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### Parental Advocacy at School Board Meetings in Hartford Vs. West Hartford Public Schools

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**Parental Advocacy at School Board Meetings in Hartford Vs. West Hartford Public  
Schools**

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EDUC 400: Senior Research Seminar

Professor Jones

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## **Abstract**

Parental advocacy and involvement are aspects of education that continue to grow as more platforms become available for parents to utilize and create a role for themselves. However, the ability to do so often varies based on factors out of parents' control. Previous literature has found these factors to be demographic including race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and one's educational attainment. Even with these publicly available platforms, like public board meetings, there are still gaps in power and one's ability to advocate. Through observing a total of six board meetings from two school districts that have wide gaps in the demographic factors, Hartford and West Hartford Public School, this paper attempts to answer the questions: What concerns/beliefs do parents hold for their children's education? How do parents voice these concerns/beliefs at regular board meetings? Lastly, do the ways in which these concerns are voiced and/or the concerns themselves vary from the Hartford Public School district and the West Hartford Public School District? After analyzing my findings from each meeting and connecting them to demographic data on each district I found that the subject of the comments shared at both meetings are very different. I argue that parents and community members of Hartford public schools, seemingly use these board meetings to ask for basic needs and rights they should be receiving from the public school system, while in West Hartford these needs are already met. Applying a critical lens to this, it is also no coincidence that the district serving a lower-income and nonwhite community is the one of the two fighting for these basic needs.

## **Introduction**

Parents, specifically those with children in K-12 grade levels, tend to play a large role in their children's education. However, studies have shown that there are multiple factors that can

create a gap in a parent's ability to engage or have a say in their child's education. While there are public platforms, such as school board meetings that allow parents to express their concerns and make their voices heard, these demographic factors do not place all parents at the same level in terms of being able to communicate their needs and in turn have their needs and their child's needs be met. These demographic factors can include race, class, ethnicity, and educational experience. Often, it's not solely one of these factors stopping parents from playing a role in their child's education, but the intersectionality of some or all of these factors. For example, in the Hartford school district, a majority of parents are black and brown parents. Many of them don't speak English as their first language and have little knowledge on the education system their child is a part of. The combination of these demographic factors can create challenging conditions for parents to be able to advocate for their children, while also creating false perceptions that they are not as capable as other parents.

Specifically, I am looking at school board meetings to see if and how these inequalities play out in a public setting and differences that arise between schools in two different urban settings. This topic of study in variation in parent advocacy in education is important as parents in certain communities, often within lower class communities, have negative experiences when trying to ensure their children are receiving the best possible. While they have the platform through these board meetings to express their concerns, the concerns themselves are often more severe in these communities which lowers the chances of their concerns being listened to or fixed. By watching these board meetings, I plan to find themes or patterns within parents' comments that can get to the root of the problems existing in schools that vary in these demographics and in turn, why parents are struggling to advocate for their children in some schools, but not others even when these schools are located in close proximity to each other.

The purpose of this observational qualitative study is to explore parental advocacy in schools and investigate similarities and differences between districts. The findings of this study are important because there is often a gap between parents' ability or success in advocating for their children and/or school community which can then affect the school's quality and educational outcomes. This research takes place at Hartford and West Hartford regular school board meetings with three board meetings from each district. To explore this topic I asked: What concerns/beliefs do parents hold for their children's education? How do parents voice these concerns/beliefs at regular board meetings? Do the ways in which these concerns are voiced and/or the concerns themselves vary from the Hartford Public School district and the West Hartford Public School District?

### **Literature review**

#### **What is Parental Advocacy/Involvement?**

Most scholars who have studied this topic, have been unable to create a simplified, specific definition of parental involvement and advocacy as this role can take on various forms. Furthermore, school systems often differ on the types of parental involvement they emphasize based on their needs (Epstein, 1997). A key lens that previous literature has looked at parental involvement/advocacy through is the ways in which the role is affected by demographic factors. However, by studying this lens, it's important to first have an understanding on different forms of involvement/advocacy and how this role is defined by schools, administration, and parents. Stelios N. Geourgiou (2007) finds in his study of parental roles in education that involvement took the form of five main dimensions. These dimensions were parenting, helping with homework, communicating with the school, volunteering at the school, and participating in

school decision making. He also notes the involvement can also pertain to a parent holding certain expectations for their children and the education they receive.

While previous literature often defines parental involvement based on how demographics can affect the role, Geourgiou finds that the role can also be defined by their beliefs on education and how they see themselves as both parents and a part of their child's educational experience. Parents who hold strong beliefs and expectations about education can also tend to view themselves as playing a pivotal role for their child along with their teachers and the school, which can lead to a higher level of involvement.

Other scholars view parental involvement as something that is determined by schools and how they facilitate it (Epstein, 1997). Schools and administrators can be seen as those responsible for informing parents about mediums of involvement. In addition, Epstein states school to home communication as a primary medium of involvement. As a school, working with a number of families, there is a relationship that is created in which the school is obligated to inform these parents and families on important information about the school and parents are, then, expected to act on this information (Epstein, 1997). While the structure of this relationship should be a given to a school and their administrators, the effectiveness of this relationship can vary based on the organization and communication between the two parties. When parent involvement is well organized, there is a shared understanding between parents and administration that parents' efforts are welcomed and appreciated. As a result, the common goal across all forms of involvement of providing a better quality education and meeting students' needs can be reached.

