do we struggle? According to some of the former students I interviewed, the racial makeup of the Bloomfield schools is not a problem. Brian Grier expresses a hopeful take on this issue:

Segregation does not concern me because at this point I think it is just a way of thinking that will eventually fall to the wayside. As time passes and people become more associated with the idea that an American can be any color this line of thinking will eventually become extinct and the people who continue to think this way will be behind the times mentally.<sup>107</sup>

Likewise, Alex Jones is not concerned about segregation in the schools. When asked, he replies, “No. It doesn't really concern me, as I feel each student's success is based on encouragement of some kind. Whether that be from family members or from the school in some way shape or form.”<sup>108</sup>

On the opposite end of these views is Charles van der Poel. Self described as “white and middle class,”<sup>109</sup> Mr. van der Poel has come to draw the connections between race, class and the high school he graduated from. He says that he now understands it is impossible to divorce

Bloomfield's demographic reality of lower income minorities from its academic situation, which includes an ironic lack of Advanced Placement courses and lower college attendance than surrounding towns. Most heartening about Mr. van der Poel's current perspective is the evolution of his thoughts on this matter:

One of my more relevant political changes I've gone through as I've gotten older is dispelling the more-or-less libertarian myth of bootstrap success. I worked hard in high school, attended a competitive undergrad school, and currently have a well-paying job...it's extremely easy for me to reduce this to some frontier narrative of drive and gumption fueling my dreams. But that's not the truth. My race, gender, and middle class upbringing made this possible in ways that most people in a similar situation don't realize.

Mr. van der Poel concluded with the acknowledgement that his current perspective isn't a popular one.

Perhaps the place to start in popularizing Mr. van der Poel's current perspective is recognizing that the opinions of a few, even when amplified through the power of real estate, publishing or the internet, do not represent the opinions of all, or even most. It is to acknowledge that there is success as well as failure, good in addition to bad, in Bloomfield, just as there is in every other school system and town. It is to admit that the prevalence of negativity which surrounds the schools is explicitly tied to race, and that wealth and housing are strands which both created and reinforce those stereotypes. It is to realize that the voices of decency and fairness that continue to echo from the 1970's were defeated by blockbusting and racial steering. Yet we can still hear those voices today in the stories of those who come from Bloomfield now. If we are to continue their work, it will require even more of the dedication, hard work, and involvement that those who came before us showed so many years ago.

## Conclusion

After I graduated from Bloomfield High School in 2003, I attended Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. I was so eager to get out of Bloomfield that I moved into my dorm the first day it opened. I was one of four residents in the entire dorm that first weekend. As other students began to trickle in, I did my best to make friends. It was not until a friend of mine named Danielle moved into the dorm that it began to feel like home. Danielle and I attended Bloomfield High School together, and had decided to go to college together as well. For the first couple of months of the semester, we were inseparable as we supported each other in getting acclimated to Richmond and college life.

As time went on and we became more comfortable, we leaned on each other less and began to branch out into the various social scenes of the dorm and the college. Soon my circle of friends grew. I became best friends with a student from Puerto Rico named Jose, and we would often annoy my roommate with our late-night sessions of videogames. I met another student named Will, a self-described redneck who proudly described his hometown of Danville, Virginia as the last capital of the Confederacy. We played more than one hundred games of chess together, with him maintaining a fair lead in the wins column. There was the resident odd couple of our floor, a Turkish pothead named Kareem and his straight-laced Indian roommate we called Vee, two students who had nothing at all in common besides their shared desire to be doctors someday. Jay was a student from South Korea, and we could find him wandering the halls of the dorm at all times of night in his oversized blue sweatshirt and pajama pants. All the corners of the globe seemed to be represented by the four hundred students in my dorm. It was my first real

experience with diversity, and the moment I realized that I missed out on this in my high school experience.

