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Oral History Interview on Magnet School Policy

Ed Linehan

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Abstract: As the magnet school program administrator for the Hartford Public Schools, Ed Linehan discusses magnet school marketing practices and voluntary school desegregation policies regarding the Sheff v O'Neill case. He also describes the challenges in recruiting white suburban students to attend an urban district, and informational mailings that his office sends to suburban homes about educational opportunities in magnet schools. Comparisons are made with magnet schools operated by the Capitol Region Educational Council (CREC).

Additional comments: This interview was conducted as part of the Cities Suburbs and Schools seminar. Submitted as part of the [OnTheLine web-book](http://OnTheLine.trincoll.edu) by Jack Dougherty and colleagues (<http://OnTheLine.trincoll.edu>).

Speaker key:

EP: Elena Polikoff

EF: Elizabeth Franco

EL: Ed Linehan

[all comments by transcriber in brackets]

PART 1 [transcribed by Libby]

LP: "The first question is...umm...over the past few weeks we've seen magnet school marketing through *Hartford Courant* advertisements and open house brochures...I guess our question is what other marketing methods are you using...umm...what are effective?"

EL: "Well the relative effectiveness of it...I can't say that we have done [a census??] of what works...and I think I would describe what we do at this stage at least as being sort of a shotgun approach...you know as many ideas as we have...as we have time for...as we have money to support. My general attitude about this is that...uh... there is no one way of doing it and that we take advantage of as many ways as possible. Yes we have used print media, we have...uh...used sort of the broad based...uh...publications such as the *Courant* and [*Hartford??*] *Life* in part because they have a circulation that is targeted to particular regions in the suburban...out-outside of Hartford. *Hartford Courant* because it is the preeminent newspaper in the state. We have also put ads in *La Voz* which is a Latino community publication that is here in Hartford. One of the things that I have learned about the Hartford community is apparently that a large part of the

community relates to public access...television. And so we created some spots and we have plugged them into public access television. And we've got a lot of response I mean if you get 6 or 7 phone calls or a half dozen people telling you that saw it on television what they are telling me that exponentially that a whole lot of other people [have seen it]. We uhh...take the current student bodies...the current students...particularly the suburban student body and we do a direct mail to those families to the parents of those families. Now they are already in our magnet schools and we say 'hello'...ya know... 'you have made a decision for your child and we assume since you are still with us that this was a good decision that you made otherwise you have the option of going back to you home school district'...now we don't say all of that... 'but what we would like is for you to take the five enclosed brochures and think about family and friends who might also want to take advantage of this opportunity,' so we use current people to identify additional people and not simply to identify but with a certain level of assumption that...that if any one of these current families decides to do this that they are not just gonna hand out brochures to 5 people but they are actually gonna say some things. And they might just hold onto the brochures and not do anything with them, put them in their junk drawer. But when somebody starts complaining about the child's classroom teacher out there somewhere or their school or their general dissatisfaction with something about the education of their child, they can say 'Oh, you know, I have some brochures here...' Just to get it out there. Either to do it in the way that we would like you to do it which is right now in time for the lottery, or whenever it comes up. We know that it comes up without even being asked at dinner parties and it comes up at picnics, people going: 'You send your kid to Hartford? What are you crazy?' "No, no, no you gotta check out the school.' So we know the informal networking is an important way that people learn about things. So by sending a letter and encouraging people help us distribute this...uh...brings a little bit more of a formal request that they do what we know they do anyway."

LF: "That informal demographic that you are talking about...what are the typical marketing strategies that you emphasize...like, there are different things that attract people to magnet schools such as what we have here, they all have that kind of idea in their head...how do you by simply just giving them a piece of paper decide what to emphasize to the prospective parents?"

