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Spring 2017

### Spanish-Speaking Families and School Choice

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# Spanish-Speaking Families and School Choice

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Educational Studies Senior Research Project

Trinity College-Hartford, CT

December 2016

School choice is one of the more current education reform movements in the United States, which often uses a market based approach to either provide racial integration or consumer-style choices in public education in an effort to improve school quality, sometimes both. In Connecticut, school choice has been implemented primarily due to the Sheff Vs. O'Neill lawsuit, which requires the State to racially integrate public schools. In 1996, the court ruled that the de-facto racial segregation was unconstitutional and the state was obligated to remedy it ([Sheff Movement](#)). The state had options when it came to integration, but chose to implement voluntary programs through the investment and development of an extensive system of inter-district magnet schools. Connecticut has seen a substantial increase in interdistrict magnet schools with 45 in operation all over the state which boast special themes like: Environmental Science, Montessori, and Arts. ([CT Mirror 2015](#)). In addition, the state expanded investment in an existing interdistrict student transfer program, Open Choice, which allowed Hartford students to attend suburban district schools.

The Greater Hartford region has seen the largest number of racially integrated magnet schools with some located in Hartford, and others located in surrounding suburban towns like Bloomfield and Avon. After 20 years and an investment of 3 billion dollars 41% of Hartford students are learning in “reduced [racial] isolation settings” ([The Hartford Courant 2016](#)). While this is a significant improvement from the conditions prior to the

1996 court decision, over half of Hartford students continue to receive educations in hyper-segregated district schools. Although substantial progress has been made in the effort to create integrated schools, Hartford and other cities in the state are left with a broken promise since the state has halted new investments in these types of schools due to budget constraints ([The Hartford Courant 2016](#)).

While this system of integration is intended to create educational equity for all students, researchers have identified that English Language Learner (ELL) or Emergent Bilingual students are one demographic group which has a low participation rate in the area magnet schools and the Open Choice program([Cotto and Feder 2014](#)). In an effort to address this problem of equity in school choice, given the large Hispanic and Latino population in Hartford, I conducted qualitative, interview-based research to understand how Spanish-speaking families navigate school choice. My research asked: How do Spanish-speaking families perceive school choice, and how does the type of support they receive influence their school decisions?

Overall, this interview-based study identified three major patterns among Spanish-speaking participants. First, most parents felt a sense of agency, regardless of the types of schools their children attend, due to the multi-tiered school choice system in Hartford. But limitations of school choice knowledge within these parents' social networks create social barriers that constrain awareness of the full range of choices available to them. Second, most parents received formal support from individual schools during the application and enrollment process, but this support came late, after they had already made their choice. Conversely, most parents who received early formal support during the school choice process were more aware of a wider range of options, and often sent their children to

higher opportunity magnet or suburban Open Choice schools. Third, most parents were unlikely to move their children from their current schools unless they had a strong negative experience. Therefore, engaging them in the early school years is important for encouraging greater participation in the interdistrict school choice system.

### **Winning the Lottery:**

The name, *school choice*, can be deceiving since it gives the impression that all parents have the power to make consumer-like decisions and access the school that best suits their educational values and their children's needs. In reality, Hartford families must engage in a confusing and complicated, multi-tiered lottery process due to a limited number of seats in these racially and ethnically diverse schools. For Hartford families, the most desirable choice programs are magnet schools and Open Choice suburban transfers, operated by RSCO, which are scarce. In addition, there is a secondary tier in the school choice system, where city families may apply to attend a school outside of their neighborhood, but usually without special themes, extra resources, or free transportation. For Hartford families who do not secure a seat in their school of choice, or for those who do not participate in the lottery process, their child will be placed in whichever Hartford Public School has the space to accommodate them ([Cotto and Feder 2014](#)). This process of investigating school options, visiting schools to collect information about the programs, and submitting an online application can be time consuming and confusing, creating a burden for families ([Hartford Courant 2015](#)). In addition, parents must take on the burden of researching and applying to schools, while considering transportation needs for both their children and parents. In a system that even the current Mayor of Hartford found

difficult to navigate for his own children, not all parents have access to the same resources to engage with and access this system ([Hartford Courant 2015](#)).

