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Why Parents Choose:
Patterns of School Choice and the Role of the
Hartford Community School

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Abstract:

In 2006, Hartford Public Schools became an all-choice district effectively eliminating the concept of zoned neighborhood schools. Designed to make public schools hubs of community development and empowerment, the Hartford Community Schools were founded three years later. This study is intended to develop a basic understanding of school choice preferences among poor minority parents and address the contradiction of local, community-based schools operating within a larger all-choice market-driven district reform strategy. Drawing on data from six interviews with Hartford Community School parents and analysis of a pre-existing publically available data set collected by the National Household Education Survey this study focuses on the complex nature of parent choice. I argue that powerful socioeconomic factors and historical perspectives greatly impact patterns of public school choice among low-income minority parents. This suggests that it is inappropriate to contextualize the schooling preferences of low-income parents of color using a white middle-class centric understanding of educational values. Further, given the recent expansion of parent choice in public education nationally, it is important to question if school choice is really the most effective strategy to improve education opportunities for low-income minority families.

Introduction

During the past decade, school choice in public education has expanded nationally. The increasing presence of magnet schools, charter schools, and intra-district all-choice systems enables parents to choose from a wide range of free public school options. Choice empowers parents to select the best schools and create market-driven positive change in public education. However, not all parents are prepared to participate equally in the choice process. Consequently, school choice might not be an appropriate strategy to reduce disparities in educational opportunity among marginalized socioeconomic groups. Current research identifies a range of socioeconomic factors that influence schooling preferences, shifting away from a more deficit-based understanding of choice preferences for low-income minority parents. It is important to develop a more holistic understanding of schooling preferences of low-income minority parents. Recognized as a platform to create social capital and foster community stability, the neighborhood school should be reevaluated as an important component of high-need urban school districts.

The City of Hartford

For decades, the effects of concentrated poverty, racial isolation, and urban decay have ravaged the city of Hartford, Connecticut. The city's impoverished residents were left with a crumbling infrastructure, failing schools, and little promise of upward mobility. Although a small city with a population of just 123,945, Hartford is one of America's poorest cities. The median household income in 2009 was just 29,190 dollars and nearly one third of families live below the poverty line.

Almost half of city residents identify as Latino and one third identify as African-American (US Census, 2009). With a large immigrant population, the school system serves students from over 24 countries speaking over 20 different languages (Strategic School Profile, 2010).

By the close of the 1990s, Hartford Public Schools (HPS) was floundering. Hartford was consistently the lowest performing district on state tests and fewer than half of its students were graduating from high school. In 1995, 29.6% of all Connecticut students passed the reading, writing, and mathematics sections of the Connecticut Mastery Test while in Hartford, only 4% of students passed all three sections. Rife with mismanagement, the city was in dire straights. Basic supplies were missing from some schools, the school department failed to pay rent on office spaces, and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Public Secondary Education even recommended revoking Hartford Public High School's accreditation (Burns, 2002). It was a tumultuous time for the school district and Hartford was not serving the needs of its students. Something needed to change. One of the nation's largest suburban-urban educational achievement gaps desperately needed to be addressed. HPS was failing its students; few were escaping the cycle of generational poverty that still persists in Hartford.

As the years progressed test scores and other academic indicators continued to decline even after the state's lackluster takeover of the district. Finally, in 2006, the Hartford Board of Education started on a new comprehensive and aggressive reform strategy spearheaded by the incoming superintendent, Dr. Steven Adamowski. This reform was designed to reinvigorate the tired school system and

create a modernized and effective system reflective of parents' needs. The cornerstone of the reform was the creation of a high-performing portfolio of schools where parents are free to choose the best schools. This reform strategy closes chronically under-performing schools and replaces them with themed models that have been proven to be successful. Each school is different, based on a distinct philosophy, educational paradigm, or academic focus. Every school is challenged to become high performing or risk closure.

HPS is an all-choice system; in Hartford, the days when zoned neighborhood schools were the only option in public education are gone. In fact, if a child is either entering system for the first time or enrolled in a school's terminal grade, parents are required to choose a school. Because children no longer assigned to a school based on geographic location, parents can vote with their feet and enroll their children in the best schools. Theoretically, parent choice would expose the bureaucratic school system to market pressures and ignite positive change. Schools would be forced to improve and adapt to parent needs or face declining enrollment and possible closure. This reform strategy recognizes that public education is not "one-size-fits-all." Rather, in a community as diverse as Hartford, the school system needs to recognize diversity in academic interests and educational values.

What is a Community School?

"A community school is not just another program being imposed on a school. It embodies a way of thinking and acting that recognizes the historic central role of schools in our communities — and the power of working together for a common good. Educating our children, yes, but also strengthening our families and communities so that, in turn, they can help make our schools even stronger and our children even more successful."

