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Timothy Goring
Trinity College

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Tim Goring
Ed 400 Senior Research Project
Professor Dyrness
Ed Studies Program
Trinity College
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Suburban Flight from Hartford Magnet Schools: Parents Views
Introduction

Many magnet schools in Hartford, Connecticut were established in part of the desegregation strategy in response to the court case of Sheff V O'Neill. The case really illustrated the unequal education that students living in Hartford, Connecticut receive while they are in school. Over 90% of the pupils attending schools in Hartford are students of color. The result of this case was that within four years over 30% of Hartford's black and Latino students would be in desegregated school settings. This was mandated, but the goal was not actually achieved. The case was trying to decrease the racial and ethnic isolation experienced by students from Hartford. The settlement also included building and establishing magnet schools in and around Hartford to attract white suburban children to the schools and to further diminish the isolation of Hartford students.

The Suburban Flight Magnet School was one of the schools established in response to the court case. The

school was established in 2001 and the school's population consists of over 50% of the student body coming from Hartford, Connecticut and the other 50% coming from surrounding towns around Hartford. This magnet school creates a diverse learning environment which benefits Hartford children and enhances a suburban child's learning. However, this particular magnet school has retention problems with students finishing the preschool programs, and they do not continue kindergarten within the same school. Many preschool children will leave this school and return to their home school districts.

I wanted to focus on this particular school since I have a personal history with this school. I have been associated with the school for the past three years now. For the first year I was a mentor to some of the children at the school through a program called Learning Hand and Hand through the University of Hartford. The following two years spent at the school, I continued to be a mentor and I also became a sub teacher. I assisted the teacher in classroom activities and I often ran activities with children alone. Having this strong connection and relationship with the school, it allowed me to see what really goes on within the school, and to see all the problems that the school faces.

I have seen first hand problems of retention rates for preschool children. What I have seen during these past three years is that after two years of preschool, many parents end up pulling their children out of the school. Witnessing this made me very intrigued and interested to understand why this is occurring, and what are the reasons why parents from only the suburban towns are leaving the school. As a result, this became a great research project for me to study and to try to understand since it is very interesting and it is also a very personal issue for me since I am a member of this community.

Research Question

My research question asks, why do a large number of suburban families withdraw their children from the University of Hartford Magnet School after preschool and return to their home school districts? This school is extremely sought after because for the past several years there has been a waiting list of children hoping to be excepted at this institution. The school is highly desirable by families and yet after two years of preschool these children from the suburban areas return to their home schools districts. Why does this occur in such large numbers after two years of preschool? Finally, why are

there more families from the suburban towns leaving the school than families from Hartford?

Working Thesis

My thesis argues that parents from suburban towns praise the thought of diversity and truly value the multiple intelligence education their child receives, but these reasons are not significant enough to keep their child at the school. I argue that parents send their child to the school to experience diversity, but many of the reasons why parents from the suburban towns are leaving the school are for diversity reasons as well. I heard and saw from the parents that issues with economics, behavior and race all played an issue in why they will have their children leave the school or will soon leave the school. Unfortunately these issues triumph over diversity and for an education at a magnet school and attrition is supporting these departures from the school.

Significance

This is extremely significant for education since magnet schools have been viewed as an effective way to achieve diversity and desegregation. Magnet schools strive to create a place where students from all different backgrounds can come together and learn. The goals that magnet schools are trying to achieve are not being met if

families from suburban towns are leaving the school to go back to their home town for schooling. Also, this situation relates to racial segregation and integration issues that the city of Hartford faces. Racial segregation and integration is a highly controversial issue in education and many states try to implement methods to prevent these inequalities from continuing. The city of Hartford tries to prevent racial segregation by establishing magnet schools, but these magnet schools might not be enough if incidents of suburban flight are occurring.

The significance of magnet schools will be minimal in accomplishing desegregation within Connecticut if issues like what I have found at this particular magnet school persist. Magnet schools will not be able to achieve diversity if parents from suburban areas come to the school for several years to experience a magnet education and then withdraw so they can return to their home school districts.

Literature Review

Previous research on my particular research question was very difficult to find. I was unable to find research or past research that focused specifically on Hartford, Connecticut suburban parents with children in magnet schools and their perceptions of this type of education. I

was able to find plenty of research done on magnet schools about their successes and their failures. The failures of magnet schools can correlate to my research since some of the negative attributes I found in the previous research are reasons why suburban parents will pull their children out of my particular magnet school or will decide to have them leave soon.

