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Connecticut Pre-K Policy, Parental Choice, and the Trinity College Community Child Center

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Trinity College -- Hartford, CT
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Abstract

Traditional public schools in Connecticut have been pushed out by newer options since the landmark *Sheff vs. O'Neill* decision, which called for the development of magnet schools. The influx of magnet schools to Connecticut has caused traditional preschools like the Trinity College Community Child Center (TC4) to experience more competition and lose potential enrollees and revenue. For this project, I sought to discover how the growth of magnet pre-k programs has influenced how families choose schools for their 3-to-5-year-old children. I analyzed data from the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, the Connecticut State Department of Education and conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with current and former TC4 parents to investigate how they choose pre-k programs for their children and understand their preschool options. Parents generally expressed that they would send their children to a traditional public school if it was more convenient, but others saw those programs as under-resourced and/or underperforming. Overall, parents could identify issues within the magnet system but still opted for magnet schools in order to do what they thought was best for their children's future. The results show that parents are generally more pragmatic than idealistic when it comes to choosing schools for their children. Even with education conceived as a public good that should be equally accessible to all, parents participate within perceived unequal schooling options if it is best for their children. The school choice framework thus limits education's impact on social inequality.

I: Introduction

The landmark U.S. Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) established that racially segregated public schools were inherently unequal even if they were otherwise equal in quality (347 U.S. 483). The second iteration of this case, known today as *Brown II* (1955), ordered that public schools across the country desegregate “with all deliberate speed”, a phrase widely criticized for being too ambiguous and vague (349 U.S. 483). Over the next many years, America struggled to integrate its public schools as racial tensions and white flight caused much upheaval across the country.

In the decades that followed, Connecticut was still struggling to integrate their schools and provide equal conditions and resources to all students. Even though it was 20 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, “the Hartford Public Schools population consisted of 91% percent minority students, surrounded by suburban districts composed of 88 percent white students” (Dougherty, Wanzer and Ramsay). Parents and students alike were growing frustrated with the state as there were clear discrepancies among schools serving students of color and white students. Therefore, in 1989, eighteen Hartford families filed a suit against the state arguing that their constitutional rights to an education and equal protection under the law were being violated by this lack of diversity (NAACP). In the landmark *Sheff v. O’Neill* (1996) lawsuit, the Supreme Court of Connecticut ruled that the state indeed had an obligation to provide adequate educational opportunities and remedy the unequal circumstances currently facing Connecticut schools (238. Conn. 1). Over the next few years, the state passed various laws, policies and goals focused on addressing the racial and social segregation within schools. One particularly

significant outcome of this case was the development of more interdistrict magnet schools and the Project Choice city-suburb program. Both of these programs sought to expand magnet school programs within the state and had specific enrollment goals. As part of their integration efforts, Connecticut decided to rapidly increase and invest in magnet school programs across the state as the best way to substantially integrate students from urban and suburban areas.

The Trinity College Community Child Center (TC4) is a traditional, full-day child care facility located on the Trinity College campus in Hartford, Connecticut . Established in 1985, its mission is to “serve the children and families of the surrounding Hartford community and the Trinity College by providing high quality education in a safe and nurturing environment that celebrates the diversity of the families [they] serve” (About). TC4 offers child care services for infant, toddler and preschool aged children 5 days a week for an affordable price. After the influx of magnet schools to Connecticut, traditional childcare programs like TC4 experienced more enrollment competition. TC4 Enrollment Data demonstrates that from 2009 to 2019, student enrollment was nearly stagnant, and only fluctuated between roughly 60 to 70 children. To start integration with young children, magnet schools began to offer more preschool programs to attract children from cities and suburbs with no tuition fees for parents. Now with new and free magnet preschools available, families across the state were leaving their neighborhood schools and moving into these other options.