## **Parent's Beliefs for Their Children's Education and Involvement**

Oftentimes, the beliefs a parent holds for their child's education can implicate how they interact and engage with their child's school and its administration. Specifically relating to my topic of study, when a parent attends a board meeting to make a comment, they most likely are voicing this belief, in the form of a suggestion, critique, or concern about the school or their child. Lee Shumow (1997) finds that there is little previous knowledge on parents' beliefs on their inclusion in the school or the basis on which they make their decisions about their child's education. Through his study, he attempts to better understand the specific and most common beliefs held for education across a widespread population of demographic groups. He notes the reasoning behind his study was that it is, "Important to learn more about parent beliefs at this time in which educators advocate widespread reform of curriculum, instruction and assessment predicated on constructivist epistemology." (Shumow, 38). Since school board meetings are put in place to help with these categories of reform and involve the voices of parents and community members, it's important to take note of common beliefs parents are basing these opinions and comments on.

Throughout parent interviews, Shumow found common themes pertaining to both parents' beliefs on education and how they viewed their role in their child's education. He found that when asked about what they felt the goals schools should have for educating children, most parents emphasized the importance of schools providing basic educational needs and skills to their students. In regards to the role parents believed they played in ensuring their children are being provided with these basic needs, a majority of parents saw themselves as being responsible in conjunction with the schools for furthering children's educational interests and talents. Shumow notes that while schools see the involvement of parents as a way to work to meet shared

goals, some parents tend to use involvement as a platform to reject any school reforms and advocate towards a return to certain traditional practices they are familiar and content with (Shumow, 1997). In addition, some viewed the relationship between schools and parents as an equal partnership working towards a shared goal. However, Shumow as well as other scholars find that parents involved in education are often not a representation of all parents. Instead, the voices and beliefs that are most heard by schools are those coming from the elite of the community or those who have been chosen to run committees dealing with school decision making.

### **Parents' Construction of Their Role in Education**

There are various ways in which parents go about constructing their role in their child's education. Scholars find that the construction of this role is often a reflection of the broad range of social inequalities, allowing parental involvement to become a "privileged domain." (Auerbach, 2007). Within these inequalities that construct this role lies an unequal distribution of capital ranging from economic, social and cultural which allows parents with a higher SES who have this capital make certain contributions that can devalue or constrain lower SES parents and their roles in education. Teachers and schools often attempt to explain this confinement of the role by assuming these parents and families don't care about their child's education, and ignore the reality of society and the sacrifices many of these families have to make in order to even send their children to school.

Because of this lack of understanding and appreciation for these parents' desires and attempts to have a role in education, they are often left on the outskirts of the school. This forces them to construct more of a supporter or advocate role for their child. Auerbach defines the construction of three separate roles that fall into this category. These roles are the moral



supporters, ambivalent companions and struggling advocates. Auerbach notes that she focused these roles on marginalized parents and parents of color, as they tend to have the most limitations when it comes to constructing these roles.

The moral supporters are described as parents who have a more hands-off approach to education, but still offered emotional support and emphasized the value of education to their child. The next role was the ambivalent companion. Parents that take on this role still offer emotional support, but are more likely to occasionally take actions that directly involve themselves in the school. The direct involvement often comes about when they strongly disagree with any messages or actions coming from the school.

Lastly, Auerbach described the role of the struggling advocate. The struggling advocate tends to have the most direct involvement with the school and along with providing necessary support at home. This group took the most hands-on approach as they believed that parental action was necessary in order to ensure their children create a place for themselves in the education system. Furthermore, when speaking on their children's education, they often used the pronoun "we," suggesting a joint ownership of their success between the student and parent. This ownership also seemed to include community allies as parents seemed to seek out help from allies to reach a level of success. These parents also didn't shy away from speaking on their frustrations with the school and how their limited knowledge and social and cultural capital placed them at a disadvantage creating this role as a "struggling" advocate.

### **Limitations in Parental Advocacy/Involvement**

Parents play an ever growing role in their child's education. However, their abilities to become involved or advocate for their children is often known to vary based on factors such as race, class, ethnicity and their own educational background. In addition, factors within the

school, such as location, demographic makeup, and amount of funding and resources also can impact how parents' role is viewed in students' education. The articles that I have read, provide examples for numerous limitations that create challenges in parents' abilities to become involved in their child's school through mediums such as joining parent boards or attending school board meetings. Some of the factors for parents include socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity and their own school experience. The school characteristics discussed in these articles have an effect on the parent's role in education are the schools location, specifically if it is located in an urban setting, and the group of parents and families they are marketing to. A study from the National Center for Educational Statistics finds that schools in Urban districts tend to serve a majority lower income population. Specifically, the study found children attending these schools were more than twice as likely to be living in poverty than children attending schools in a suburban location. (NCES, 1990). Both the parents and schools having major roles in parental involvement, engagement and advocacy creates unequal opportunities for a parent to ensure their child is receiving the best education possible.

A possible obstacle in a parent's ability to become a part of parental involvement using platforms such as parent board and school board meetings is the idea of professionalization that can often be seen as an unspoken requirement for involvement. In the article *Professionalizing the PTO: Race, Class, and Shifting Norms of Parental Engagement in a City Public School*, author Posey-Maddox discusses how the roles and benefits that come from middle-class parents engagement with PTO's creates a divide between parents that are able to contribute to the school in this way and those that aren't. Parents with less academic and professional experience or less of an ability to provide financial help to the school feel as though their voice and involvement isn't as valuable as the middle-class parents that are often at the center of PTO's. This not only

creates unnecessary tension within the school, but also creates a less inclusive environment by not allowing for equal involvement for families of all class statuses, race, ethnicity, and school and professional background.