- Ira Harkavy and Martin J. Blank, "A Vision of Learning That Goes Beyond Testing." Education Week, April 17, 2002

Founded in January 2009, The Hartford Community Schools (HCS) is just one piece of the district's multi-faceted reform strategy. Currently, six schools in Hartford are designated as community schools. The HCS movement expands upon the familiar notion of the neighborhood school and emphasizes partnerships between schools and local non-profit organizations. By integrating high academic standards with health and social services, community schools are designed to improve academic opportunity for students and neighborhood stability while combating the effects of concentrated poverty. Community schools strive to create an environment where all students are given the opportunity to reach their highest potential. They fill the void of services that exists between traditional public schools and local communities needs.

The community school model transforms standard public schools from rigid disconnected institutions into vibrant community centers addressing a spectrum of needs. Public schools become hubs, bringing together students, their families, educators, and community organizations. Community members can find health and social services, family support services, expanded youth development opportunities, and adult education programs among other services. The community school vision serves as a platform to improve both academic achievement of students and overall community stability. The community school strategy recognizes that a student's educational achievement is not just a factor of academic offerings and school quality. Especially among socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, the availability of basic health and social services impacts student achievement.

This research explores the question: Why do low-income minority parents choose schools and what does this mean for the role of the Hartford Community Schools within the larger district reform strategy? Grounded in an understanding of existing literature and a careful analysis of different data sources, this research suggests that low-income minority parents choose schools based a holistic understanding of schooling priorities. Low-income minority parents are predisposed towards neighborhood schools not because of parental indifference as some literature suggests, but rather because socioeconomic status and historical perspectives significantly constrict choice sets for those parents. Considering the choice preferences of low-income minority parents, the Hartford Community Schools may be a more effective reform strategy to better serve the needs of Hartford parents.

Literature Review

Inner cities have been subjected to decades of racial isolation and concentrated poverty. Schools that serve inner-city populations have long been identified as failing or inferior. Low-income minority students are often trapped in these substandard, underfunded, and overcrowded schools, which helps to perpetuate the cycle of generational poverty and racial oppression for minorities nationwide. Today, it is hard to find an inner city that has not been destroyed by neglect and urban decay. Schools play a pivotal role in social mobility and the collection of social and cultural capital. Advocates of school choice suggest that

enabling parent choice will expose the overly bureaucratic public school system to market forces and create a momentum of positive change in American education. However, this is based in the flawed assumption that all parents can choose equally.

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) governs the basic understanding of school choice. RCT follows the belief that all parents make decisions based on preferences that are constricted by real-world circumstances and needs. However, Bell (2008) discusses that RCT is faulty because “it treats a crucial construct –preferences– as exogenous to the inquiry” (p. 121). Put simply, the author states that schooling preferences are not static. Rather, they are subject to the historic, cultural, and socioeconomic structures that parents must navigate daily. As a result, preferences change over time. Additionally, parents develop their choice based on resources available to them that are heavily dependent on social class and education level. It is important to acknowledge that no socioeconomic class uniformly hopes things will just “work out” for their children. Parents in higher socioeconomic classes have the luxury to make different schooling decisions based on cultural capital and social privilege unavailable to poor and working class parents.

There is little disagreement among scholars that socioeconomic and racial identities strongly affect patterns of school choice. However, there is disagreement regarding how exactly these differences manifest themselves along cultural and ethnic lines. Parents’ preferences for schools cannot be defined in simple terms because choice reflects personal experiences, histories, and emotions. When given the opportunity to choose, parents cite a large variety of reasons that lead them to choose one school over another. Bell (2007) argues that parents’ geographical

preferences connect to larger ideas about parenting, family life, and one's understanding of the stratified nature of American society. In her qualitative research in a poor mid-western city, Bell found that social capital strongly influences school choice. In her set of longitudinal interviews with parents, she found that parents relied on social networks to both gather background information on schools and facilitate logistics such as transportation. Availability of transportation and convenience of location significantly impacted choice. However, this is not to suggest that parent choice is only motivated by convenience. Many parents' preferences were rooted in their "implicit views of child development" (Bell, p. 387). Parents actively determine what is "too much" or "not age appropriate" for their child.

In their study of parent choice in the Netherlands, Ladd, Fiske, and Ruijs (2011) discuss how school choice can lead to higher levels of racial segregation in public education based on their analysis of school administrative data. Although different than most Western countries, the Dutch education system has a long history of school autonomy and parent choice and it provides important insights for the future of American education as parent choice policies increase nationally. The level of segregation in Dutch cities is similar to American cities and the authors suggest that as the influx of non-western immigrants continues, residential and educational segregation will continue in the Netherlands. The authors conclude that increased levels of parent choice and school autonomy actually make it very difficult to decrease segregation. This research is particularly relevant to Hartford because of its high immigrant population and extreme racial isolation.