There has been extensive research on magnet school's successes and the attitudes towards magnet schools. The results seem to be very mixed. Supporters of magnet schools show that these schools are a great way to achieve diversity, and that magnet schools help give children opportunities in poor urban areas. Christine Rossell (2005) studied some of the reasons why magnet schools were successful and she saw that "parents like school choice, and they have been incorporated into the school choice movement as a means of improving achievement and into No Child Left Behind as a way of increasing the opportunities available to children in low-performing school" pg25. Skeptics of magnet schools emphasize that these schools do not create much diversity since magnet schools are predominately majority minority. Even if a magnet school was diverse there is still racial segregation within the

classroom, and significant differences in the school when it comes to race.

Lawson Bush (2001) argues that the effectiveness of magnet schools is debatable when it comes to desegregation and creating diversity. Bush did a qualitative study within a school and he had the help of four students within the school to help analyze the desegregation within their magnet school. Bush and the students collected data using interviews, journals which they kept, and cameras to film the school and classrooms. Lawson Bush (2001) concluded, "in short, we found that though the entire school setting is significantly racially heterogeneous, the classes are racially segregated and are maintained systematically, structurally, and by the attitudes and behaviors of teachers and administrators" (p.45) Magnet schools might be an institution that creates diversity within the school, but it might not solve the desegregation problems within the school and classroom. This study shows how desegregation was still an issue within a completely diverse school.

Updated Methodology

My methodology consisted of in-depth interviews with parents from the magnet school. The interviews were with only parents from the suburban towns. All the parents from

the suburban towns were white except for one family that was Asian. I did not want to interview any parents from Hartford. The interviews usually lasted for about forty five to sixty minutes long. I interviewed ten parents and two teachers since I wanted diverse opinions from the parents, but I also wanted the perceptions and opinions from the teachers. All the parents that I interviewed were parents of the preschool children attending the school currently. Five parents that I interviewed still had their child enrolled within the school. The other five of the parents that I interviewed have already withdrawn their child from the school, but the child was enrolled during the preschool time frame. Most of the parents I spoke to withdrew their child after preschool. Lastly, the two teachers that I interviewed were in the preschool classrooms. I have a long standing relationship with most of the parents who I interviewed, so the interviews were very honest and very informative since they expressed their true feelings towards the school.

It was a very simple process in how I chose the ten parents to interview. During the course of my time at the magnet school, I had known five parents who had already withdrawn their child from the school and enrolled them in their town school's system. The other five parents I knew

still had their child enrolled within the classroom and that they came from a suburban town.

My interview was different among parents who still had their child enrolled within the school compared to parents who have already withdrew their child from the school. Parents who still had their child enrolled in the school were talking about the problems that they have, but in a much more non aggressive manner. They spoke about their problems in what will make them withdraw their child, but they were not overtly angry about the problems as much as I noticed among the parents that have already withdrawn their child. The parents, whose child no longer attends the school, did not hold back their anger and their associated problems with the school. They were much more hostile and aggressive with expressing their problems with the school since they have already left and I felt like they needed to justify why they actually left the school. They wanted to prove that they had good reason for leaving the school since it had so many problems and situations that were unreasonable to deal with. It was very interesting since the interviews went very differently with parents that still had their child enrolled in the school compared to parents that have already withdrawn their child from the school.

The interview started off with questions of how and why did they chose the University of Hartford Magnet School. Every parent addressed the same reason of why they chose the school which was for diversity and for the multiple intelligence education. Once the reasons of why they chose this Magnet School for their child, I wanted to find out their negative view points of the school. Once the negative views of the school were shared, I asked if they had any solutions to fix these problems. Many parents had trouble thinking of solutions for the problems they had or their child had experienced at the school. Most of the parents indicated that the problems will always be there and you just can not fix them. Finally, for those parents whose child is still at the school, I then asked if they have ever thought of withdrawing their preschooler from the school. Most of the parents said they have considered it and they will probably withdraw their child in the near future. My last question was would they have ever applied to the school if they had to pay tuition? Many of the parents said that they would never have applied if there was a tuition attached. My interview started off slow with easy questions and progressed to more intense and serious questions where their true feelings would be revealed.