Similarly, Debra Malone (2017) finds a strong correlation between parental involvement in schools and socioeconomic status. She discusses parental involvement which she refers to as PI in her writing and discusses the different levels of PI that are seen across SES groups. Furthermore, the gap in PI has become a more prevalent challenge schools are facing as it has become more of a nationwide priority for schools. Through analyzing previous studies on PI, she discusses the pattern of parents with a higher SES tended to have higher levels of education background and experiences that increased their knowledge on forms of involvement allowing them to be more actively engaged within the school. In turn, Malone credits the tendency for less involvement from parents with a lower SES to a lack of knowledge on how to obtain public resources and platforms that would benefit their child. However, while SES was an indicator of level of involvement, Malone notes that this didn't translate to willingness to be involved. She states, "Several researchers found that numerous low SES families wanted to participate in their child's schooling but were unable to do so because they lacked essential resources such as time, money, and transportation to support their children academically." (Malone, 2017). Barriers that are present for these parents make the reality of a high level of involvement more challenging which can lower their role in their child's education, despite their desire and willingness to advocate and be involved. While Possey-Maddox and Malone focus their studies on limitations that result from SES, these same barriers as well as additional ones come about based on other factors such as race and ethnicity, which I will look at through other pieces of literature. Furthermore, these studies shed more of a negative light on the involvement from parents from

lower income communities. However, other scholars have found that even though limitations create challenges to do so, parents that believe their involvement matters and will make a difference, find ways to get involved despite any demographic factors that may affect the results. (Georgiou, 2007).

### **Critical Framework**

After reading previous literature on parental involvement and advocacy and finding a pattern of societal inequalities being brought up when limitations for involvement were being discussed, I found it important to look at this topic through a more critical lens and apply critical race theory to the topic of a parent's role in education. Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate apply critical race theory to education in *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education* (1995). Ladson-Billings and Tate find that scholars often seem to question how useful race is as a category of inequality. However, doing so denies the innate racialized society we live in. When analyzing inequalities that are present it's necessary to acknowledge how race has and can still be used to determine one's role in society. Thinking of race just as an objective condition ignores the problematic aspects of race and how it decides where one fits into society and the opportunities they are given. While inequalities can be looked at through the lenses of categories such as socioeconomic status, gender or one's education background, it cannot be done so effectively if the category of race is ignored.

### **Inequalities within education and school reform**

Based on this framework, it's also necessary to look at previous literature discussing the root of the inequalities schools can bring about which make both school reform and equitable education difficult to attain. When parents come to comment and advocate during board meetings, it's most likely met with the purpose to speak on items they want reformed, however,

being able to offer these reforms often require more than simple fixes because of the systemic inequalities of education. Scholars have found that public schools are meant to help all citizens reach the “American Dream” however, this goal is often conflicted by the aspect of competition and individualization in society. The education system in particular seems to often face criticism about whether it is truly a good for the public, or a good that further reinforces social disorder and inequality (Hochschild, 2001 & Labaree, 1997). When reforms are proposed there is often a debate between who is benefitting and who isn’t rather than the reform being targeted to benefit the public as a whole (Christensen & Karp, 2003).

Labaree’s *Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals* (1997) looks at the different categories the public seems to credit these inequalities to- organizational, social and cultural. He states that some people see inequalities through an organizational lens and correlate issues with reform to too much bureaucracy in schools. Through the social lens, he states that people feel inequalities are stemming from social inequalities such as chronic poverty, racial discrimination and societies desire to preserve privilege. The last category he discusses is cultural meaning people are viewing inequalities through the culture of poverty and differences in family goals and values. Labaree, however, suggests that these inequalities are fundamentally political. The various lenses educational inequalities are analyzed through highlight how complicated the reality of school reform really is. While most parties interact with the school because of a goal to make schools better, without a more uniform understanding of the inequalities present, these parties tend to be fighting against each other rather than with and for each other. My study helps in the efforts to better understand how parents go about fighting for and speaking on desired reform as I assess whether these inequalities play a role in doing so.

## **Methods**

### ***Methods/Methodology***

I conducted a qualitative study that looked at the differences and similarities between two Connecticut school districts. By choosing qualitative methods, I felt I would be able to dive deeper into the specific instances where parents are attempting to advocate for their children in a more effective way than I would have if I used quantitative data. Carol Gribich describes qualitative research and states, “It provides detailed information and can progress knowledge in a variety of areas: it can help assess the impact of policies on a population; it can give insight into people’s individual experiences; it can help evaluate services provision; and it can enable the exploration of the little-known behaviors, attitudes and values” (Gribich, 2013). Since my question is trying to analyze parents’ voices while they advocate, numerical data or survey questions wouldn’t be able to provide information on important aspects when studying parents voices such as tone and emotion.

Within the possible methods of qualitative research, I chose to conduct an observational study. I chose to look at the Hartford Public School district and West Hartford Public school district. I watched three board meetings from each district and then analyzed my findings using a codebook made prior to watching the meetings. I chose participant observations for this study, in order to be able to obtain data from a wider population, as these meetings are open to the public. By observing rather than interviewing, I was able to see firsthand how parents conduct themselves in these meetings and the ways in which they go about advocating for their children. In addition, participant observation allowed any prior views, assumptions or expectations to not affect my findings, since the subject matter and the participants speaking in the meeting were out of my control.