The school choice system in Hartford is complicated and at the same time, the stakes are high. A large body of research has found that there are academic benefits to children learning in racially and socio-economically diverse schools ([Reid and Kagan 2015](#)). Magnet and Open Choice schools are considered to be “High opportunity” due to the socioeconomic makeup of the school population. Conversely, Hartford district schools are considered to be “Low opportunity” since they are often hyper-segregated by race and serve a disproportionate number of low-income students and students living in poverty. Area magnet schools tend to be racially diverse while district schools are more likely to be hyper-segregated with over 90% of the population identifying as Black or Latino([CT Mirror 2016](#)). Often researchers and policymakers use “Free & Reduced price lunch” numbers to analyze the economic makeup of a student population within a school. This method is no longer an accurate measure for Hartford schools due to Hartford schools providing free lunch to all students regardless of income ([Hartford Courant 2016](#)) However, historically Hartford public district schools serve a high percentage of low-income students compared to interdistrict magnet schools and suburban Open Choice schools which on average, serve a more economically advantaged demographic of students ([Quick 2016](#)).

### **Existing Literature:**

Latino families have been found to have many of the same motivations other racial and ethnic groups when it comes to their perceptions and motivations for choosing schools for their children (Mavrogordato and Stein). Although Latino families are just as motivated

to access high quality school options for their children, there are unique barriers they face in these free-market school choice systems. Recent research has been conducted in Indianapolis, Indiana to understand the motivations of Latino and non-Latino parents to enroll their children in Charter schools. While Madeline Mavrogordato and Marc Stein concluded that while Latino parents hold similar values in what they consider a good school and undergo a multi-stage process of navigating the school choice system, there are some important differences. Latino parents relied more heavily on word of mouth information when navigating school option compared to non-Latinos (Mavrogordato and Stein 1057). This constrains their understanding of the full array of school options for their children. My research had similar findings in that Spanish-speaking parents relied heavily on information friends, family, neighbors and coworkers, but this research went further to identify how some parents were able to overcome this social barrier through supports around the school choice system.

Mavrogordato and Stein also found that Latino families, relied on visits to the schools themselves to continue their multi-stage process in learning about the school offerings. The presence of Spanish-speaking bilingual staff provided an important connection for families as they visited schools and collected more information about their options (Mavrogordato and Stein 1058). My research found that Spanish-speaking families were able to get support from bilingual staff at both district and magnet schools, however, access was much easier at district schools with a large population of Spanish-speaking students and staff.

Statistical research on Hartford school choice shows that top-tier lottery participants are socioeconomically advantaged compared to non participants, however my

research focused more broadly on the school choice system, including the HPS district lottery. My research also looks specifically at Spanish-speaking families using the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews. Similar to findings by Mavrogordato and Stein, Trinity College researchers Jack Dougherty, Diane Zannoni et. al. found that families who apply to the top-tier RSCO lottery are more likely to have privileged socioeconomic characteristics compared to those who do not apply (Dougherty and Zannoni et al. 1).

Research conducted by Dougherty and Zannoni on the Hartford regional school choice system also identified that English as a Second Language, or ESL students as underrepresented in the top-tier choice schools such as magnet, charter, technical, and suburban schools (Dougherty and Zannoni et al., 22). This research team looked at what characteristics make families more likely to be RSCO lottery “choosers”, but beginning in 2008 HPS transitioned to an all choice system with its own lottery (Dougherty and Zannoni et al 4), and this multi-tiered system has received little attention in current literature. Dougherty et al.’s research also looked at who was “choosing” magnet schools, but my research demonstrates the way Spanish-speaking parents navigated the system and what pathways encouraged participation in the higher opportunity, racially integrated school choice process.

Policy researchers Haynes, Phillips, and Goldring who studied immigrant populations in the urban, southern city of Nashville, TN. In their study of how Latino families interact with a magnet school system designed to racially integrate schools, they found that there were differences in the income levels and professions of the families who opted into the system compared to those who did not. Among Latino parents, these

researchers found that those who chose to participate in this system, tended to be “solidly middle income” and “either second-generation immigrants or are married to one” (758).

Compared to non-Latinos, Latinos who opted into the system tended to have higher levels of education even though their income levels were similar to non-Latinos. The Haynes, Phillips, and Goldring attribute this difference to the economic choices immigrants must make when they come to this country and take lower level jobs compared to their level of education in their home country (Haynes et al. pp). While the Trinity College researchers did not explore the reasons for the differences between Hispanic families in the city of Hartford compared to the suburbs, the demographics characteristics are likely similar as many families choose to leave the capital city as their economic conditions improve. Overall, the existing literature on Hispanic or Latino “choosers” demonstrates that they are more likely to be advantaged by multiple markers of socioeconomic characteristics of income, education, and generational status. My research accepts this assumption and moves beyond by investigating how these families are able to overcome barriers around the system through different types of support.