Many of the interviews happened during out of school settings. All the interviews that I had with parents happened within their home or on the phone. I did not feel the need to tape the interviews for I felt that would interfere with parents expressing their true feelings. The parents trusted me so I thought tape recording would make some parents reconsider having the interview with me. So I ended up taking extensive notes of the interview which lasted longer than anticipated, but I took my time writing down quotes from what each of the parents shared with me. The parents let me take time to write down everything. They were very patient and understanding. Overall, the interviews went very smoothly since I had such a great relationship with each parent and teacher. Our interviews were more like a causal conversation since they were honest and true with every question that I asked.

Analysis and interpretation

From all the interviews that I had with the parents, they all expressed to me the same reason why they decided to send their child to this magnet school. Diversity was the number one reason why parents from the suburban towns sent their child to the magnet school. The parents thought it would be beneficial for their child to experience diversity since all the parents expressed to me that

diversity is a part of real and everyday life. All the parents believed that a diverse learning education would be best for their child since the world is not only "white privilege" which is what their towns are like. However, with all the parents' strong feelings about diversity and having their child being around children from all different backgrounds, it did not really hold true.

Parents expressed to me that economics played a role in leaving the school. They felt like a financial burden was always put on them. Whenever a school party or group activity was planned the suburban parents felt like they always had to pay for everything since Hartford parents could not afford to pay. The parents did not mind that they needed to pay for these activities, but continuing to fund all the rest of the students became a problem/burden.

Parent Comment

"When we try to plan activities on the weekend with our child's friends from Hartford, we have to pay for everything! The burden is always on us!"

"When activities are held at the school or outside of school, the responsibility always lies on us. We have to pay for everything and provide everything. Parents from Hartford can not afford to help out."

Also, some parents expressed to me that since they pay taxes in such an expensive town, they should enjoy the school system in their town. Attending the magnet school is great, but they do not receive any benefits from their home town school system even though they pay taxes there.

Finally, parents expressed to me that race plays a role in their dissatisfaction. The parents expressed to me that their child sometimes comes home and demonstrates behavior that is not appreciated or acceptable. The parents know their children has learned it from their peers who live in Hartford. The parents I spoke to feel like the children living in Hartford are not raised appropriately and their parents are not great role models. The parents expressed to me that they have seen the parents from Hartford exhibiting poor behavior when they are present at the school. The suburban parents believe that the parents from Hartford are the problem. The school is not the problem the parents are having, the issues are with the other parents. If we fix the parents from Hartford, then the school will be fine. The parents expressed to me that the suburban children and their parents do not act like that and do not show disturbing behavior. So, it must be the Hartford parents that show and demonstrate this poor behavior.

Parent Comment

"I threw a birthday party for my child and I invited everyone child from her class. Not one minority child showed up."

" One of my best friends, who happens to live in Hartford, threw a birthday party for her child. My friend invited everyone from the class. The parents from Hartford came since they saw the party was being held at a Hartford address. Once the Hartford parents realized it was a white neighborhood they left and never came to it."

"Hartford parents are not sending their child to the school for the same reasons we are. They are sending their child to this school since they are fleeing their public school system. The Hartford parents could care less about diversity. They make no effort to establish relationships with us."

The parents do not like that this behavior is being presented to their child. They feel like their child will pick up bad qualities from their peers who live in Hartford. The parent is very concerned to what the future will bring if they continue to keep their child within the school. The parents feel like within the next year they will be pulling their child out since they do not want

their child being exposed to behavior that is not acceptable and appropriate.

Parent Comment

"I have recently started noticing that my young boy has been coming home and displaying behavior that is not appropriate. Physical force and inappropriate language is not appropriate. I wonder where he learned this behavior since he did not learn it from home. I believe he learned it from his peer students from Hartford."

These are the main issues that were expressed by the parents that I had interviews with. The parents from the suburban towns love the thought of diversity and the multiple intelligence education, but their current issues and problems at the Magnet School are more important than the positives. These problems will likely make these parents remove their child from the school or these problems have already made the parents withdraw their child from the school. Sadly, the parents do not have any suggestions to improve the problems that they have with the school. The only outcome is for them to withdraw their child from the Magnet School and have them mainstream in their suburban school system.