## **Limitations**

While I felt these methods would be the most beneficial in answering my research questions, there were limitations to consider as I went about my data collection. A main limitation I found was that since all of the board meetings I collected data on were from past meetings, all of the data was taken from watching them online. Watching online was helpful as it allowed me to pause when needed to take notes, rewatch parts that I may have missed or wanted a better understanding, and use subtitles so I was able to clearly know exactly what was being said by each parent. However, the limitations of watching the meeting virtually rather than in person was that I wasn't able to take notes on items such as seating arrangements, side conversations, and facial expressions of audience members that weren't speaking or in frame. However, since the main focus of my research question was how parents spoke on their concerns for their children's education, not being able to collect data on these items didn't take much away from being able to answer my research question.

## ***Participants***

The two school districts I chose to focus my research on were the Hartford and West Hartford Public School Districts. I chose to look at these two districts because during my time taking Educational Studies classes, I have had opportunities to spend time in Hartford Public School classrooms and have noticed differences between the qualities and experiences students have in this school district versus the reputation I've learned about West Hartford since being a part of the Trinity community. I found these differences in school quality and demographics especially interesting because of the close proximity of the school districts. The demographic differences noticeable between these two districts pertain to factors such as race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status which I analyzed more when looking at my demographic findings from the

districts' website and the ACS-ED Demographic Dashboard. While I had preliminary notions on these districts' demographic differences that led to my decision of using the two districts as my participants, I still analyzed specific data on these factors as a part of my data collection in order to have a better understanding prior to making connections between demographics and the findings from the meeting observations.

While the school districts can be seen as the participants of this study-, each speaker during the public comment section of the meetings I observed also acted as a participant. When I originally designed my research question, I had envisioned specifically focusing on parent comments and did not account for the large number of community members who didn't currently have a child in the district, but still attended meetings to comment. Even though my focus was still on the comments coming from parents, I took notes of community members' comments as well, since they were still relevant to understanding the issues at hand that were being brought up to the school board.

### ***Data Collection***

To start my data collection, I first came to a decision about the number of board meetings I would watch for each district. In my original research plan, I decided that I would watch four board meetings from each school district to end with a total of eight sets of fieldnotes. After completing one board meeting for each district and looking at the large amount of data and differences I was already able to notice, I planned to reduce this number to two board meetings per school district. I also thought this would reduce repetition in my findings, as I was noticing, specifically during the Hartford Board meetings, the same concern being expressed multiple times. However, after completing my second round of data collection for each district, both



districts' board meetings were shorter than the first meetings I had watched, so I decided to watch an additional meeting for each district.

I chose meetings for each district that were held on the same day, so that the context in terms of anything that had been going on in the state or other outside contexts were consistent with one another. When choosing dates for board meetings, I only chose from those held in 2022, so I was more aware of the context going on at the time of the meeting. Before watching each meeting I assessed the agenda and minutes to both give background on the meetings content and make preliminary observations. Before watching the meetings, I also took note of the websites that published these school board meetings and assessed their accessibility and how they are published. When watching the board meetings I took notes based on the codes that I had created in my codebook which looks at items such as tone, specific language, body language and the type of complaint/concern being made. I started with watching a board meeting from the Hartford Public school and then watched a West Hartford Public school board meeting from the same date. I used this pattern for all of the board meetings I watched. Emmerson et al. describe the purpose of ethnographic methods such as observation and states, "Immersion in ethnographic research, then, involves both being with other people to see how they respond to events as they happen and experiencing for oneself these events and the circumstances that give rise to them." (Emmerson et. al, 1995).

While watching each board meeting I took detailed field notes on my observations. These field notes included notes on audience members such as the number of people in the audience, the age range, the attire people were wearing, their gender, race and the location of where they were sitting. I also took notes on the location of the meetings in terms of its layout and where the board members were sitting in relation to the audience. During the first meetings watched for

each district I took detailed notes on the meetings introduction, whether this was translated or not and the protocol discussed for the public comment section which came after the introduction for both districts. Once the public comment section commenced, I took field notes on each comment that was spoken. These notes included the identity of the speaker and their relationship to the school district if they mentioned it. I then wrote down the content of their comment and to which subject it was in regards to. Watching meetings online allowed me to take notes on the exact comment and specific words they were using that could be telling of my findings. I was also able to pause the video or rewind in order to get specific quotes from these meetings, which would have been less attainable if I were to watch these meetings in person. In addition, I took notes on important aspects of the comment such as tone and how long the comments were lasting. While my notes mainly focused on the public comment section of the meeting, I would take note if anything on the agenda pertained to my research questions, such as West Hartford's change of Policy 553 which focused on the structure of the public comment section, and would also take notes on those agenda items or meeting sections.

### **Data Analysis:**

When taking notes on the meeting, I took detailed notes about each speaker that spoke during the public comment section. To analyze these notes I had intended to use deductive coding and a codebook that I had created prior that included codes such as TONE with subcodes for positive and negative tones, as well as code for body language (BL) and Important Language (IL) (See Appendix A).

However, after doing a preliminary reading of my six sets of fieldnotes, I found that the codes I originally thought I would focus most on for my findings, were not actually where most of the differences were stemming from. While my original codebook had more of a focus on

aspects of comments such as tone and body language, I noticed that throughout my field notes I mostly took notes on comments themselves, their subject and specific wording. Because this approach I took on my fieldnotes, I ended up using more inductive coding and created a new code book to analyze my data with:

My first round of coding consisted of categorizing into types of comments. These comment types were either a suggestion or a complaint/concern. Comments that I felt didn't fit it to either of these comments were marked as other. Secondly, I coded each comment into categories of the topic of the comment. To choose these codes, I picked out the most common topics between meetings in both districts. These topics were academic, equity quality, safety, and transparency. Comments that didn't fit into these topics were marked as other. My last code marked comments by who or what they were in regards to. This code categorized the comments based on whether they were speaking about the community, a student(s), a teacher(s) or the student and the community. The reasoning behind including a last code for both the student and community came from the prevalence of parents or other speakers coming in to talk about a concern for their child or a singular students and would also make remarks about coming to also advocate for other children in the community, so they don't have to go through similar challenges. In addition to my three rounds of coding, I also included a code for any positive remarks that came up in people's comments. In my original plan for deductive coding, I had a code for both positive and negative comments and positive and negative tones. However, as I began to watch the board meetings, I quickly realized the purpose of comment sections of meetings was for people to present the board with any problems or constructive criticism they had. In turn, there were few strictly positive comments as I began coding. Because of this, I switched to just creating a stand-alone code for positive remarks. For example, if a speaker made

a point to express gratitude towards a board member or to make a comment on something they felt the board or district did well. After using this codebook, I was able to create clear categorizations of the differences and similarities found while observing each meeting, which allowed me to better answer my research questions. (See Appendix B)

## **Findings**

Based on my findings and data analysis I developed the following thesis to answer my research questions: While the structure of Hartford and West Hartford Board meetings are the same, the subject of the comments being spoken are very different. Parents and community members of Hartford public schools, seemingly use these board meetings to ask for basic needs and rights they should be receiving from the public school system. Parents and community members of West Hartford Public schools, however, seem to have these needs met, as their concerns focus less on school equity and quality and more on transparency and their own involvement in the school. The reasons behind coming to this thesis were very evident in my findings from each meeting, and my demographic findings further heighten the issues with these differences in parental advocacy and involvement, especially when taking a critical perspective on the topic.

### ***Demographic Findings***

To start my data collection, I began by collecting demographic data on the Hartford and West Hartford Public School District. I collected this data by analyzing documents on the respective districts' websites and also took data from the National Center for Education Statistics ACS-ED District Demographic Dashboard from 2016-20220. Through analyzing demographic statistics across these sources, I was able to find wide gaps and differences from numerous characteristics that pertained to both students attending the public schools and the household they

were coming from. The first main difference I found was in the race/ethnicity of the students. Hartford public schools served a majority Hispanic/Latinx students, while West Hartford served a majority White students. (See Table 1.1 & 1.2). The next gap in student demographics found was in the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced meals. In Hartford public schools the percentage was 71%, while 26.7% of West Hartford public school students were eligible in West Hartford. After language was a topic that came up in all Hartford board meetings I observed, I looked to see the percentage of students that were English Language Learners or Multi Language Learners in each district. This percentage was 21% in Hartford and 6.1% in West Hartford. Throughout these student statistics, the smallest difference I found was in the percentage of students in special education programs. 19% of students in Hartford public schools and 16% of West Hartford public school students were in these programs.

Similar to student statistics, I also found large gaps in household data that came from the ACS-ED dashboard. The most telling and dramatic gap I found was in household income within the two districts. The median household income in Hartford was \$43,155 while this number was \$154,625 in West Hartford. This finding translated into the gap between the percentage of families with an income level below the poverty level. For Hartford households, the percentage was 33.2%. In West Hartford households, this percentage was only 5.6%. Another large gap was in educational attainment of parents within the district. In Hartford, the number of parents who had a bachelor's degree or higher was 12.6%, while 77.2% of parents had a bachelor's degree or higher in West Hartford Households. Similar to the language findings for students, I also found differences in household language statistics that could be a reflection of the topic coming up in Hartford meetings. When looking at primary languages spoken in homes, I found that 59% of families only speak English and 80% of families solely speak English in their homes. The

demographic findings helped me to better apply a critical perspective to the patterns found in the meetings, and gave extra background and support as to why I chose to look at these two school districts and their differences.