### **Research Design:**

This research used qualitative method open-ended interviews. I recruited and conducted nine semi-structured interviews with my target demographic: Spanish-speaking parents, of school age children, who live in Hartford. The purpose of sampling this specific group was to gain insights into the barriers that inhibit barriers that inhibit Spanish-speaking parents from accessing the full array of school choices in the Hartford region, and the specific supports that help some Spanish-speaking families participate in school choice.



Through accessing this group of parents, I intended to target families who are most likely recent first generation migrants to the continental United States, since second generation Latino parents who went to school in the United States are more likely to participate in school choice, and are most likely English-speakers, even if Spanish was their first language.

Originally, this research intended to utilize one recruitment site, The Center for Latino Progress (CLP), due to an existing working relationship with this non-profit organization. However, when implementing the research I found that there were too few potential participants who were in my target group. When I reconnected with this organization, I found that the classes offered were different than in my initial planning phase of the project. These changes meant that there were fewer people available through this organization that would meet my target population. In order to recruit 5-10 interviewees, I made contact with an additional organization which serve my target population: The Park Street branch of the Hartford Public Library.

The Center for Latino Progress provides adult ESL classes and jobs training to people from predominantly Latin American and Caribbean countries ([Center for Latino Progress](#)). The Park Street library branch is located right in the heart of the predominately Latino and Caribbean neighborhood, which is also one of the poorest neighborhoods in the state. This branch is also next to the Sanchez School, a Hartford Public school with 86% of the student body identifying as Hispanic, and 84% of the student body is eligible for free and reduced price lunch. In addition, among the Sanchez school student population, 36% are documented as English Language Learners ([CT Dept of Education 2016](#)), meaning it

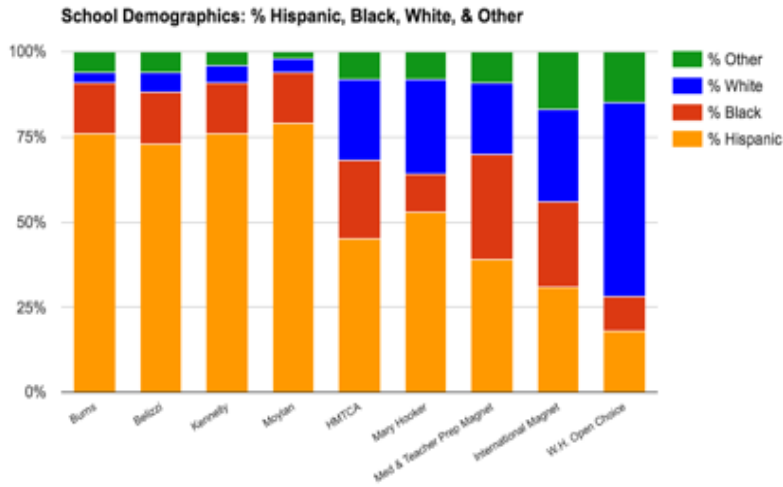
likely serves a large population of migrant families, many of whom do not speak English and are living in conditions of poverty.

Both of these sites served people who fit my target research group, which allowed me to connect with Spanish-speaking parents. While each of these sites served people from low-income communities, which is often associated with it is also important to acknowledge that individuals who pursue these types of programs and services may be more motivated than average, particularly for those attending classes to improve their economic standing, like at the Center for Latino Progress. As a result, there is a self-selection bias within my research since it may not be representative of these communities of parents as a whole. Despite this possible skewing of the data, the larger community of Spanish-speaking parents is difficult to connect with outside of these types of organizations for researchers who are not a member of these communities. These interviews should still provide useful data about what social and structural barriers exist in the school choice system for these families.

Recruitment of parents at these sites consisted of a flyer in Spanish and the help of bilingual staff at these sites to connect me with parents who fit my demographic group. I used a Spanish translator for these audio-recorded interviews, since I did not have sufficient language skills to conduct the interview in Spanish, and I did not expect my interview participants to speak English fluently enough to answer the questions I asked. I used an interview guide which is in both English and Spanish. Examples of interview questions were: How do you get information about schools? And, did you receive any help enrolling in or applying to schools? (See full interview guide in appendix).