As a student employee who has been working at TC4 throughout my undergraduate career, I have been particularly interested in the ways in which the center has been affected by the increase in magnet pre-k programs. To better understand the impact that magnet schools had on traditional preschool options like TC4, I question: *How has the growth of pre-k magnet*

schools affected the Trinity College Child Care Center and similar institutions? How have these policies impacted the decisions current and former parents of TC4 make when choosing who will care for their 3-to-5 year-old children?

Through a thematic analysis of state pre-k policies and the growth of magnet programs post-Sheff v. O’Neill and 10 interviews with currently and previously enrolled TC4 parents, I discovered that parents view the quality, cost and location of a school as the most important factors they consider when deciding where to send their child for preschool. Moreover, even though magnet schools were introduced as an alternative school option, the majority of parents viewed magnet schools as the only option for their child if they are going to receive a high quality education. Overall, parents can be defined as homo economicus; that is, that regardless of the school or the amenities it may offer, parents are more pragmatic than idealistic and therefore ultimately decided to send their children where it is most convenient for their family dynamic. Even when parents could identify issues within the system they were operating in (i.e. the Connecticut magnet school system), they were still willing to participate in it if it maximized their children’s educational opportunities.

II: Literature Review

Sheff v. O’Neill

The historic case of *Sheff v. O'Neill (1996)* agreed that Connecticut had an urgent duty to provide adequate and equal educational opportunities to all of its students. To achieve this, Connecticut eventually settled on significant increases in funding for magnet school expansion and set forth specific integration goals. Similar to the paths taken by states like New Jersey, Maryland and North Carolina, Connecticut implemented a school finance program as a way of improving racial integration and student achievement (Ryan and Saunders). Though promising, it was still unclear as to how successful a monetary remedy could be in reaching these goals. The initial 1996 decision recognized that the state was not meeting its obligation to its students, but it did not specifically lay out a solution to the issue (Dougherty, Wanzer and Ramsay). The only tangible efforts to address the case was in 1997 when the legislature passed “An Act Enhancing Educational Choices and Opportunities”, which allocated money to a statewide interdistrict magnet school program and encouraged voluntary participation in the program (Connecticut General Assembly). After two years with no real efforts on behalf of the state to address school integration, the plaintiffs continued to file motions demanding a remedy. It was not until 2003 that a new legal settlement was negotiated and agreed upon between the two parties. Known today as *Sheff I (2003)*, the four-year remedy was aimed at increasing the number of interdistrict magnet schools and enrolling 30% of Hartford minority students in reduced-isolation settings by 2007 (Dougherty, Wanzer and Ramsay). The indication of clearly stated goals gave hope to many families who had been demanding action from the state for decades. However, even this newly negotiated version of the *Sheff* settlement would ultimately come to fail. Logistical challenges and policy flaws limited the effectiveness of the plan and once again, the *Sheff* plaintiffs were back in court negotiating a new settlement proposal (Dougherty,

Wanzer and Ramsay). After months of litigation and negotiation, both parties finally agreed on a revised settlement. Now with *Sheff II (2008)*, the settlement contained similar provisions discussed in the *Sheff I* provision, as well as a more robust, long-term plan to address the management of desegregation efforts (Dougherty, Wanzer and Ramsay). After years of negotiations and advocacy, there was finally some semblance of a goal to integrate Connecticut schools. Today, Connecticut and other states continue to work on fully integrating U.S schools.

Utilizing transcripts from focus groups of participants of the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC) program, the Open Choice initiative that emerged from *Sheff v. O'Neill*, one study was able to hear the perspectives of students, parents and educators on their experiences with the program. When asked what they disliked about it, students expressed feeling racial tension and bias within the classroom (Holmes and Clark). One student said that teachers at his magnet school, “do not want to be challenged. They can say anything they want, even sometimes racist remarks, but you cannot say anything back” (Holmes and Clarke). Similarly, parents also spoke about tensions in terms of black and white. They expressed instances of cultural clashes and stereotyping, and recommended that teachers partake in trainings that help them work with Choice students (Holmes and Clarke). However, educators avoided discussing race and viewed the program in a more positive light (Holmes and Clarke). Some even expressed dissatisfaction with Choice parents, claiming that they were not involved enough. As indicated above, one’s positionality within the program strongly influenced how they experienced it.