The interviews that I had with the teachers were very different. The teachers views on why the parents from the

suburbs sent their child to this magnet school is completely different from what the parents expressed to me. Teachers believe the parents from suburban towns send their child to the magnet school for hiding their child's learning issues. The teachers believe the parents from suburban towns are not sending their child to the school for diversity. However, the teachers views on why the parents leave after preschool are very similar to what the parents expressed to me.

Teacher Comment

"Parents from the suburban towns send their child to the magnet school since they do not want their friends in their town to know that their child is slow or has a disability. If parents send their child to the magnet school they will not be noticed as slow or be labeled since they believe we will be too busy taking care of the bad children from Hartford."

"Parents from the suburbs like the thought of diversity since they are doing the right thing so that is why they send their child to this magnet school. They feel like their child should have experience with children from different backgrounds so their child knows that other children live differently. However, the parents do not

want much interaction with those kind of children so that is why they leave."

The teachers that I interviewed addressed the same reasons that the suburban parents did with why the parents will pull their children out of the school. The teachers knew exactly why parents from the suburbs will leave and they know it is only a matter of time for most parents from the suburbs to have their child leave the school after preschool if not before then. The teachers know that the violence, and the behavior that Hartford children exhibit is not what suburban parents want their child exposed to.

"Parents from the suburbs pull their child out of the school since they do not like the exposure that their child receives from children from Hartford."

"Parents from the suburbs do not want their child to express the same behavior and mannerism that children from Hartford do, so they pull their child out of the school so their child will not learn those bad traits."

The teachers that I interviewed differed greatly when it came to why suburban parents sent their child to this magnet school in the first place. I was very surprised to find this since I thought the reasons would have been similar. However, once I heard the teachers explanation, I thought it was very interesting and very valid. The

teachers views on why the suburban parents would leave the school were accurate with what I heard from the actual parents. The teachers and parents both expressed issues of behavior which was exactly what the parents from the suburbs did not want their child to pickup.

Conclusion

Overall, this research that I did was very interesting since I learned so much more than I expected. I knew problems existed within this school concerning retention rates, but I did not know how deep the problems went. The interviews that I had with the parents and teachers really helped me to understand how serious and deep these problems are for this magnet school. However, after understanding the problems facing the magnet school and for all parents involved, I realized that the solutions to fix this great problem are going to take lots of time, much support, and further studies to address all of these concerns. The parents, as mentioned earlier, could not think of any solutions to fix the problems that they have with the school. The teachers expressed to me that solutions are hard and it takes lots of effort from everyone to create solutions to remove these problems and barriers. This work is just not happening.

A great significance of my research is that magnet schools try to achieve a diverse learning environment, and to desegregate inner city schools. This magnet school in particular is not fulfilling the goals set for itself since this school is not achieving a diverse learning environment after preschool and it really is not desegregating Hartford. The school consists of primarily Hartford students since the suburban parents are leaving the school. This is a problem for the school since the reason why it was established is not being met. This is also a problem nationally. If this problem exist elsewhere within the United States, then magnet schools will not be effective at all in creating a diverse learning environment and will not be able to desegregate inner city schools effectively if problems like what I have found, at this magnet school in Hartford, persist.

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Appendix- Interview questions for parents and teachers

- 1) What made you choose to enroll your child at the University of Hartford Magnet School?
- 2) Do you feel your student is receiving a quality education?
- 3) What advantages do you think a magnet school education can provide your child that your neighborhood could not?
- 4) Have you considered leaving the school? If so what are the factors that might be influencing this decision?
- 5) What are some of the negative aspects of the school that would make you withdraw your student?
- 6) On a scale from 1- 10 how does this school meet your expectations! What do you like the most or what do you like the least? 10 being the greatest, with one being the lowest.
- 7) Was diversity a reason for choosing the school?
- 8) With some of the negative attributes of the school that you addressed, can you think of any solutions to fix them that would make you consider staying enrolled within the school?

- 9) If you have left the school already, why did you leave and return to your home school district?
- 10) If there was tuition attached to sending your child to this school, would you still have considered enrolling your child here?
- 11) If your town offered a preschool and kindergarten program that was free would you have ever applied to the University of Hartford Magnet School?
- 12) These questions meant specifically for the teachers that I interviewed-Why do you think the parents sent their child to the University of Hartford Magnet School?
- 13) What reasons would the suburban parents pull their child out of the school?
- 14) I asked additional questions, but these were the standard questions that were addressed. Additional questions were only added if clarification was needed or I had a subsequent question based on their answer.