EL: "I don't, I don't...uh...especially emphasize any of that, I go back to the core notion to what magnet schools are about and at its core even though for the educators and for the lawyers its about school desegregation...uh...voluntary school segregation...for parents only the smallest, smallest portion of parents are motivated to go to a school because they want more diversity in my experience. What more universally parents want is 'a good school.' They have a lot of different ideas about what that means but at its core its academics, and achievement. And what we do is simply...uh...is to briefly...in our documents now...the schools develop another tier of documents...but in our, our, district level documents, just give them the thinnest, briefest, thumb-nailed description of what the focus of the school is. So, you know, Sports and Medical...I used to be the principle of a performing arts high school. When I would say that, just like I said it now, all four of us have an image of what that school must be about. But I've visited about 200 performing arts high schools in the United States and I tell you, you can't make any assumptions because they are very, very different one to the next. So beyond giving them the sort of thumbnail, we then encourage people to go check it out. To visit it. And when a parent walks into a building and they see how they are greeted and they see the climate of the school...assuming that it's in operation, those are the quality experiences. So there is a lot of

putting information out there, there are a couple of other things that we do in terms of putting information out. We...uh...in that brochure...there is a map of the region and we uh let's see there's a company in East Hartford called "Asco"...A. S. C. O... and they are a direct mail company. And, so, Filenes, and just everybody, anybody...and they have census-driven mailing lists. So you say to them, can you give me households in this region that have school-aged children? Kindergarten through highschool. Yep, and I think that was something like 48,000 homes and so we mailed one flier to 48,000 homes. The print...I never even saw those fliers...The printer...we knew how many...I'm not even sure the number..."

LF: "These fliers?" [Holding up the green Hartford Host Interdistrict Magnet Schools brochure]

EL: "Yes, these. Direct mailed to people's homes in the suburban communities...uh...with the same notion that Sears does it. 'Hi we're having a tire sale.' Now I don't know whose ready to buy tires, so I mail it to everybody that's likely to own a car...or likely to have a child. And the total suburban student population is a couple hundred thousand kids last year I only needed 200 so I could fail a lot of the time to find somebody who's interested but if I found 2-300 hundred...uh...I would be golden in terms of actually bringing suburban kids in. so, we send directly to peoples homes, now, the reason we bother to do that is some of the those folks...their children are in private schools. So we don't really have a collaborative relationship with them and we wouldn't want to be perceived as attempting to raid the students from you know schools that are tuition based and the like and so that's one reason why direct marketing is a good idea. But another reason is we can't be certain that our other strategies effective in terms of parents being informed and that is we also send to every elementary and middle school in the region enough of these fliers to be sent home with every child."

LF: "What if they are illiterate or cannot read English?"

EL: "Then they would be at a serious disadvantage."

LF: "Then what do you do to make sure that everyone has an equal chance?"

EL: "In the recruitment efforts within the Hartford students we give..."

JD: "We have one of those here..." [Showing the bilingual magnet information packet]

EL: "And so remember now the hope is that the overwhelming majority of the kids that we bring in from the suburbs are Anglo. Or white because Hartford public school are something like 97 percent [minority?]. And while many of the kids that come in from the suburban communities are minority, not majority, ultimately, given...again, remember what I said about when you're talking about a parent perspective it is different than if when you are talking about the lawyers or educators perspective. [The state?] Will only fund this program if we meet certain racial diversity standards what that means is bringing the white folks in um so we make no effort to put our documents into other documents when we are recruiting in the suburbs. I'm not happy with this first effort in Hartford to um because while the intro materials, the application themselves, the application rules are in both English and Spanish...um...there is no description of any school in either language other than a simple label and the labels are all just in English. Um... but it's a