Schneider et al. (1998) agree with other school choice literature in that they recognize parents of different socioeconomic and racial groups have different values and preferences for schooling. However, based on their survey data from two suburban and two urban school districts Schneider et al. assert that this difference does not manifest itself as most critics predict. Rather, low socioeconomic status parents with lower levels of formal education want schools with higher test scores because they feel that attending “good” schools, as defined by test scores, is an essential gatekeeper to higher education. Meanwhile, middle-class white parents have the luxury to evaluate schools more holistically and subjectively. Additionally, they discuss that less educated parents prefer more structured and disciplined schools, “again putting them at odds with the prevailing beliefs of progressive education likely to be endorsed by more highly educated, more affluent parents” (p. 499). Segregation might emerge through school choice because different racial or socioeconomic groups have characteristically different sets of values regarding education. School choice patterns reflect the fundamental differences that arise among ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups. Most importantly, this difference means that school choice has the potential to increase racial and economic segregation in America’s public schools. However, less than one percent of respondents directly mentioned “race” as the primary motive of school choice. Consequently Schneider et al. were unable further analyze the impact of racial demographics on school choice. Because it includes personal interview data, my research can more effectively address the impact of race on school choice. However, Schneider et al. conclude that race is likely declining as a factor. Additionally, the

authors state that “an emphasis on values and diversity may be luxuries” that middle class parents are more likely to stress (p. 498). Furthermore, white parents do not share the concerns of racial hostility that minority parents must consider.

Lower socioeconomic status parents were much more likely to emphasize a safe environment and fundamentals of education, such as test scores. Schneider et al. argue that is due to two reasons. Firstly, urban school districts serving poor minority parents historically have higher incident rates of violence and misbehavior because of the effects of concentrated poverty and racial isolation. Secondly, because minority and low-income parents recognize the “gate keeping points” that their children must pass to land comfortably in the middle class, they emphasize fundamentals and a more disciplinarian style.

Related, parents often choose local schools based on cultural familiarity. Although many minority parents live in neighborhoods suburban residents might view as substandard and dangerous, many parents feel at home in these neighborhoods because they are familiar with the community. This is particularly relevant for recent immigrant populations. Bell (2007) also found that parents make judgments about school quality based on building appearance or student behavior at dismissal. Decisions based on a school’s academic merit were largely absent from her discussion. However, that absence does not necessarily suggest that poor parents devalue academics. Rather, poor minority parents lack the socioeconomic capital to focus on more abstract school qualities, which limits their focus to more visible and concrete indicators of school quality. The understanding of place-based geography provides an important framework to study parent choice in Hartford.

Other research places a stronger emphasis on academics and school performance indicators. In their study of magnet school choice, Haynes, Phillips, and Goldring (2010) discuss the choice patterns of Latino parents. Their study involved a total sample of 718 parents (with a response rate of 56.7%) who submitted magnet school applications for the 2002-2003 academic year in the Nashville, Tennessee region. The authors argue that a school's academic performance is, on average, the most important characteristic minority parents will consider. Although all parents appear to value a school's academic reputation, Latino parents differ considerably from Black and White parents in the use of social networks to evaluate schools. The limited English language skills of many first generation Latino parents creates a "barrier that may influence their access to social networks ... and other mechanisms that might attempt to inform parents about their school choice options" (Haynes et al., pg 782). Although it is recognized that Latino parents are certainly not the only racial group that faces a language barrier, it is particularly concerning within this population. The Spanish speaking Latino population in America is rapidly growing and in Hartford, over 50% of students identify as Latino (HPS strategic profile, 2010). This has significant implications on district policy. Issues and concerns of Latino parents should be of special concern in Hartford because of the large and growing Latino population. HPS needs to be able to effectively serve this population.

There has been considerable research on the intersection between race and class with school choice. However, the role of gender has largely been unaddressed in previous research. In her study of 14 African-American women, Cooper (2007)

addresses the role of school choice as a heavily racialized and gendered process. She found that given their long history of oppression and resistance, African-American women develop a strong personal commitment to find equitable education for their children. School choice in the African-American community is signaled as “motherwork” and a critical form of political resistance for Black mothers. Cooper’s argument replaces the static idea of RCT with her term “positioned school choice,” which incorporates the subjective, complex, and culturally relevant nature of school choice. Most importantly, Cooper’s theory of positioned school choice recognizes that it is inappropriate to try to understand the choice process of African-American mothers through “Anglocentric norms and decontextualized assumptions” (p. 508).

Researchers question if low-income and less-educated parents are as well equipped as their wealthier and better-educated counterparts to make informed schooling decisions. This is of particular importance for choice sets, or the portfolio of schools from which parents can choose. Low-income and middle-income parents initially consider ranges of schools that are similar. However, working class parents largely choose failing, nonselective, and free schools while middle and upper class parents generally choose non-failing and selective schools (Bell, 2009). This idea complements the theory of Schneider et al. (1998) that low-income parents consider test scores the most important indicator of academic quality. Bell builds upon this understanding by discussing that low-income and less-educated parents are less prepared to make informed schooling decisions. By nature of their education, higher-educated parents are more empowered to conceptualize academic success more holistically and not rely on more basic indicators, such as test scores.