Parental Decision-Making

Parents consider a myriad of factors when deciding where to send their children to school. The importance of certain considerations may differ among parents depending on their demographics, such as their race and socio-economic status. An ethnographic study suggests that the child-rearing decisions and practices of parents are most influenced by their social class (Lareau). In particular, it suggests that working-class and poor families practice the *accomplishment of natural growth* while middle-class families engage in *concerted cultivation* (Lareau). Accomplishment of natural growth refers to a more hands-off and directive approach to childrearing whereas concerted cultivation consists of more involved parenting and a host of extracurricular activities (Lareau). Children raised in middle-class households developed a sense of advantage and entitlement not developed by working-class and poor children.

The area in which the Trinity College Community Child Center is located in Hartford, Connecticut is heavily populated by the Hispanic and Latinx community. Specifically, it is 44.3% Hispanic or Latino, 35.3% Black or African American, and 14.8% White (Data USA). A study conducted on Latino parent's engagement with school choice initiatives, specifically magnet schools, found that their participation in magnet schools varies greatly based on factors such as their educational background, socio-economic status, and social networks (Haynes, Phillips and Goldring). It also found that Latino parents value high educational attainment and viewed magnet schools as the best way to achieve it (Haynes, Phillips and Goldring).

Moreover, a study conducted by a Trinity alum nearly a decade ago looks into the various motivations parents had for participating in the magnet school system post-*Sheff*. After conducting various interviews with parents in different school zones about their interests in magnet programs, those that decided to enroll their children in a magnet school noted the schools

educational opportunities and reputation (Moore). Similarly, it was not that parents were opposed to their traditional, neighborhood school, but if given the chance to attend a magnet, they would do so. One parent interviewed stated that, “Naylor is a good school. But if you can get your child into a magnet school as opposed to Naylor then...” (Moore). Clearly, while this parent has no particular interest in a magnet school, they would not mind participating in one because of its perceived superiority over traditional, neighborhood schools.

The various literature on the impact of the *Sheff v. O’Neill* case as well as parental-decision making processes is key to highlight when attempting to understand the influence that magnet school policies have on parents' choice in schools for their preschool-aged children. Overall, the literature demonstrates that the *Sheff v. O’Neill* case was a convoluted process that impacted all involved differently. It also is helpful in explaining the various reasons why parents make certain schooling decisions.

III: Methodology

There were two main sources of data collection : document analysis and parent interviews.

Document Analysis

The qualitative data discovered in this study was first collected through research conducted to find major state funding laws and related policies that have directly or indirectly impacted the funding received by the Trinity College Community Child Center. This research

included analyzing legislation found on the cga.ct.gov site as well as recounting reliable news media, articles and other scholarly sources surrounding education policy in Connecticut. I also discussed with a director at the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood and a chief officer at the Connecticut State Department of Education to assist in the fact-finding process that was needed to accurately depict this information.

Parent Interviews

For the second half of my research, data was collected from 10 interviews with parents who have at least one 3-to-5 year old child who either now attend a pre-k magnet program or have applied to attend one. Most parents were formerly enrolled at the Trinity College Child Care Center and some currently had their children enrolled. All currently enrolled parents who were interviewed had applied to attend a magnet school for the 2019-2020 school year but were not accepted into a program. In interviewing both formerly enrolled parents and currently enrolled parents who applied but did not receive acceptance to a magnet program, I was best able to evaluate what factors attracted parents to these programs. It is important to note that because of my identity as a Trinity College student who works at TC4, my relationship prior to the interviews varied with each participant. Some parents were either part of the Trinity College faculty or staff and therefore knew me in some capacity before our interview. Those parents who were not part of the Trinity College community may not have known who I was prior to our interview. How well a parent knew me personally may have impacted how much they opened up and shared with me during our interview. My community partner, the Trinity College

Community Child Center, emailed individual parents who represented our target groups to solicit their participation, and parents who expressed an interest in being a part of the research were interviewed. Each parent was given a \$20 gift card for their time.