first step...uh...and it will be better in the future. So direct mail, home, distribution directed at schools asking them to cooperate and send them home...um...informing the suburban communities that we are available to come to PTA groups or to school board meetings. What we haven't yet done is targeted schools to do assemblies particularly middle schools, 8th graders...we will hopefully do that in the future. Another strategy that we have not yet used, but are likely to use this coming year in the fall before the recruitment campaign actually gets going is set up a number of VIP days where we would invite principals, board of ed members, PTA presidents from the whole region to a sign up basis to come into Hartford and get on a coach bus and to tour x number of the schools and so we might have a number of high school days a number of elementary school days to demystify... 'Come see what is that were recruiting kids to.' And when I have done this in the past with another community...um...obviously the only people that respond to the invitation are people that are gonna be a little bit more open to the possibility. Or openly aggressive. And generally with those people is always an "Oh my god, I had no idea' reaction. Now lemme see if I've missed anything. Another strategy that has been used is that we know if effective is getting employers to allow us to do a direct marketing to their employees so the theory that there is x number of people working in Hartford but don't reside there. And they are comfortable coming into Hartford to work which is not true for everybody and for some of those people especially the parents of especially young children, they might actually like having their children being close by to where they work...um...and that starts with city employees, teachers, and other city employees. We have a partnership with the university of Hartford and Capital Community College and I would say okay, allow us...we'll give you the materials that you distribute to your staff. We have different businesses working with different magnet schools as business partners...so we create a variety of ways and its very possible that a family might receive information from three of four directions at once...another one...another thing that we will do next year is slides in the movie theaters...One of our schools this year did a billboard and it was very effective. Another thing we looked into is one of the wraparound bus posters, but those go for around \$3000 a month...I mean you could buy a car for that amount. Now at the building level, it is really important what each school does because they are gonna have the more elaborated descriptive material. They are going to have a message that they project...uh are gonna appear to be organized or disorganized and so one thing when you're looking at a glossy brochure or listening to a central office type talk about...ya know making promises...talking like a salesman. Its quite a different thing when you are talking or looking at the person who's the principal or an instructor its very important how those people represent [unclear??] as well as what the message actually is. So we right now have a website, district magnet school level website, under development...there will be all kinds of links to school levels...its taking advantage of every...every uh...last year the yellow brochure of this...well 2 years ago there was really no campaign at all and the first 6 mo after the Sheff settlement a lot of people out of CREC and few of people out of Hartford public schools made efforts but it was really uncoordinated. The two new magnet schools they got 9 suburban applications. 9. And they turned towards Hartford public schools for failing and it was a design for failure, there was no support for any recruitment campaign...nothing. We did one thing last year. So, now we go to year two. And now we have 4 Sheff schools...actually we were only supposed to have four but we ended up with 5 new Sheff schools and we got permission to print our first brochure and we did the direct mail and the school mail and the letter to [unclear]. Late in the year...uh...it took us a long time to get it set up. There were 25 available seats and we got 1,000 applicants another reason that this if this is a business, a profitable business, I'm in a very enviable position where if

I don't get 95.5% of the people who could buy to buy I still win. There are other things about this that are not so much about marketing but understanding that the challenge is not as great as most people think. A whole lot of people, when I first arrived told me that I'm never gonna get people to send their kids to Hartford public schools because we have a terrible reputation the state [unclear??] said that Hartford is perceived as dangerous cit. people just had reason, after reason, after reason why you were never gonna get people...and everything that they said was a real challenge that I had to overcome but they never thought about the other side and that is how many people ate potentially out there that could conceivably come if they wanted to, and are they all happy? At the middle and high school level, a lot of these towns have one school and a school may be terrible successful with the overwhelming majority of kids...now when I say successful I don't only mean academically successful, I mean are they satisfied. There are a lot of honors students whose parents are not satisfied with the school...so whenever you're marketing you have to ask yourself now, what is it that you're marketing and who is it that might be interested? And the people that are up and down happy with what they got aren't looking for a better thing they might get surprise but there are a lot of people out there who are not completely satisfied and its for every conceivable reason, academics, its boring, lack of diversity, but you know University of Hartford is here its not in Simsbury alright...so...and Capitol Community College is here...and so there are certain things that we have. Hartford Stage Company, the Athenaeum...there is a wealth of learning opportunities that only exist here or only exist in this concentration, no where else in the region, so to the extent that the schools can take advantage of those resources through partnerships of one sort or another, you can even provide unique opportunities."