Today, Bloomfield High School has changed in some ways. After my interview with Principal Galloway, I wandered the halls of the building I'd spent four years of my life in. The funds for renovations which had finally been approved had been put to good use. The library was redesigned into a modern media technology center. Old chemistry classrooms had been refurbished and now held students studying English and history. The former music room was converted into the new main office, across from the new front entrance for the school which had formerly been the side entrance. The building sparkled with new white linoleum floors, a major improvement over the ratty grey and blue carpet which covered the floors during my time there. Bloomfield High School looked like a new building. What hadn't changed was the student body. When the bell rang, I was surrounded by a sea of brown faces. They laughed, flirted and argued with each other, just as high school students everywhere do. But their social experiences were limited largely to other students who looked and sounded like them. I looked at them and saw myself as a teenager, a young man who was completely unaware of the vast range of experiences that existed for people who were a different race, came from a different culture or spoke a different language.

I visited a former teacher of mine, Mr. Joshua Smith. He had me address two of his classes about the realities of life after high school and the research I was conducting. The first class was his Advanced Placement English class, the second an academic level junior English class. In neither class was there a white student. Rather than lamenting the racial isolation those classes embodied, I used it as a jumping off point to discuss my research. "Why do you think it is that the only white person in this room is the teacher?" I asked both classes. Between them, the

two classes hit on many of the elements which contributed to their racial isolation: housing, school choice, and the age of minority residents versus white residents. The students were assembling the pieces of a larger puzzle they hadn't been able to put together yet. They didn't have to be told about their segregation though. It was their lived experience. As they simultaneously navigated the difficulties of school and puberty, these students were also burdened with the weight of a hundred years of racial decisions in housing, schooling and the perceptions of outsiders, all bearing down on them. They were aware of this, but only partially.

The goal of this paper is to increase that awareness, to put together the pieces those students assembled in my time with them. The story of Bloomfield and its schools stretches back decades, to the racialization of real estate by NAREB, through blockbusting and the valiant attempts of the town's residents to combat it, white flight from the increasingly black public schools and the current degradation the school suffers in the court of public opinion. The link between race and class, established in years long gone by, persists and results in the concentration of poor black children in the Bloomfield public schools.

As I have conducted the research necessary to determine how Bloomfield came to be the town it is today, I find that I am left with one question: So what? Why should this matter to anyone outside of Bloomfield, or even inside the town? School days become school years, students graduate and either succeed or fail. It is the tale of American meritocracy, where the best and brightest make it and the rest are allocated into their particular peg in the wheel. What does it matter that this process has a racial flavor in Bloomfield?

It matters because the status of Bloomfield and its schools is not a coincidence or the result of inertia. Specific policies in housing, from exclusionary real estate ideology through



blockbusting, helped to turn Bloomfield into a predominately black suburb. The reactions of white residents who fled or pulled their children out of the public schools accelerated the process. The link between race and property values drained the town of resources. Popular opinions about the negative connection between race and educational achievement locked the schools into a downward spiral, as high achieving students left the district. Bloomfield became a black suburb, and an essentially all black and poor school system, as a result of decisions and policies.

Those decisions and policies must be understood and identified if they are to be combated. Bloomfield presents a serious challenge to the tidy understanding of race and class in America today. The struggle against segregation is often understood in terms of cities versus suburbs, black versus white, the poor versus the rich. Such dichotomies are comforting due to their simplicity, but they do not accurately describe the scourge of segregation that exists in so many towns across America today. In Bloomfield, the conditions that race and class imposed on residents cannot be neatly separated. The two have been intertwined together over decades of decisions, actions and policy. Added into this knot is education, the great equalizer, the force which is supposed to ensure equality of opportunity. In reality, education is just as racialized as property, and individuals respond to those racial overtones. An entire century of racial real estate practices, divestment in the schools and slander in the popular imagination of its residents has put up barriers that the town may never overcome without help. The connection between race and economics has determined how we perceive the schools, but that determination has led us to ignore all the good that has been occurring in the schools. Decisions were made that have concentrated race and poverty inside the walls of the high school, and it will take new decisions to undo the damage that has been done. It will require an investment from individuals near and

far, to take a stand against racial and economic isolation as the town's residents of the 1970's did. It will require more former students to speak out about their experience in the high school, good and bad. There must be voices to counteract the prevailing narrative about the town's schools. It will take people to divorce the link between race, class, and housing, and to choose to make Bloomfield their home and the schools their own. This is the thread that runs through Bloomfield's history, one of action and choice. New results will require new choices.

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