The interviews conducted were semi-structured and took place at TC4. The focus of the interviews was to probe the types of considerations parents make when deciding where to send their children for child care, as well as how parents specifically view magnet pre-k programs. An interview guide was created to assist with the interview process and to ensure consistency amongst all interviews. A full copy of the interview guide can be found in Appendix A. Some key questions I asked parents were “what are the most important factors you consider in choosing a center or school for your child?”, “what about a magnet school, if anything, is attractive to you?” and “are there any other options, besides magnet and traditional public schools, that you have considered to send your child to?” Some questions were more hands-on and required parents to view physical images and discuss them. Oftentimes parents were asked follow-up questions not specifically mentioned in the interview guide but relevant to the topic being discussed. The interviews required Institutional Board (IRB) approval, which was received and accepted. All parents were asked to read and sign a consent form before each interview was conducted. All interviews were recorded using a mobile device and transcribed for coding purposes. All identifiable information gathered from interviews was kept confidential and pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of all interviewees. After the transcription process, interviews were analyzed and coded using Atlas ti 8. Coding was important in order to determine the frequency of certain themes and patterns mentioned among the parents.

IV: Key Findings

Quality, Cost and Location are most important to parents

As part of the interview, parents were asked the question “What are the most important factors you consider when choosing a center or school for your child?”. After answering this open-ended question, parents were asked a more focused question that required them to rank six common factors parents often consider in this process. The six factors were cost, curriculum, extended hours, location, quality and uniforms. Parents were shown six cards, each with one of these factors displayed on it, and were specifically asked, “how would you rank these factors from most to least of importance when choosing a center or school for your child?” After coding for the frequency of each factor and through a weighted analysis, quality, cost and location were overwhelming viewed as the most important factors to parents. Figure A represents this data and also shows what factors parents viewed as less important.

Figure A:

Rank of Importance (Most to Least)	Factor to Consider
1st	Quality
2nd	Cost
3rd	Location
4th	Curriculum
5th	Extended Hours
6th	Uniforms

When asked to explain why these factors were ranked as most important, Kaitlyn, a current, TC4 White parent shared that quality, cost and location are virtually tied for 1st in her family. She said, in reference to schools, that “even if it costs nothing and the location was convenient, if the quality wasn't good, I would never put them in it. And the same like, if the location wasn't good, but the quality and the cost were, we wouldn't go for it. I think all three

have to be there for us to want to do it.”

Magnets are not options -- they are the only option

The significant increase in magnet schools across Connecticut was an attempt at integrating schools through providing more school choice options. However, the continuous focus and investment in magnet schools influenced how parents viewed traditional public schools. To most parents, traditional public schools are too under-funded and under-resourced, and therefore insufficient for their children. Even when some parents said that they would not mind enrolling their children into a traditional public school, they admitted that they did not believe their children would receive an education comparable to that of a magnet school. So while parents did not necessarily prefer to send their children to a magnet school, it was seemingly the only option for them if they wanted their children to gain a good education. 6 out of the 10 parents interviewed viewed sending their children to magnet programs as the only way to ensure that they receive a quality education.

Nicole, a current TC4 African American parent shared with me her frustrations about choosing whether to send her children to a magnet or traditional public school. She said, “When I think of magnet schools, I feel like I don't have any other choice but to send the girls there if they're going to get a good education; unless they go to private school, which I can't afford for all three... I feel like I wish people would take the same energy and resources they put into magnet schools and put them into the public schools in our area.”