LF: "Well I was just going to say that it seems as if you've come along way from those 9 initial applicants, but we, during our interviews with the magnet school parents, have still seen some discrepancies between whether suburban parents could access the information. Some of them had to go out of their way to look on the internet, and still had difficulties – Some of them from Simsbury – it seems that you have come a long way but how to you exactly tap those resources...?"

EL: "Well I wanna reach as many people as I can but that's not my priority..."

LF: "Is that 48,000 that you were talking about, the people that receive the brochures..."

EL: "Those are families."

LF: "Is that just Hartford?"

EL: "No, none of them are Hartford. The Hartford ones I send these to the schools and I say send them home. I have a captive audience in Hartford...and if you print that in a publication, I will smack... I'll find where you live and tell your parents that they are wasting their tuition money...I'm telling you now...[joking]."

PART 2 [transcribed by Lainey]

[Picking up from Libby's question on Linehan's statement in the Hartford Courant]

EL: You can do it geographically and there is no constitutional protection for geography so if I give Simsbury 20 seats the chance that most of those seats will be minority are real small so if I give Bloomfield 20 seats the chance that the majority of those seats will be white is really small when I do direct mail, I didn't mail any to them, the school district is more minority isolated than ours they have fewer white children than we do so I don't target, that's not the target, no, if I'm a Bloomfield parent I feel that...

LF: Isn't that putting them at a disadvantage, if you don't send them things?

EL: Yeah, but the office for civil rights in Washington has said that as a last resort and if it's the only thing you can do, you can use race in the assignment of kids in the lottery because remember now the goal here is for more diversity, so on the one hand I have a constitutional decision in CT that says that separate is inherently unequal and it works at the disadvantage of poor minority kids and so we have to throw a variety of devices, magnet schools is only one of them, we have to bring kids into more racially and ethnically and economically diverse schools but the only thing you get punished for meaning they close your program down is if your not racially diverse, I could become completely economically diverse, whatever that means [???] that doesn't count for anything no matter what the law says, when it comes to is the program succeeding in its diversity goals, there are no economic diversity goals, there are no ethnic diversity goals, there is minority and non-minority, racial, there are only two racial categories so if you had 100 percent African American school and through an aggressive campaign you brought 30% Hispanic population to that school in the real world you've made that school more diverse but for the purpose of the Sheff decision that don't count. The only thing that counts is minority, not minority now, the office for the civil rights and the US department of education has given tremendous guidance based upon regional, regional court, federal court decisions, the supreme court hasn't decided anything yet, has given guidance to what's likely to keep you out of trouble with the law in terms of reverse discrimination and so there is an allowable as a last resort narrowly tailored use of race in the assigning of kids. But the preferred method to bringing diversity to a school and staying out of court and not violating anyone's rights or perceived rights, cause you don't have to be wrong to be brought to court, someone just has get angry at you, is to have an applicant pool of people who apply that reflects what you want in the end and so the law of averages just kicks in...

LF: So are you saying that more...

EL: Let me finish, I know I'm long winded...but the guidance from the feds is that the preferred way to have your lottery work so that you get the mix of kids that you want is to get a mix of applicants that mirrors what you want to end up with, than the law of averages kicks in now to achieve that, there is nothing wrong with aggressively recruiting under represented groups of kids, who is under represented? White folks, aggressively recruiting, that would mean Simsbury, not Bloomfield, there is no constitutional violation of anyone's rights that I didn't mail these home to, so there's the notion of school choice and different strokes for different folks, one size does not fit all that you might want to be in a Montessori school, you might want to be in a magnet school and you might want to be in a Bank St. model elementary school and you all as consumers shop around and you get info through a variety of vehicles, state department education websites, state profiles, NCLB reports ...