Furthermore, because of their higher socioeconomic status, middle-class parents are not as aware of necessary educational gate points and economic limitations as working class parents. Following the understating that schooling markets are unbiased and fair, it is understood that all parents will choose the best school from the set that exists. This, however, is incorrect. This overly simplified logic does not account for the idea that both education level and socioeconomic status create different choice patterns, whether due to preference as according to Schneider et al., or unequal ability as according to Bell.

Research shows that it is extremely difficult to qualify specific patterns of parent choice. Although strong correlations between school choice and socioeconomic status have emerged there is widespread disagreement in determining what the most important factors of school choice are among different demographic groups. Parents who actively engage in the choice process have a proven interest in the academic and social development of their children. However, socioeconomic differences shape the choices parents can make. For example, parent choice is severely limited without available transportation (Bell, 2007). Low-income parents are predisposed to certain schools because of geographic factors. Lower income parents who arrive home late, tired, and burnt-out from multiple service sector jobs have little time to commit to the search process (Schneider et al, 1998). Low-income parents are at a significant disadvantage in the choice process.

In their study, Goldring et al. (2006) analyzed elements of a new student assignment plan resulting from the 1998 decision to create the unified Metropolitan Nashville School District. The authors overlaid schools zones with census block

groups to better understand a school's ability to leverage community capital in low-income racially segregated neighborhoods. The nature of the HCS as community resource centers is important because "the capacity of parents in high-risk neighborhoods to manage and promote educational success and healthy outcomes for their children may be powerfully influenced by ... community capacity building in the neighborhood" (p. 358). The authors conclude that a focus on locally zoned schools as a tool for school improvement might be ineffective because impoverished neighborhoods lack significant cultural and social capital. However, the authors also realize the capacity of neighborhood schools strongly connected with local communities (like the HCS) to promote social change requires further research. My research addresses the relationship between school choice and the role community centered schools in a high-need school district.

A clearer understanding of the HCS and its context in an all-choice system is necessary to provide disadvantaged communities in Hartford with social mobility through education. The HCS are designed to provide many of the characteristics lower-income parents regard as important in the school choice process. Understanding why parents choose the HCS will lead to a better understanding of the choice process overall.

Methodology

This study draws on both qualitative and quantitative data sets. Trinity College IRB approval was received before research began. For the qualitative data, I

interviewed six parents who have or previously had at least one child enrolled in a HCS. One interview was conducted in person while the remaining five were conducted via telephone. All parent interviews were with mothers. All interviews were recorded and transcribed and on average, the interviews lasted 34 minutes. Additionally, the identity of each interviewee and specific school(s) they discuss are kept anonymous. All names used are pseudonyms. During these interviews I asked parents about their experiences going through the choice process, how they selected the school their child currently attends, how they participate at the school, and how they understand the role of HCS in the community. The parents described both their positive and negative experiences and discussed their hopes and recommendations for the future of HCS. The structured interview guide used is included in Appendix B.

Secondly, I analyzed preexisting data collected by the Parent and Family Involvement in Education - National Household Education Survey (PFI-NHES) conducted in 2007. When appropriately weighted, this telephone survey of 10,681 respondents is statistically representative of the national population. I analyzed this data using the statistical tool SPSS. Crosstabs and, where appropriate, chi-squared values were generated to compare patterns of choice and parental involvement with race, income, language, parental education, and other socioeconomic indicators. PFI-NHES questions included reasons for school choice, if other schools were considered, level of parent involvement, and many others relating to both school choice and community focused schools. The survey disaggregates survey

respondents by many characteristics including: race, parental education and employment status, family structure, primary language, and household income.

Analysis & Interpretation

The qualitative data gathered through this study aligns with previous research. Unsurprisingly, it shows that choice preferences for low-income minority parents vary significantly from white middle-class parents. Unsubstantiated, it is easy to misinterpret the preference for neighborhood schools voiced by low-income parents as indifference towards their child's education. For example, if location is the most important consideration for these parents, then academic rigor is secondary or even negligible in the school choice process. However, this conclusion is based on the faulty rational choice theory. Rationalizing the choice process of low-income minority parents through a white middle-class centric understanding of schooling preferences ignores the impact of socioeconomic class and historical perspectives on the choice process. This project demonstrates the complex nature of education preferences that might remain unacknowledged by studies based unilaterally on decontextualized survey data. The analysis of quantitative data complements the interview data to create a broader and richer understanding of schooling preferences in high-need communities.

Location as a Function of Need

All of the parents interviewed in this study discussed the geographic location of a school as the primary reason for choice. However, the emphasis on location was primarily derived from two different reasons: economic limitations and a consciously developed preference for a local education. All six parents interviewed described their choice process as complex, important, and very involved. As one mother described:

I didn't have access to a car. I'm still not driving but I have access to a car, now. And I am very involved in my kid's life. If he were to go to one of those suburban schools, I want to be sure that when they have parent-teacher conferences, parent-school association, I can take an active part in that... I didn't want to put him into those schools because I knew that it would be difficult for me to get there.