As past literature shows, it is not that parents have a newfound interest in magnet schools, but that they are perceived as practically the only way to provide children with a quality education (Moore). Similarly, Adriana, a former TC4 Hispanic parent, explained to me the conundrum she was faced with when she reluctantly decided to send her child to a magnet school. She said to me,

“We live in Hartford, so our options for schooling are very difficult. Which means that if we wanted him to go to a local public elementary school starting at kindergarten, those would have been difficult choices to make and he probably would have been in schools that are underfunded and that are under-resourced. And so we had to think long term about where he could end up if we don't try this now. It was not an easy decision by any means, even knowing that we would literally save hundreds of dollars a month. It was still a really difficult decision.”

Parents feel so compelled to send their children to magnet schools that they would still make that decision even if they were still unsure about it. As seen with Adrianna, there was nothing inherently better about a magnet program that attracted her to it; rather, it felt like a necessary evil that had to be done for the sake of her child.

Parents are more pragmatic than idealistic

Ultimately, parents expressed that regardless of the school type, whether magnet or traditional, or what the school has to offer, they will do what is in the best interest for their children and their unique family situation. In this sense, parents are *homo economicus*; that is, they make choices based on what is most rational and will optimize their opportunities.

As discussed earlier, parents were asked to rank six commonly considered factors for school from most to least important. When I asked Elisa, a former TC4 White parent this question, she quickly stated that she personally considered none of these factors. Instead, she said,

“I feel like the main reason that we send our kids to magnet schools was because if they didn't get in for pre-K, we didn't think they would get in for kindergarten; like if TC4 went until fifth grade I would stay here. I am leaving here as like a pragmatism thing. So I'd say like our number one factor was the lottery protocol, like the way the lottery works and the number of seats, that was definitely number one. Beyond that like, I would probably say I don't care about other things.”

Here, Elisa points to the lottery protocol as the main reason why she left TC4. The state-run choice lottery system she is talking about is the way in which families must go about receiving entry into a magnet school. If interested, parents must submit themselves to a selective lottery protocol that assigns students to certain schools based on a formula unknown to them (Thomas and Kara). Elisa and other parents recognized this system as convoluted and unfair, but still decided to participate in it. If it ultimately means that their children will benefit, they are still willing to be apart of the system.

Even when parents could point out challenges with the magnet school system, such as the school lottery protocol, parents will still apply to send their children to a magnet program as early as 3 years old to maximize their chances of earning a seat. Shania, a former TC4 African American parent, expressed a similar sentiment. She would have liked to have kept her child at

TC4, but had to think pragmatically about what would be in her child's best interest in the long-term. She said,

“If he could have stayed here until he was five, and I knew that I could enroll him into this school and he was going to get in and be great. But when it's a lottery, *it's a lottery*. It's a hit or miss. So you don't want to give up that good opportunity and then when you try again the next year it's like, “no he's not going to have to go to a neighborhood school”. And I don't have the greatest neighborhood schools to choose from. So you don't want to risk it.”

They prove that even when parents could point out challenges with the magnet school system, such as the school lottery protocol , parents will still apply to send their children to a magnet program as early as 3 years old to maximize their chances of earning a placement.

V: Discussion and Recommendations

Through 10 qualitative interviews with current and former TC4 parents, I was better able to understand how the influx of magnet school programs impacted the decision-making process of parents considering early childhood schooling options. Firstly, parents care most about the quality, cost and location of a program. These three factors are what parents consider to be the most important factors when thinking about their children's early education. Moreover, magnet schools have come to be viewed as the only schooling option for parents if they want their children to receive a quality education. The persistent investment in magnet schools has led parents to believe that the educational success of their children is strongly dependent on their participation in a magnet program. Lastly, parents are overall homo economicus, which means

that they act in rational ways that maximize their utility. Parents will ultimately make choices based on what is best for their family.