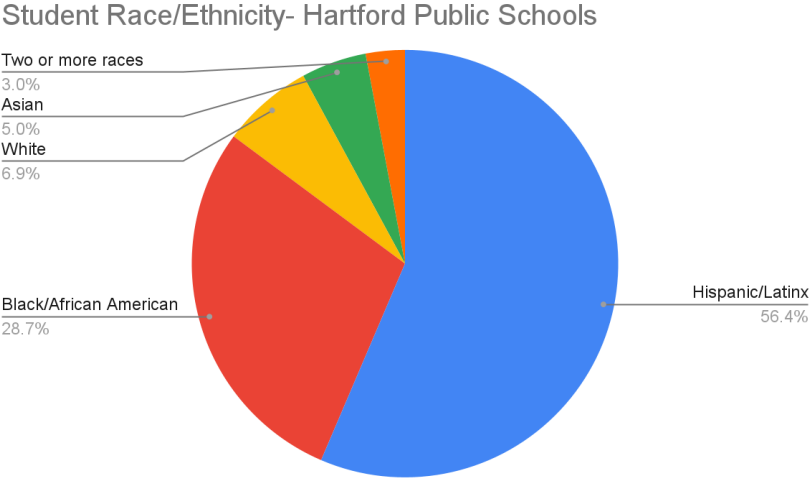


Table 1.1- Student Race/Ethnicity- Hartford Public Schools

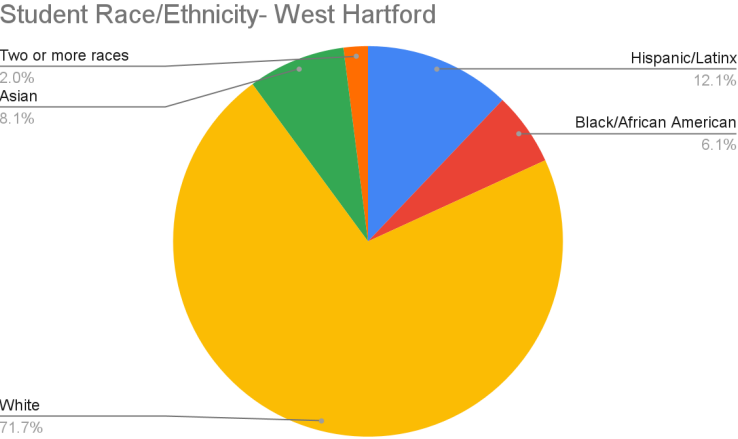


Table 1.2- Student Race/Ethnicity: West Hartford Public Schools

## ***Meeting Findings***

### ***1. Topics of Concern***

#### ***Hartford- Fighting For Basic Educational Rights***

Throughout watching board meetings in each district, I quickly noticed a large difference with little overlap in terms of the topics of concerns parents and other speakers brought up in Hartford meetings versus West Hartford meetings. As stated in my thesis, Hartford parents and speakers seemed to be asking for more basic educational rights. This came in the form of comments that mainly regarded the schools' equality, quality and safety. A majority of parents and speakers came to the meeting to speak on concerns or complaints they had regarding these topics and parents often had a specific case to back-up their concern, whether it was something their own child went through or another student in the community.

These three most common topics I found parents and speakers commenting on also often intersected within one comment. For example, an academic concern numerous people spoke on was the desire for the school to include vocational education or an industrial training curriculum at the high school level, in order to give these students higher chances to have more opportunities after graduating high school. One speaker, Michael, who has spoken on this topic multiple times noted that about 35% of students in the district move on to a post high school education. He then states that "about 65% of students are prepared to hit the streets." He mentions that in some cases these children outside of the 35% have been known to become involved in illegal activity after completing their time in the district as they have no plans after graduation. Michael then says that the school needs to emphasize teaching the students basic vocational skills and within these skills he mentions teaching students, "how to feed, clothes and transport yourself." He ends his comment by noting how he's come to speak on this various times over the years and have seen

no progress on this wish. The comment is an example of a comment concerning equality, in terms of the level of opportunity they wish for these students, quality, in terms of the education they should receive in order to have a future past high school.

Another comment that highlights these main areas of concern, specifically safety, and simply a desire to be provided basic rights and be treated well by the schools came during the board meeting held on October 18th, 2022. This comment was made by a woman who was representing a mother whose daughter had autism. She states that this woman's daughter was verbally and physically abused by a student in front of a school social worker. This student was only ever suspended. The mother then says that her daughter "will never attend a Hartford public school again."

Later on in this meeting this mother came up and spoke specifically on this case. She spoke in Spanish, but had a translator with her. Before even starting to speak, the mother began to cry. She states that her daughter has autism, memory loss and the mental capacity of a six year old. She says that her daughter has been home for two weeks after she had received a call from a school social worker informing her that her daughter had been punched in the face by a student and had trash emptied on her. However, when attempting to raise her concern for her daughter's safety, the school only got in touch with her to say her daughter had been suspended for throwing food around in the cafeteria. The mother was also told she couldn't speak with a teacher without filling out a form of concern. She states that she's filled out the form but still hadn't heard back from anyone from the school. Once she was given an appointment from the Board of Education, the form given to her about the appointment was written in English, so she wasn't able to understand the content of the form. When discussing the details of this meeting, she says the vice principal and her classroom teacher weren't in attendance and they weren't able to actually speak



on this issue, because this meeting was in response to a concern form she had sent in a long time ago and was just being called in for it.

Another emotional concern brought up in the Hartford meeting about the lack of basic rights parents were receiving and quality education children were receiving came from a comment during the September 20th meeting. This mother was coming to speak because her son was just starting at Weaver High School. She mentions the “brutal” experience her older son had at Weaver and states that she cried every night because of what her son had to go through. She asks the board to think in consideration of the children of Hartford as they are the future of the community. She asks both what the school can do for them and what she can do to protect her children from the school system. Lastly, she asks the board to bring back programs that trained young children, in order to help them succeed in the future.

These comments ranging in topic of concern, all highlight the basic needs and rights parents and speakers came to ask the school for. Many comments and the emotions that came up in them also exemplified the severity of these needs and how parents were using this platform to fight for their children's education, rights and safety.

#### *West Hartford- Personal Requests, Suggestions, and Opinions*

The main topics covered in West Hartford meetings seemed to differ greatly than the topics being discussed throughout the Hartford Meetings. I found that a majority of public comments in West Hartford were primarily focused on concerns with the district's transparency and parent/community to school communication. In terms of transparency, a pattern that came up was parents stating that when a problem was occurring in the school, parents felt that the school wasn't being transparent about it because of a desire to keep a certain image the school wanted to maintain for themselves. Similarly, parents also seemed to be very concerned about the ways in

which the school communicated with them and allowed them to play a role in decisions and their child's education. Many concepts were in regards to parents' own expectations about how they felt they should be treated by the school. An example of a comment reflective of this pattern came from a mother who spoke at all three board meetings I watched, but specifically on a topic along these lines during the October 18th meeting and the November 15th meeting. This mother came to the board with the complaint that agendas for meetings were posted on the district's website too last minute. She then mentions a time recently when a meeting for a subcommittee she was a part of moved their meeting to be done virtually, but she wasn't informed. She says that because of this she wasn't able to attend the meeting. She expressed multiple times to the board that she feels these actions are "discriminatory toward me." She returns to the November 15th meeting to complain about how she had recently been removed from a club that she's a part of because of comments she's made at prior meetings. These comments are examples of common topics that came up in public comments that were in regards to how parents communicate and play a role in the school.