LF: What is NCLB?

EL: No Child Left Behind reports and you all as informed consumers go out there and try to find out the best school for your kid, that's cool but that's only half of what I'm supposed to do the other half of what I'm supposed to do is make these schools take predominately minority and poor schools and make them more racially, ethnically and economically diverse and to do that I've got to aggressively get white people to do what most people don't think white suburban people are gonna do, send their babies to Hartford. I've been in public forums frequently where I make a joke about it and I say 'you know people ask me why did a thousand families of all colors as a free will act send [??] to take their kids out of higher performing school districts and send them to magnet schools, brand new magnet schools, schools that didn't even have buildings or principals yet, why did they do that? And I seriously say I can only think of two reasons, one is that those individual parents in each one of those thousand cases saw something of value that made sense to them for their child so they pursued it, had nothing to do with the average test scores from the two school districts much more specific, something about what their kid needed and what they saw even if it was only an idea about the school that didn't exist, or alternative we need to report these thousand families to DCF for child abuse because clearly their children have done something wrong and are being punished by being sent to the Hartford public schools, "you do that one more time and your gonna be sent to a high school in Hartford." But I say that so people will kinda go "oh yea" there must be something, you know, obviously its not the latter and its not test scores either because we don't have the test scores, even at some of our established schools we don't have test scores, relative to where the kid got [???] so, yes, fairness to everyone, informed decision making, quality education for everybody, but we also have, it's a Rubik's cube, life is really complicated, there are multiple dimensions to this work and multiple goals and objectives and once you get to trying to diversify a school district, it is so economically and racially skewed to one extreme, the Hartford public school system, and your supposed to only use race as a criteria as a last resort after you've demonstrated that you've aggressively gone after under represented groups, I don't send these things to Bloomfield myself, so and that's the challenge and even at that out of those thousand applications last year 250 came from white families 750 came from minority families, white people got accepted disproportionately because I used a narrow [??] use of race to select kids otherwise I would not have been able to even begin to approach my Sheff diversity goals and that leads to Stan Simpson [from the Hartford Courant] writing an editorial, not an editorial a commentary, it was last spring, reverse discrimination you know, and had the Hartford school district been 95% white I would be aggressively recruiting in Bloomfield and Manchester and Hartford...questions?

LP: How do the marketing strategies of the Hartford Public School magnet program differ from those of the CREC magnet program?

EL: I don't really know...um, I don't really know because I don't spend a lot of time, I've never worked, I've never been there, I've never been directly involved with their, there are a couple of things that are different though, that I can point to but I don't know if it's really a marketing strategy so much as just close to it, CREC has maybe 9 schools now and each school functions independently with respect to lottery procedures, application forms, what is considered to be a complete application, so there's not a unified approach, I think this year may be the first year