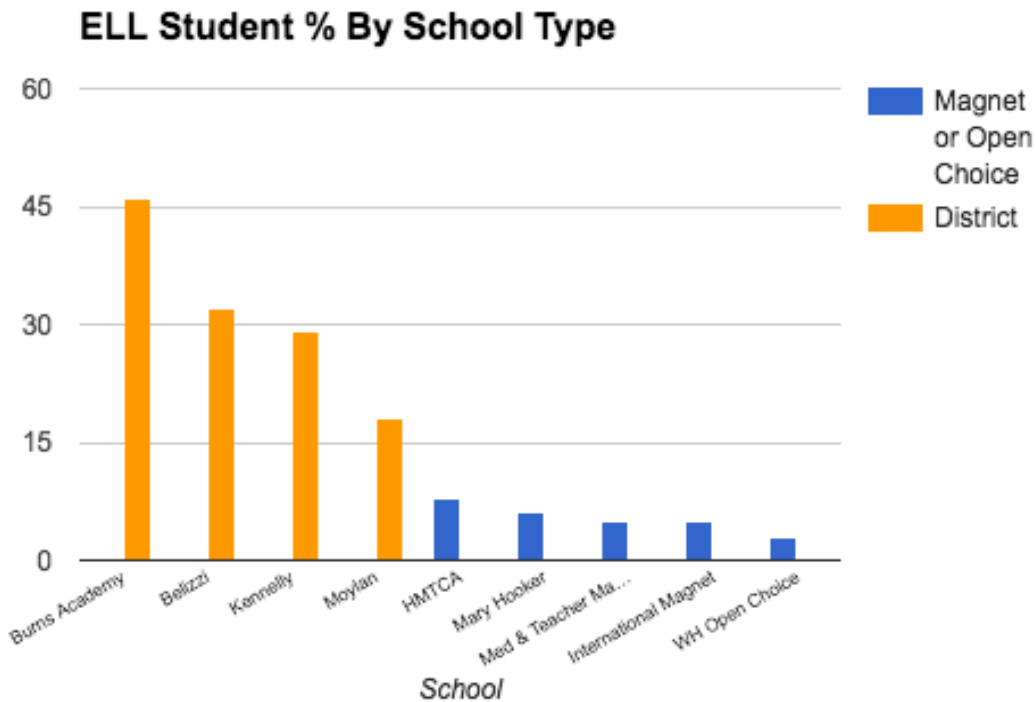
I conducted five interviews at the Park Street Library and four interviews at the Center for Latino Progress on Park Street in Hartford. As the primary investigator, I asked questions in English. A translator communicated my questions to the Spanish-speaking participants, and also translated their responses back into English. Four of the parents had children enrolled in Hartford Public Schools (HPS), district schools. Two of the parents had children enrolled in magnets schools, two of the parents had children enrolled in HPS district schools and Magnet or Open Choice schools. One of the parents had a child enrolled in a private, tuition based, Catholic school. For the purposes of comparing numbers and experiences of these parents, I have excluded the private school parent. This parent did provide useful insights into what challenges Spanish-speaking parents face with school choices that could be useful when making future policy recommendations.

| <b>Parent Participants by School Type</b> |   |
|---|---|
| HPS District School Parents               | 4 |
| Magnet School Parents                     | 2 |
| District & Magnet Parent                  | 1 |
| District & Open Choice Parent             | 1 |
| Total                                     | 8 |



*This figure shows that of the schools mentioned in parent interviews, the 4 district schools had a high proportion of students of color, while magnet schools and the Open Choice school were more racially integrated.*

*Source: Connecticut State Dept. of Education: School Profiles 2014-15*



*This figure shows that of the schools mentioned in parent interviews, HPS district schools served a disproportionate number of English Language Learner (ELL) students.*

*Source: Connecticut State Dept. of Education: School Profiles 2014-15*

**Research Ethics:**

The community of Spanish-speaking parents involved in this research is considered a vulnerable population due to the minimal level of English language fluency and the possibility that some participants could be undocumented. For this reason I submitted and received approval from the Trinity Internal Review Board (IRB). Precautions taken to reduce the risks to participants included: Avoiding using real names in field notes, using pseudonyms in my writing for individuals, instructing interviewees to avoid using real names in the recorded interview, and masking identifiable information in interview transcripts, as needed. Through these measures, the risk was minimized to individual participants.

**Agency with Limitations:**

The multi-tiered, school choice system in Hartford created a sense of agency among most of the Spanish-speaking parents, regarding the school placement of their children in HPS district schools, interdistrict magnet schools, and Open Choice suburban schools. But limitations in awareness in Spanish-speaking parents' social networks about school choices create social barriers which inhibit greater participation in the broader regional school choice system. Regardless of the type of school their children attend, most of the Spanish-speaking parents considered their child's placement something they chose. This appears to be the result of the HPS all choice system which allows parents to actively choose the district school their child can attend, which enabled them to avoid schools with the worst reputations.