After conducting this research and with input from the Trinity College Community Child Center (TC4), some policy recommendations can be made to improve the educational opportunities for Connecticut students. First, the state should consider new and substantial investments in non-magnet, neighborhood schools, particularly those in low-income areas. Lack of funding in these schools has left parents competing for seats at magnet schools because of a perceived superiority over other options. Investments in these schools will surely attract parents as they associate more resources and funding with a quality education. Similarly, Connecticut should expand the number of early childhood programs outside of the magnet system. Connecticut currently has no mandatory preschool law and only offers pre school services in certain districts (Lohman). Now with magnet schools offering pre-school programs, more and more families are now applying their children to preschool programs as early as 3 years old. More preschool options in more districts will provide all families with the opportunity to start school at an early age. To alleviate the costs of childcare, Connecticut should also focus on providing more accessible subsidy programs that can assist with the cost of childcare. Currently, state programs like Care 4 Kids offer families subsidies if they meet certain eligibility requirements. However, many parents I spoke with said that these programs were simply not enough, especially now that magnet preschool programs are virtually free. If we can better assist families with childcare regardless of where they choose to enroll, they may be more willing to explore childcare options outside of the magnet system.

In the near future, the Trinity College Community Child Center (TC4) hopes to use this data as part of their efforts to build an entirely new facility with help from the state. More research can be done to help with this task, such as a better understanding of how TC4 should design the new facility and how they could attract higher socio-economic families. The Trinity College Community Child Care hopes that by developing a new building, they may be able to attract families in ways that currently can not. Nonetheless, TC4 now better understands the decision-making process that parents experience when deciding on a school for their children. No matter what, parents will always make decisions that are in the best interest of their children.

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Appendix A -- Interview Script for Ed Studies Senior Thesis Project

Logistics -- (For Interviewers)

- Before Interview:
 1. Ensure you are in a quiet space, free of lingering noises and activities.
 2. Check that all other phones and devices are turned off or on silent.
 - During Interview:
 1. Be aware of the many tasks you are required to perform simultaneously. As the interviewer, you are to listen intently to your guests, ask follow up questions and push the conversation along, and remain calm and personable throughout.
 2. Begin recording with a production intro to capture important information such as names and dates, i.e “This is [your name] interviewing [subject’s name]. We are recording on [Date].”
 - After Interview
 3. Ensure that you have ended the recording by pressing the record button at the conclusion of the interview.
 4. Upload onto the computer and create an additional copy for safe keeping.
 5. Provide interviewee with release form and go over consent.
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Introduction - Get to Know Interviewee

Preface: Thank you again for agreeing to be apart of our research project! Our conversation today is going to be integral to our work, so we truly appreciate you being here and answering our questions. To start off, I’d like to get to know you on a bit of a basic level as a warm up our discussion.

For all interviewees

- Tell me about your children.... (how many, ages, current centers or schools)

Interview Questions for both current and former TC4 families

1) What are the most important factors you consider in choosing a center or school for your child?

2) Show cards of the six factors:

(quality, cost, location, curriculum, extended hours, uniforms)

and ask, how would you rank these factors from most to least of importance when choosing a center or school for your child.

3) Show cards with different students and explain: here are images of children in different settings. Can you take a look at this, and tell me, what, if anything, in particular you find attractive for your child?

4) Matching: Here are words on cards: preschool -- child care center -- magnet school
Do you associate any of these words with any of the photos above?
[what images do you like? And what labels do you put on them?]

5) What about a magnet school, if anything, is attractive to you?

6): If you had a choice, would you prefer that your child be enrolled in a magnet school or not, and why?

- Have you applied for your child to enroll in a magnet school? why/why not?
- If they applied once, but did not receive a seat: Will you apply to magnet school again?

6B) [If they mention cost or free tuition]:

- If a child care center cost the same for you as a magnet school, would you enroll in a center?

7) At TC4 (or when you were at TC4), do you (or did you) participate in any programs that reduced the cost for your child to attend?

- If yes, how important was this in your decision-making?
- If no: did you apply to any programs that would reduce the cost? What happened?
- If you applied but did not receive reduced cost, will you apply again?

8) So far we've discussed TC4 and magnet schools. Are there any other options you have considered for where to send your child?