- Joanne, Hartford Mother

When asked if location was one of the biggest factors, Joanne replied: "Yes, it was the main factor." While this example clearly indicates the effect of economic limitations on the choice process, it does not fully contextualize her choice process. It is necessary to understand her other experiences. When she moved to Hartford, her young son was reading well. However, after only a year in a local elementary school his reading level "just kept going down and down." Joanne recalls after that year his classroom teacher was asked to retire and it was a struggle to get him back on grade level. After hearing that Genesis Magnet, a HPS operated elementary magnet school, had a strong reading program, smaller classes, and more dedicated teachers Joanne decided to apply for admission. In fact, realizing the benefits of more individualized attention, she applied to multiple magnet schools in the Hartford area. As required by law, admission to magnet schools in the Hartford area

is determined through a lottery process. She sharply recalled that "...he got into none, and I gave up."

Ultimately, her son continued at his local school. Without access to a car, Joanne was unable to realistically consider schools that were further away without sacrificing her ability to be actively involved in her son's education. The district school he now attends is "just within walking distance. It's quite close." Although Joanne considered a mix of both magnet schools in Hartford and suburban towns, her creation of a choice set was severely limited by geographic distance. Put simply, after not getting into any of the magnet schools that were close enough, Joanne's only choice was her local neighborhood school. Parents of higher socioeconomic status benefit from larger choice sets because they are less likely to face economic limitations that limit geographic preference.

It is also very important to recognize this parent's perception of an all-choice system changed after completing the process. Early in the interview she stated: "the choice process. It sounds good on paper. It doesn't work." After her negative experiences, Joanne lost faith in the lottery system. Several other mothers voiced this specific type of distrust. Low-income minority mothers, especially low-income African-American mothers, can become frustrated because they perceive "educators as disrespecting and devaluing their families" (Cooper, 2007, p. 508). Minority parents are essentially disenfranchised by the system when they are not accepted at magnet schools, especially given the constricted choice sets they have. Given the high volume of applications at certain schools in Hartford, it is not uncommon for parents to have this experience. School choice is a specific form of political

resistance for minority groups (Cooper, 2007). Parents who engage in school choice and fail through no fault of their own, parents like Joanne, may be less inclined to participate in their child's future formal education. Although these experiences did not stop Joanne in particular from participating actively in her son's education, it is crucial that educators more effectively engage low-income minority parents.

The quantitative data analyzed in this research also suggests that local preferences of low-income minority parents are a factor of income, not race. When asked about the most important reasons for choosing schools, 26% Whites, 23% of Latinos and 29% of Blacks responded "academics" (see figure 1, Appendix A). Although there is a minor difference between the racial categories, the difference is not particularly significant. Responding to the same question, 17% of Whites, 28% of Latinos, and 25% of Blacks responded "location." Regarding location, there is a significant difference between White respondents and Latino and Black respondents. This suggests that although Whites, Latinos, and Blacks value "academics" equally, minorities are much more likely to cite "location" as the primary reason for school choice. This finding aligns with most existing literature.

Replacing race with total household income in the statistical analysis yields significant findings (see Figure 2, Appendix A). 29% of families making more than 25,000 dollars a year but only 18% of families making less than 25,000 dollars a year selected "academics" as the main reason for school choice. Nearly one third of families making less than 25,000 dollars a year cited "location" as most the important factor. However, only 17% of families making more than 25,000 dollars responded similarly. Families making less than 25,000 dollars annually were

significantly more likely to choose a school based on location. Differences in choice preferences are much more pronounced when disaggregated by household income. In Hartford, more than 40% of families are making less than 25,000 annually (US Census, 2009). Accordingly, this finding has significant consequences in the Hartford context. This data suggests that income has a much larger impact on school choice patterns than race. The statistical differences evident between racial categories likely result from the correlation between race and income and, to an extent, the race-based preferences exhibited by some minority parents discussed later in this paper.

The analysis of PFI-NHES data also reveals that parents of households where English is the dominant language were roughly twice as likely to have considered at least one other school for their child than in households where Spanish is the dominant language (34% versus 18%, respectively). This suggests that a parent's decision and ability to choose might be a factor of language. Parents who do not have the language skills or cultural context to understand the complex choice process are at a disadvantage. In Hartford, 18% of K-12 students are not proficient in English and 43.4% students come from households where English is not the primary language (Strategic School Profile, 2010).

Theoretically, increased availability of transportation for students would enable many low-income parents to consider more schools further from home. HPS has a complicated standard to determine whether or not students will receive transportation. Following this standard, relatively few students are eligible for transportation to school. In FY 2010-2011, HPS spent over twenty-two million

dollars on transportation costs (Adopted Education Budget, 2011). Especially given the current economic climate, it would be unreasonable to provide transportation to every HPS student wanting to attend a school outside of their local neighborhood. Additionally, even if every student were offered transportation by the school district many parents would still to lack transportation to their child's school. Consequently, the HCS model might be more effective in equalizing education than an intra-district choice system alone for low-income minority communities. This research suggests that Hartford parents do not have the social or economic capital to drive a market-based reform strategy without additional supports.