Although many parents were aware that magnet schools existed, some felt limited to the nearby district schools even though there are also magnet schools nearby. Isabel, a mother of three girls who all attend the Burns Academy chose their school because the other nearby district school had a negative reputation. “Isabel shared her choice was in part, “because I heard the other school, Maria Sanchez, I heard from other parents that there were bad things happening there, so I chose Burns instead.” This parent knew which school she did not want her children in, but she also felt constrained to options in the immediate neighborhood based on information from her informal social network. “they told me I could choose whichever schools were nearby, and I chose Burns.” Despite this feeling of agency among parents, dueling school reputations between district schools and the perceptions of limitations from social networks limit some parents awareness of the full range of options.

Most of the parents relied primarily on informal networks to initially learn about school choice options, and few reported receiving or reading any official information to make the decision about which school to apply to. As a result, these parents trusted family and friends to decipher the complex layers of school choice in Hartford. For Maria, a parent whose two youngest children attend the HPS, Kennelly School she first learned about schools from co-workers. She shared, “When I worked, I would ask around, about where they would put their little kids...so I would just ask around.” Another parent, Antonia, had children enrolled in the Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy and The Environmental Science Academy at Mary Hooker, both HPS operated, racially integrated magnet schools. Like Maria, Antonia places a lot of trust in informal sources of information about school choices for her children. She received information about which schools are considered

better “...from neighbors mostly and from friends. They told me about them and that’s why I enrolled them.” Unlike Maria, Antonia received information from her social network about alternative school programs and was able to act on the information to apply and enroll her children in racially integrated, Hartford based magnet schools.

Much of the literature about Latinos and school choice find that generally, parents who participate in these programs are more likely to be higher income, and hold a higher level of education compared to parents who do not participate. The parents who did learn and apply to interdistrict choice programs may have greater abilities for navigating the system and may have access to social networks of more socioeconomically advantaged. Therefore, the evidence that some Latino parents are able to navigate the Hartford regional school choice system does not contradict the findings that many parents have limitations that make participation harder to access. Antonia is enrolled in an adult ESL class and making steps to improve her socioeconomic condition, which suggests she is motivated to take advantage of opportunities available to her and her family. While there is no evidence that Maria is less motivated, it is plausible she may not have the same level of personal and social resources available to her to make the same decisions.

Although one parent successfully navigated the complicated interdistrict school choice system without early formal support, most parents’ choices were often constrained by a lack of information about the options available, vague impressions, and misinformation. All but one parent interviewed was aware of magnet schools and of the seven who knew about them expressed that they thought magnet schools provided a “better education” and “more opportunities.” Parents who did not have children enrolled in these schools gave vague descriptions compared to the parents who did have children

enrolled. They believed that magnet schools offered “better programs,” though specifics about these programs could not be recalled by parents who lacked personal experience with these schools.

While parents overwhelmingly identified magnet schools as “better”, some had misinformation about requisite requirements for admittance to magnet schools. While there are no entrance requirements for enrollment in magnet schools, Camilla, a Burns Academy parent thought differently. When asked what she knew about magnet schools. Camilla responded, “First of all, they have to have good grades....Though I am not sure, I’m not sure too much...The children’s behavior has to be good.” While this was the only parent to express that participation in magnet school had restrictions based on the academic performance and behavior, this misconception may be held by more parents in the community who lack formal information about the programs. This suggests that despite seeing these schools as “better” some parents may not perceive these schools as for their children, if they are not high performing academically or if they have had any behavioral issues previously. This inaccurate perception may be steering parents away from pursuing a wider range of school choices.

Overall, the informal information available to these Spanish-speaking parents meant there were limitations in their awareness about the broader school choice system in Hartford. The information gathering process is an important first step in navigating the school system, and most parents relied on an informal network of information to make their school choice. For one parent, their informal information from a neighbor directed them towards high-opportunity magnet schools, but for the majority of parents, their



informal information was either neutral or directed them into low-opportunity, racially isolated district schools.