In addition to comments addressing these topics, it was common that comments were also in regards to agenda items for the meetings, such as certain policies that were being passed. For example something on the agenda at these meetings was the revision of a policy regarding the structure of the public comment section of meetings. The policy proposed restructuring this section to prioritize comments that were addressing topics on that meeting's agenda. Parents and speakers were then coming to speak on their opinions about the revision of this policy, many of which felt it limited their opportunity to speak and was an attempt to give the board more power.

## 2. *Who is the Subject of Concern?*

### *Hartford- Concerned for Students and the Community*

The second area of difference I found as I observed meetings from each district was the subject of who parents and speakers were coming to comment on. Throughout Hartford Board meetings, a majority of parents and community members were speaking in regards to their own children or the community as a whole. When parents were coming to speak on their children's behalf, it was often about a struggle their child was facing or a negative experience they had gone through in the district. While these comments would start out as an individualized concern for a child, often noting a specific story or instance the parent was speaking on, they also often added points to their comment mentioning that they were also speaking out so other children in the community wouldn't go through the same struggles. Phrases such as "our children," "we," and "community" were commonly used during comments. On the occasion that a parent was speaking about themselves as a subject of their comment, it was mainly in regards to their ability to advocate or understand issues going on in their child's education. Parents speaking about themselves mainly seemed to be speaking about issues such as language barriers that were acting as limitations to their involvement and they were asking the board to better help them have an easier time understanding documents being sent home and getting in touch with someone who spoke their language that they could better communicate with when they had a question or concern.

### *West Hartford- Concerned About Their Role As a Parent or Community Member*

A majority of public comments during West Hartford meetings were in regards to themselves as parents or community members and their engagement with the school board. Rather than coming to speak about their child, students or the community, these parents and

speakers seemed to be the ones at the center of their comments. Their comments tended to mainly regard their own desires and expectations they held for the school and the board. In cases where these desires and expectations weren't being spoken on, comments were also often met with the purpose of these parents or speakers sharing their opinions, for example, opinions on meetings agendas.

### 3. *Attendance of Meetings*

The last significant finding I took note of during my observation of these meetings was about who was attending and speaking at each meeting. When taking field notes on the public comment section, I took notes on people speaking during meetings that had also commented at previous meetings. Based on these notes, I found that there were more of the same few speakers commenting at West Hartford Board meetings than Hartford Board meetings. While there were regular speakers at Hartford meetings, this was mostly in addition to a mix of new speakers coming to each meeting.

I also took notes of the speaker's relationship to the school district. As the focus of my study was on parental advocacy, I was surprised to see how many speakers at the meeting were individuals who didn't currently have a child in the school districts. These speakers were mainly coming as community members who still had concerns for the school and the community. These types of speakers were present in both Hartford and West Hartford meetings. However, I noticed that in the Hartford meeting these speakers often titled themselves as "advocates" and tended to speak more on the community as a whole. Their comments pertained to helping the community reach their potential and receive a better quality education for all students as they are the future of the community.

## **Discussion**

Based on my findings, there are multiple overall themes that highlight inequalities present in parents' experience with advocacy and involvement. One key theme that answers the research question regarding differences between Hartford and West Hartford meetings is the fact that Hartford parents and community members seem to be asking and fighting for basic rights that should have already been promised to them by the school. Since West Hartford schools seem to already meet these needs, public comments during their meetings are able to be more parent focused rather than child focused. While parents and community members in the Hartford school district need to use this space to attempt to ask for a quality education for their children and the community, West Hartford parents are able to use the space to share their opinions or discuss their own expectations and desires for the district.

Some of these differences in topics of comment could be based on the current timely context of the meetings. This connects to previous research in which scholars have found that parental involvement can vary based on a school district's needs. (Epstein, 1997) Specifically in West Hartford, the amount of comments that were about agenda items, could be based on the recent proposal to change the structure of the public comment section of meetings. This policy directly affects the parents and their ability to engage with the board, a topic that was widely discussed throughout all meetings. Because this seems to be a priority for West Hartford parents and members of the community, these individuals were able to use the space to speak on this current policy that they felt would directly impact their relationship with the district.

Furthermore, these differences and themes from my findings highlight the gaps of power present within parental involvement in schools and how that can create different levels of school expectations and the ways in which parents interact with the school. As previous literature has

referred to parental involvement as a “privileged domain” that markets itself toward white and high SES parents (Auerbach, 2007). Both findings from meetings and demographic analysis support this claim. As there is a clear gap in income levels between Hartford and West Hartford, the lower income district seems to be fighting for basic needs that the other district has the privilege of having without question. My findings also frame Hartford parents as the “struggling advocates” Auerbach discusses, as they are taking ownership and getting directly involved in their child’s education. They were not shy about coming to board meetings to speak on issues they were facing, however they are struggling to get results or to be heard based on their lack of social, cultural and economic capital.

Connecting this to the critical framework and critical race theory, my demographic findings show that West Hartford is a majority white school district and Hartford is a majority Hispanic/Latinx and Black School district. It’s important to note that all of the specific comments from Hartford meetings brought up in my paper were said by people of color, while in West Hartford all comments brought up were spoken by White parents. The claims from previous literature about parents with lower SES having a more difficult time with parental involvement seems to also intersect with race and Gloria Ladson-Billings point on how these other categories can’t be looked at without seeing the role race plays. While Hartford is known as serving a lower-income community, this community is also known to be populated mainly by people of color. These communities are the ones fighting for basic rights and needs rather than the majority white and high SES community that is West Hartford.