Location as a Function of Preference

I'm a strong believer in my children walking to school. I believe in the community school. I believe in neighborhood schools.
- Roberta, Hartford Mother

A first generation immigrant and mother of three, Roberta's story is not uncommon in Hartford. Like any mother, she wants the best for her children and education is their ticket out of the damning cycle of generational poverty. She enrolled both her eldest and middle daughters at the closest public school. They attended a mixture of district schools and local magnet programs throughout middle and secondary school. Although Roberta had more luck than parents like Joanne by gaining admission through the lottery process, she declined the offers for her youngest daughter and chose instead to keep her at her neighborhood school. Each time she was accepted at a different school, they "would check out the school and we would end up not deciding to go." Most recently, her daughter was accepted at a school in South Windsor, a nearby suburb. Again, they chose the neighborhood

school. As Roberta explained, “I own a home in the neighborhood, and so, I think it comes on me to support my school, work with the school, work on the [parent-teacher organization]... serve on the school governance council, volunteer at the school...” She has been very active in the education with all of her children, expressing: “I am the first and most important teacher in my children’s life.” Both Joanne and Roberta expressed a strong desire to be involved with their children’s school. However, Joanne explained her choice of a local school based on need while Roberta based her decision on preference. These parents’ different reasons for choosing a local school were likely created by their different experiences navigating the racial and economic hierarchy that defines the lives of low-income minority parents.

Roberta’s strong preference for local schools may, in fact, not be a true choice. Because of her status as racial minority, she was predisposed to choose a local school. Roberta explains one of her reasons for school choice: “and the other thing, to be honest with you, when I look at the racial make up of the schools, I didn’t want my child to be one of ten black children in that school population of 800 or 600, or 500 odd students.” This sentiment that Roberta explained was not unusual. Three of six mothers interviewed during this study explicitly mentioned race while explaining their choice preferences. Like Roberta, the other two parents mentioned, “race is a factor” and that “I looked at academics first, it’s school. Academics are key. But I also want my son to be comfortable. So I had to be careful, race is a big one.” This finding is significant because it suggests that poor minority parents simultaneously acknowledge a socioeconomic and racial hierarchy and engage

resistance strategies against these structures to protect their children from potential racial antagonism. It is important to understand that these parents did not primarily want to avoid certain racial populations. Rather, these parents realized that choosing a different school means a different community in which their child might be a racial or ethnic minority. Additionally, Hartford parents, many of who are immigrants, often enjoy a level of cultural familiarity and comfort in their local neighborhoods and want their child to enjoy the same. Considering the city's diverse population, small and insignificant changes in geographic location likely yield large and significant differences in race or ethnicity.

Parental education significantly impacts school choice patterns. Higher educated parents are empowered to make different choices. The quantitative data analyzed in this research supports that conclusion. Figure 3 (Appendix A) shows the relationship between the highest level of education achieved by the mother and the percentage of parents who considered at least one other school for their child. The relationship between education and choice is clearly demonstrated. For example, when the highest level of education the mother received was primary school, 19% of families considered at least one other school. Conversely, when the mother's highest level of education was graduate school, 43% of parents considered at least one other school. In Hartford, 65.4% of parents have a high school degree or lower. Only 5.0% of Hartford parents hold a graduate or professional degree. Within Hartford County, which includes the City of Hartford and its far wealthier suburbs, 42.3% of parents have a high school degree or less while 13.8% of parents hold a graduate or professional degree (US Census, 2009). This shows a significant difference in

educational attainment between city and suburban parents. Hartford parents are more likely to be at a disadvantage in the choice process because they, on average, have lower levels of education than suburban parents.

The Role of the Community School

"It's expensive. We both work, but it's hard."
- A Hartford Mother,

In Hartford, 29.4% of families and 42.5% of children under 18 are living below the poverty level (US Census, 2009). Many Hartford families are struggling. Working in low-wage service jobs, many parents are forced to work long hours for little money. An important component of the community school model is the availability of free medical, dental, and mental health care for students. The benefits of these services in schools are multifold. Firstly, parents are not burdened with the costs or hassle of medical appointments. This is of particular importance for non-English speaking immigrant parents who are likely unable to navigate the myriad of complicated available care options. Secondly, parents do not have to leave work to take their child to medical appointments and the out of school time for children is decreased because services are provided on-site. Lastly and most importantly, children are more likely to get the health care they need. Community schools also provide free or low-cost before and after school programming for students. As Joanne explained: "it's free, and most of us in these communities go to work and our salaries are very small... if [parents] do not always have a meal for their kids, they're given it [at the community school] usually, and they're given the opportunity to do

their homework.” The availability of a wide spectrum of on-site services is critical for parents. As another parent mentioned, “I take the bus and it takes a long time. I can’t pick up [my son] after school but I can’t afford a babysitter.” For this mother, the availability of an affordable after-school program for her son was indispensable. The services offered at HCS are deeply appreciated by parents.