**Type of Support Matters:**

Most parents received late formal support at the school level with the application and enrollment process, but this support occurred once they had made a school choice based on informal information. Conversely, most Spanish-speaking parents who received early formal support during the school choice process were more aware of a wider range of options, and often sent their children to higher opportunity magnet or suburban Open Choice schools. For Burns parent, Isabel, she was very pleased with the support the staff at her daughter's' school gave her. She shared that “The teachers and the social workers at Burns helped me [enroll her daughter].” and that “from the very first time I tried to enroll my daughters into 1st grade, they attended me very well....The teachers talked to me about everything, and the following few days, they continued to treat me very well, and I just loved it.” This type of support parents were given at their district schools of choice was a common theme in the interviews. This theme highlights how district schools may be actively courting parents to apply specifically to their school in order to compete with other district schools and area magnet schools. This focus on recruitment may be leading parents to feel sought after, valued, and respected, and therefore less inclined to seek alternative schools choices.

When parents are not otherwise aware of the full range of school choices, formal support early in the choice process can make magnet schools more accessible. For Carmen, a parent of an International magnet school student, previous enrollment in the Head-Start

program led to her child's application to the program. When asked if she chose her child's school, she responded, "...the director of Headstart. She enrolled him, she did the application online. The applications for all the kids. She filled out the applications for multiple schools, not just for this one." Carmen shared that she did not know about magnet schools prior to the support she received in the application process. She shared that her son was accepted into a few different schools through the lottery, but decided on the International Magnet School for Global Citizenship in a nearby suburb. This recollection that the director took the time to submit school choice applications for all program participants, suggests that this person believed the magnet schools would offer better opportunities to students compared to the HPS district schools.

It is unlikely Carmen would have applied to the RSCO lottery without this support since she did not know about magnet school prior to the director filling out the application. The lottery application period closes in February every year, a full six months prior to start of the school year meaning it is plausible that parents are not yet be thinking about the full range of options available to them so early ([RSCO](#)). This evidence highlights how programs and formal supports outside of the official school choice system can play an important role in offering formal opportunities to families who may not otherwise have access to the information needed to make a fully informed decision. While Carmen would technically categorized as a "chooser" in quantitative research (Dougherty et al), she was the only parent out of nine who did not say she "chose" the school. Based on the broader conversation with Carmen where she shared that her son was offered a seat in a few different schools through this lottery application, and the fall-back option of sending him to

a district school, I would also categorize Carmen as a “chooser,” since she ultimately had a number of options to choose from.

School-based early formal support also provided more opportunities for one student to apply and enroll to the interdistrict Open Choice program. For Maria, who was both a HPS district school and Open Choice parent, information about the wider interdistrict school choice system and counseling on pathway options was provided by the school her daughter was previously enrolled in. At the time of the interview, Maria’s daughter attended a High School in the socioeconomically advantaged West Hartford suburb. Not only did the school provide access to the information, but “they helped her apply to the school that she wanted to go to.” Since during the interview, this parent expressed that she was satisfied enough with the HPS district school her younger children are enrolled in, it is unlikely she would have pursued the Open Choice program without the concerted effort on the part of the school to engage more families and students in the inter-district lottery process.

Overall, most of the Spanish-speaking parents were given formal support from their school of choice which allowed them to actively engage with the choice process at some level. But, two of the parents were provided high quality formal support early in the choice process which both informed them of more choices and provided support in the lottery application process. These examples highlight the important way in which formal support within and around the school system could potentially increase awareness and participation among parents who might otherwise not engage with the interdistrict choice system.

**Early Engagement:**

Engaging Spanish-speaking parents in the early years of their children's education is important to increasing magnet school and Open Choice participation since once established, parents are hesitant to move their children from their current schools without a strong negative experience. In addition, the largest number of available magnet seats in elementary schools are during the pre-k3 year and the kindergarten year for Open Choice schools ([Debs](#) 2015). If parents become aware and interested in magnet schools or the Open Choice program past these important entry year's, engagement in the broader school choice system becomes more limited and families will be less likely to secure these coveted seats in racially diverse schools.

Although most parents interviewed had heard of magnet schools and expressed that they offered better educational opportunities to students, those interviewed at the Park Street Library were satisfied enough with their current HPS district schools and did not wish to move their children. Camila shared her perception of magnet schools and said, "I have heard that they have a better education. There's more opportunity for kids to learn there." Despite this perception of better educational opportunities, when asked if she would be interested in applying to a magnet school, she responded, "the fact that they already established there and that they have already been there for a while, um I would much rather just keep them there...there is a lot of respect between the students...and the principals at the schools are good...and for them to be comfortable speaking their own language...because the school is bilingual, it's Spanish and English, so they don't speak just English." For Camila and other parents who have children attending HPS schools, there is a level of comfort in remaining in the environment their children are settled into and are able

to maintain their Spanish language. The positive experiences they have had and the opportunity to speak Spanish with the staff and between students created a positive climate for these families. It therefore becomes difficult to engage parents in the broader regional school choice system unless they have had negative experiences within their current schools.