where they are even having a unified application deadline, lottery day, so each school is a singleton operation and our approach is to have a unified one application that is used for all the schools, can be used for multiple schools, you can apply to up to 3 schools, and my definition is one due date so on and so forth, we think that's more user friendly, think about when you were applying to Trinity, your applications to the schools were each individual to all the schools you were thinking about but your financial aid application that generic stuff is universal so you didn't have to fill out fifteen times and you didn't have to learn fifteen different forms to fill out for financial aid , just once and it would have been sent on to everybody and so having one set form, one deadline I think is more parent friendly than having every school do their own thing, their own way, drilling down a little bit deeper, our system not as open as some would like it to be like in the papers recently, but our system doesn't have a lot of hoops to it in other words we don't ask, we get a simple application filled out and delivered to us one way or another and that's a valid application the parent might not know anything about the school they are applying to they might have gone to an open house, they might not have, they might not have they might have just heard from a neighbor this is a good school, they might hate their neighborhood school and they are desperate for anything that is different I have no idea, we don't look at kids records, we don't know if they are special Ed or not, we don't know if they are English or foreign language dominant, we don't know what their attendance is, we don't know what their IQ, their test scores we don't ask for teacher recommendations, we just say what school would you like to go to and have a parent sign it, at the other extreme there are in the CREC cluster a series of much more prohibitive requirements to have a completed application, the parent must attend an orientation session prior to the lottery, now the arguments in recommendations so on and so forth differ, the arguments for doing it that way, arguments that CREC has had, arguments that Hartford schools have had in the past but no longer and other schools all over the country, is when your increasing that parents are well informed about the school they are applying to so once their kid gets in your not gonna have a mismatch of assumptions about what the rules are, what the school is all about and that is desirable, it becomes a question of what the trade off is, I can tell you with no uncertainty that if I was a kid right now with the same parents that I grew up with in New Haven living in Hartford that I never would have had an application to a magnet school my father was totally, working class family, my father was totally uninvolved with anything that had to do with school he liked when I got good grades so he could brag to his friends but beyond that my father never went to a PTA meeting, never went to a school event, I'm not proud of this, that was just my father, my mother who, they were both children of the Depression, the Great Depression, probably heard of it, I heard of it too, I wasn't there then, almost but not quite, my mother was the oldest of seven children, her mother got sick she was in the seventh grade, my mother had to quit school and take care of her younger siblings and she never went back so she has an incredible inferiority complex confusing education with intelligence, so she was always intimidated to do anything, she would go but she as very very shy, so no mater who I was because of the accident of who my parents are I never would have fit an applicant to a school that required that my mother attend an orientation session first, it just never would have happened, so we [??] on the side of inclusion particularly given that we, given that 70% of our seats will be going to Hartford children and we know that many of these children are coming from families that are facing lots of challenges so we don't, so we want it to minimize, people are even suggesting more radical ways of being totally inclusive of kids who are under represented, under advocated for, so, I'm so long winded I don't remember what the question was

JD [Jack Dougherty]: I have one quick follow up just for my clarity for my sake, you've explained very clearly the direct marketing and everything else, just one thing I need to understand, these green things, these, I think you also said your sending stacks of these to some suburban school districts...

EL: Yes, yes...

JD: We know that several suburban school districts do not consider themselves active participants in magnet school programs as other suburban districts do, any sense about whether the suburban districts are actually distributing your brochures?

EL: No, no I don't really have much of a sense, I don't waste much time or energy thinking about it, it's just cheaper to do it and...

JD: So you did your job?

EL: Yea and if I wanted to be aggressive about it, I don't think it would be worth the energy because I know that you can win the battle but lose the war, and so if I know I'm right, I now I have a right to have my materials distributed under CT state law even if there is no partnership and I don't even remind them that I have the right, because I'm broadcasting through the media through direct mail to and through schools, I know that there are gonna be x number of applicants from every one of these communities and if an applicant gets told well we're not going to authorize you going that town now has a political problem because they've got parents who want something and there's no charge so on what basis, what form of paternalism are you practicing to say "no?" and in two counties in the state of CT, I've only has 2 districts that ever say no, and one has reversed itself and the other one has just recently said no but they will eventually reverse themselves, one in the greater New Haven area and now one in the greater Hartford area...

JD: Do you mind saying which one in the greater Hartford area?

EL: Enfield, and the heart of the concern on the part of the superintendent is that some of the kids that may come to us may be special Ed kids and they are fiscally responsible for providing special education services and their budget is incredibly tight and so they don't want that exposure...

JD: They don't want to send the money out

EL: Right, but there is a certain level of irony here because they, that same school district receives scores of Hartford kids including special Ed kids and so it's in effect a one way street its ok for Hartford kids to go to Enfield but not ok for Enfield kids to come to Hartford so you know, persistence wins the day.

[Linehan shows us his Calvin and Hobbs cartoon "management model" -- the punch line is "persistence"]