Conclusion

When the community is involved, you know, the parents get help, the kids, get help, the school gets help. I believe that by everyone working together, it will, you will get some improvement - whether it is behavior wise, academic, social, everything you know. To me, everything will come together. That’s my vision of it, a community school.

- Roberta, Hartford Mother

The Hartford Community Schools are designed to improve academic outcomes of students while simultaneously improving neighborhood stability. Recognizing that schools play an important role in the creation of social capital, the HCS creates a welcoming support system that enables low-income minority communities to reach the promise of social mobility. Interviews with parents and an analysis of national survey data suggest that poor minority parents are not socioeconomically empowered to create their own social mobility through an all-choice system because it contextualizes choice using only a white middle-class centric understanding of schooling preferences. The choice patterns of low-income minority parents are significantly constrained by economic realities and social-historical perspectives. The community school model provides necessary support to improve the socioeconomic status of disadvantaged populations. Based on the

school choice preferences of parents, the Hartford Community Schools are invaluable in the neighborhoods they serve.

Limitations & Future Research

A major limitation of this research is the small sample size of parents interviewed. Although it does not invalidate the conclusions made in this study, further qualitative research regarding schooling preferences of low-income minority parents is necessary. Given both the increasing prevalence of public school choice policies nationally and the potential for neighborhood schools to act as catalysts to increase neighborhood stability and social mobility for historically disempowered socioeconomic groups, future research regarding the role of neighborhood based schools is imperative. Further research is necessary to improve the academic opportunities for marginalized populations in high-need racially isolated urban communities.

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Appendix A - Selected Charts

Figure 1:

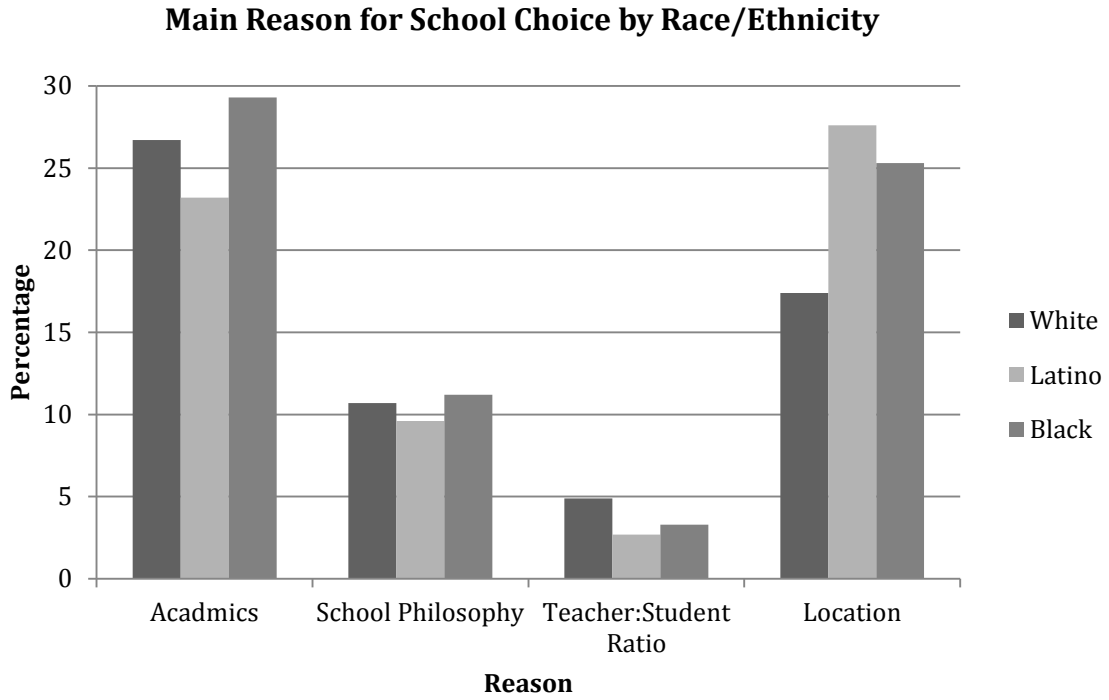


Figure 2:

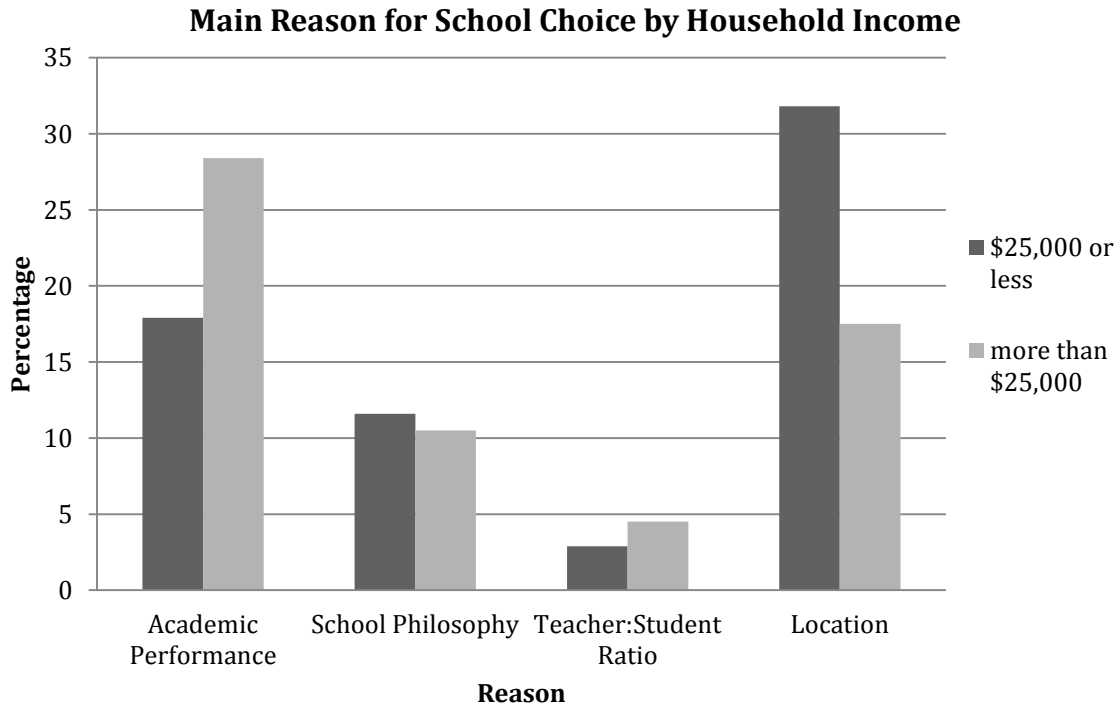
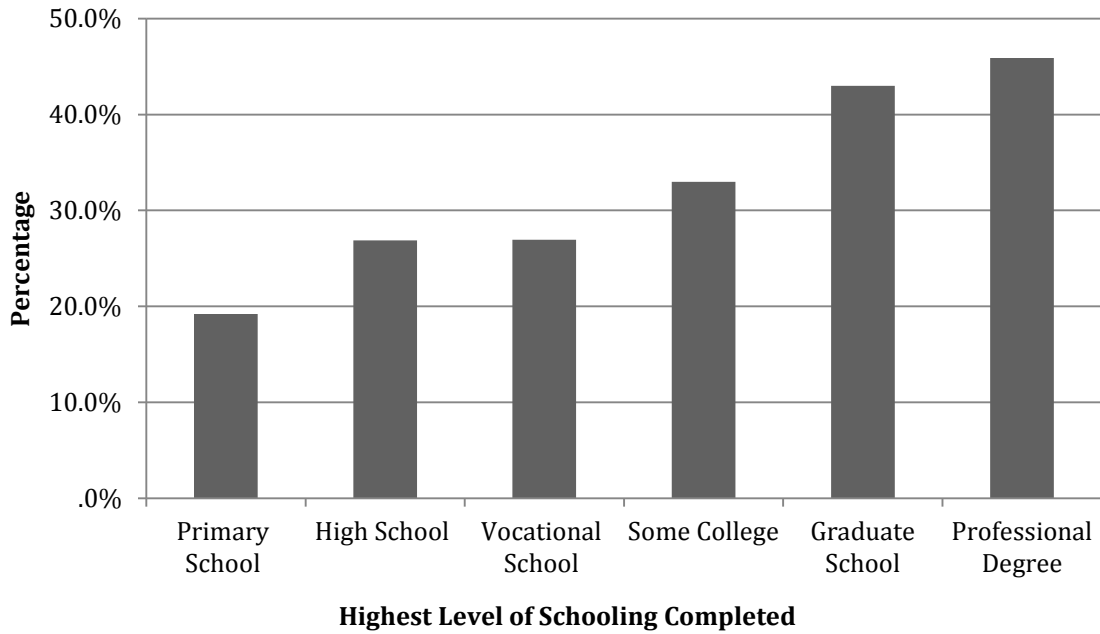


Figure 3:

Mother's Highest Level of Education and Percent of Families who Considered at Least one Other School



Appendix B - Interview Guide

Note: This guide was used to structure the interviews and was not strictly followed. It is included only to show the general progression of the interviews and the types of questions asked.

- 1) What grade is your son/daughter currently in?
- 2) Do you live in the neighborhood?
- 3) How many years have they been enrolled at this school?
- 4) Do you have any other children? Did they, or will they attend this school?
- 5) Did you know that this school is a Hartford Community School?
- 6) Did you participate in the school choice process this year?
 - a. (if yes) Can you describe your experiences? How did you choose this school? Did you consider other schools?
 - b. What kinds of characteristics are important in a school for you?
- 7) How do you learn about or evaluate schools in Hartford? Online? From other parents?
- 8) Can you explain your experiences at this school? Are you happy with your experiences here?
- 9) Are you involved at your child's school? Do you feel welcomed by teachers and other school staff?
- 10) What kind of services or programs not already available would you like to see at this school, and why?