Themed district schools are valued by some parents, but unlike magnet schools, these HPS schools tend to be racially isolated. Sofia, a parent of a child who attended the Asian Studies Academy at Belizzi was happy with the enrichment the school offered. When offered information about school choices after the interview, she responded, “my kids already like the schools they are in right now, they’re learning, they teach Chinese there and my kids, they want to learn that language.” Although this school offered a special theme that some parents valued, the school would be considered low-opportunity due to the high concentration of Black and Latino students ([Asian Studies Academy School Profile 2014-15](#)). To some parents, these themed schools may have looked similar to the inter-district magnet schools, but they are missing the important element of racial integration and equitable resources Sheff plaintiffs have been fighting for since they brought the lawsuit against the state in 1989 ([Sheff Movement](#)).

Parents who felt respected in their current school were unlikely to move their children without a strong negative push. When parents were asked to share an example of when they felt good or bad about the school their child attends, they often cited inclusion in the school and respectful communication from school staff. Magnet schools were perceived as “better,” in terms of academic opportunities, but most HPS and Magnet school parents

are content with their schools, therefore, do not have a strong impetus to move their children.

For one magnet school parent, personal experience led to dissatisfaction with a HPS district school and pushed her to apply to different magnet schools for both her school-aged children. Antonia had children enrolled in two different HPS run interdistrict magnet schools. She expressed discontent about the education her daughter was previously receiving at an HPS district school the prior year. In previous school years she became concerned because, “I noticed that my daughter was not advancing and did not care for the homework and they allowed her pass grades. I saw that she was very distracted in that school and I told them to give her tests and the results were that she did not need any help. But I knew she needed help. That’s what I didn’t like about the school, they made her an afterthought.” Like other parents who moved their children from an HPS district school, her negative experience functioned to push this parent to seek alternative school options for her children.

Overall, parents were satisfied with the climate within the schools in which their children were currently enrolled. This positive climate kept parents from pursuing alternative school choices, with the exception of parents who had personal negative experiences within a HPS district school. This reluctance to pursue the broader school choice system once students are established means that engaging Spanish-speaking families when their children are young is important for increasing participation on the RSCO school choice lottery. Early engagement is also important because of the key entrance years in preschool for magnet schools and kindergarten for Open Choice, suburban schools.

**Concluding thoughts:**

Most of these parents have had their children enrolled in public schools for many years, which makes it difficult to identify how much knowledge they had about school choices when their children were first eligible to apply to the RSCO lottery. It is plausible that although most parents cited an awareness of magnet schools during the interviews, they may not have been aware of these schools when their children were eligible to apply for pre-k 3 seats. More qualitative research could look at a larger sample of Spanish-speaking parents of children from birth to age three to document what types of knowledge and support are available at this critical time in the school choice process.

The school choice system was put into place in the Hartford region to provide equitable opportunities for all students regardless of their racial and ethnic background or home address. Despite this intention and a substantial investment into a voluntary integration plan through a lottery system, far too many Hartford students have been left out. This research found that Spanish-speaking families feel a strong sense of agency in the tiered school choice system consisting of both an interdistrict lottery and HPS district lottery. Despite this sense of agency, many of these parents had a constrained awareness of the full range of school options available. Parents who encountered high quality, formal support in the school choice process had more awareness and greater access to higher opportunity magnet and suburban schools. Finally, most parents were satisfied in their schools regardless of school type, and disinterested in learning about what other school choices were available, even if these same parents believed magnet schools were "better." These findings suggest that offering high-quality support to Spanish-speaking parents

when their children are eligible to apply for a pre-k 3 spot in magnet schools or a kindergarten seat in suburban Open Choice schools, could make this complicated system more accessible to them, and potentially address the issue of ESL students' underrepresentation in high-opportunity schools.

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Appendix:

### **Interview Guide:**

My name is Michelle Herbert and I am a student at Trinity College. I am interviewing parents of school age children to understand their experiences with the school system in and around Hartford. This interview is voluntary and you can stop at any time. It will take approximately 20 minutes, and you will receive \$10 for your time. I would like permission to record our interview. I will not use your name in this anonymous interview. When you are speaking, please do not use people’s real names. Instead, say things like “my 10-year-old child” or “my sister” or “my neighbor.” Since you will decide what information you will share with me, there is no more risk of this interview than a normal conversation. May I begin recording our interview?