In addition, the parents of Hartford school children are often speaking on the same concern or needs and aren’t finding much response or improvement. They are often left feeling powerless and speaking to the board is more of a cry for help, rather than a space to share their

opinions which is often the case at West Hartford meetings. In addition, these schools are both under the same state rules and regulations, but the quality of education and rights they are granted is vastly different. These findings connect to previous literature that addresses both the challenges with school reform, and how schools can widen the gaps in systemic inequalities. Previous research finds that rather than providing an equal opportunity for all students, public education can often enhance one's individual agenda creating a large gap in achievement and opportunity. In addition, schools that fail to provide needs for students widening the gap can be closely tracked to the structures of racial and class inequality. (Hochschild, 2001). As needs of students in Hartford are seemingly failing to be met, it's necessary to take into account that this is the case of many school districts that are serving primarily students of color who are coming from lower-income communities, while students from schools like West Hartford, primarily white and high SES students, are automatically granted a high quality education just based off these factors, placing them at an advantage point in the education system.

While these findings and themes shed more of a negative light on the experiences of Hartford parents, students and community members, a powerful takeaway from observing these meetings was the high level of community advocacy present in Hartford meetings. While many people speaking at these meetings were speaking on specific, severe cases, they still made it a point to note they were not only speaking for themselves and their children, but the community as a whole. There seemed to be a shared understanding and a strong desire to fight for and obtain a quality education for all students of the community to ensure a bright future for the Hartford community. While other literature focuses mainly on the limitations families from marginalized communities face when being involved or advocating for their children's education, some

highlight their strong willingness to fight for their educational rights (Georgiou, 2007,) which is overtly present in Hartford meetings both for people's own children and for the community.

### **Conclusion**

This paper asked the question of what concerns or beliefs parents held for their child's education. Taking a specific lens, it asked the question if these concerns and the ways in which they were voiced differed when observing Hartford Public School board meetings and West Hartford Public School board meetings. The meetings highlighted that there is a vast difference in topic of concern between the two districts. As Hartford parents are asking for basic rights, West Hartford parents have the privilege to use this time and space to comment on themselves and their own desires, expectations or opinions on the district. Connecting to my demographic findings, the school that is based in a lower-income community and serving majority students of color fighting for a quality education, further highlights the race and class disparities that can be heightened by the education system, hurting students coming from non-white and lower income communities.

### *Recommendations*

The findings and themes that came from this study show how much work needs to be done to lessen the gaps of power in education. Specifically for parental advocacy and involvement, there are various ways in which schools can go about bettering this experience and the results they are seeing. Firstly, school and parents would both benefit from having more accountability for follow-up procedures. Hartford and West Hartford board meetings both have protocols for follow-up of public comments that state that the board is required to follow-up with anyone speaking at the meeting within 48 hours of their comment. However, this is the extent of the protocol. This could allow the schools to be cleared of any responsibility after just one email



being sent. Changing this protocol to promise more active communication could force schools to take more responsibility and action on issues being brought up that can lead to more efforts being taken to fix them. Similarly, having more spaces that allow for conversation between parents and the school would be beneficial. Rather than having the most accessible platform be structured in a way where parents can comment without receiving an in-person response from the board, having a space where more open and productive conversations can occur would help to more actively deal with problems at hand.

An interesting aspect of using these two districts as participants and finding a wide array of differences, is that they are in such close proximity to each other. As these schools are so close by, working with each other and sharing ways in which a more equal educational experience can be provided for all students could help lessen the gaps between the two districts. Possey-Maddox (2013) discusses a resource sharing initiative across school districts in Illinois and found that this sharing of resources benefited a wide range of student groups and school communities, while also limiting the gaps of resources and opportunities brought on by the schools in this area. A resource sharing initiative between Hartford and West Hartford could be a starting point to address the large race and class disparities present and can lessen gaps in quality and experience between these neighboring districts.

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## Appendix A:

### *Original Codebook*

Code	Description
Tone- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Subcodes:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ PT (positive tones)</li> <li>○ NT (negatives)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Are the parents angry, frustrated, calm, etc when giving voicing concerns</li> </ul>
Silence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Who is staying silent and why is that important</li> </ul>
Board Members (BM) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Subcodes               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Positive reaction/response (PR)</li> <li>○ Negative reaction/response (NR)</li> <li>○ Indifferent reaction/response (IR)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Notes on board members responses to</li> </ul>
Important Language (IL) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Subcodes:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “My child” (MC)</li> <li>○ “Community”</li> <li>○ “The School”</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What words are telling within these parent concerns</li> <li>● Patterns of words within concerns</li> </ul>
Body Language (BL)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What’s telling about the body language of parents?</li> <li>● What’s telling about the body language of board members?</li> </ul>
Type of Complaint/ concern <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Subcodes:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Social</li> <li>○ Academic</li> <li>○ Quality</li> <li>○ Equity</li> <li>○ Advocacy</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Which areas are the parents most concerned with?</li> </ul>

## **Appendix B:**

### *Revised Codebook*

#### Coding Round 1:

- Suggestion: S
- Complaint/Concern: C
- Other: O

#### Coding Round 2: Category of concern/complaint or suggestion:

- Academic: A
- Equity: E
- Quality: Q
- Safety: SF
- Transparency: T
- Other: OT

#### Coding Round 3:

- Community Concern: CC
- Concern for teachers: TC
- Concern for Student: SC|
- Concern for parent: PC
- Student and Community: CSC

\*= positive remarks