Hola! Mi nombre es Michelle Herbert y soy estudiante en Trinity College. Estoy entrevistando a padres de niños en la escuela para entender sus experiencias con el sistema educativo en toda la ciudad de Hartford. Esta entrevista es voluntaria y usted puede parar cuando desee. La entrevista durara aproximadamente 20 minutos y usted recibirá una tarjeta de regalo de 10 dólares por su tiempo. Me gustaría pedirle permiso para grabar nuestra entrevista. No utilizare su nombre en esta entrevista por lo tanto será anónima. Mientras usted esta hablando sobre su experiencia, por favor no utilice nombres reales. Pero, puede referirse a las personas de su experiencia como “mi niño de 10 años” o “mi Hermana” o “mi vecino”. Es usted quien decide el tipo de información que está compartiendo conmigo, por lo tanto, no pasa de ser una conversación habitual.

Podría empezar a grabar?

**Let’s talk about your children, and just a reminder, instead of saying their names, please use their ages to talk about your kids.**

**Hablemos acerca de sus hijos, tenga en cuenta que en vez de decir sus nombres, por favor use sus edades cuando hable acerca de sus niños.**

- 1) How many children do you have?
- 2) What are their ages?
- 3) Where do they attend school?

- 1) ¿Cuántos hijos tiene?
- 2) ¿Cuáles son las edades de sus hijos?
- 3) ¿En qué escuela estudian?

**Now I would like to ask you some questions about the process of enrolling your child in school.**

**Ahora, me gustaría hacerle algunas preguntas acerca del proceso de matriculación de su niño en la escuela?**

- 4) How do you get information about schools?

*Follow-up prompts: Do you get information from friends, family, internet...*

- 4) Como consiguió información acerca de las escuelas en Hartford?

*Seguimiento: ¿Consiguió esta información por amigos, familiares, Internet, periódico, televisión o cualquier otra fuente de información?*

- 5) Did/does your child attend preschool?

*Follow-up: Where? How did you learn about this program?*

- 5) Asistió o asiste su hijo a la escuela de educación inicial?

*seguimiento: Donde? Como se entero de este programa de educación inicial?*

6) Tell me about the school your child is enrolled in.

*Follow-up: How do you feel about your child's school?*

6) *Me puede decir un poco mas acerca de la escuela a donde asiste su niño.*

*seguimiento: Como se siente usted con la educación de la escuela de su niño?*

7) Do you feel like you chose your child's school or were they assigned to it?

*Follow up: Can you tell me more about that?*

7) *Sintió usted que pudo escoger la escuela de su niño o sintió que su niño ya estaba asignado a una escuela determinada?*

*seguimiento: Podría explicarme un poco más acerca de eso?*

8) Did you receive any help enrolling in or applying to schools?

*Follow-up: Tell me more about... ?*

8) *Recibió usted alguna ayuda matriculando o aplicando a las escuelas?*

*seguimiento: Me podría decir un poco más acerca de este proceso?*

9) Have you ever heard about magnet schools?

*Follow-up: If so, tell me what you know.*

9) *Ha escuchado usted acerca de las escuelas magnet?*

*seguimiento: Si es así, me podría decir lo que sabe usted acerca de estas escuelas?*

10) Have you ever heard about the Open Choice Program?

*Follow-up: If so, tell me what you know.*

10) *Ha escuchado usted acerca de los programas Open Choice?*

*Extra: Si su respuesta es si, me podría decir lo que sabe usted acerca de este programa?*

11) What do you like about your child's school? (Or don't like, but parents responses have been mostly positive about the current schools their children are enrolled in)

*\*Translated orally*

12) Tell me about a time when you felt good or bad about your child's school.

*\*Translated orally*

13) What do you look for when choosing a school?

*\*Translated orally*

14) What do you think makes a good school?

*\*Translated orally*

**I am almost done and just have a few last questions.  
Ya casi terminamos, solo faltan un par de preguntas.**

15) What language do you speak at home?

15) Que idioma se habla en casa?

16) Do you have anything else you would like to share with me or any questions for me?

16) Tiene algún otro comentario que quiera compartir conmigo o tiene alguna pregunta para mi?

**Thank you so much for your time!**

**Muchas gracias por su tiempo!**