

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## Project Choice Campaign

# **Improving and Expanding Hartford's Project Choice Program**

Prepared for the Sheff Movement coalition  
by Erica Frankenberg

## Acknowledgments

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We are particularly grateful for the support of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, which provided funding for this research, and the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), which acted as a fiscal agent for the Project Choice Campaign. The Sheff Movement coalition is independent from the Foundation and CREC and the conclusions of this report are not meant to reflect those of the Foundation or CREC.

## About the Author

Erica Frankenberg is an advanced doctoral candidate at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. She has authored a report on the racial segregation of public school teachers and is also co-author of a series of reports and articles on school desegregation trends. Recently, Frankenberg helped coordinate and write a social science statement filed with the U.S. Supreme Court in the Louisville/Seattle voluntary school integration cases, regarding the benefits of integrated schools (Ms. Frankenberg's analysis was specifically cited and attached as an appendix to the dissenting opinion of Justice Breyer). Frankenberg helped author a widely disseminated manual on voluntary integration published by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the Civil Rights Project at Harvard. She is the co-editor of *Lessons in Integration: Realizing the Promise of Racial Diversity in American Schools* (with Gary Orfield, 2007) from the University of Virginia Press.

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## Introduction to the Sheff Movement

The Sheff Movement is a community based coalition that is working to expand and strengthen the range of quality, integrated education programs available to Hartford families under the *Sheff v. O'Neill* school desegregation court decrees. These programs include the “Project Choice” program, which places Hartford children in suburban schools, and a system of 15-20 Hartford-based magnet schools that are open to children from throughout the Hartford Region.

The coalition has recently launched the Project Choice Campaign, a new project to give voice to the network of Project Choice parents and alumni and to expand support for the Project Choice program in the Hartford suburbs. The Campaign kicked off its work with an anniversary conference on December 2, 2006, co-sponsored by the Capitol Region Education Council, celebrating 40 years of the Project Concern/Project

Choice program in Hartford. We are now working to develop committees of supporters in selected suburban towns, with focus groups and some small-scale events, and we are preparing a DVD that includes interviews with alumni and some of the original founders of the Project Concern program. This research report is also a key part of the coalition’s work.

Philip Tegeler of the Poverty & Race Research Action Council (and a former lawyer in the *Sheff* case) is helping to oversee the Project Choice Campaign, along with Sheff Movement co-chairs Elizabeth Horton Sheff and Jim Boucher.

The Project Choice Campaign is grateful for funding support from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, the Hartford Courant Foundation, and the City of Hartford.



## Executive Summary

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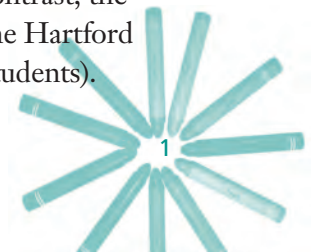
The Project Choice program, which provides integrated school opportunities for Hartford schoolchildren throughout the region, is an integral part of the State of Connecticut's response to the 1996 *Sheff v. O'Neill* school decision. The Choice program has been overshadowed by the larger interdistrict magnet school program, but like the magnet program, Project Choice has also lagged in its growth – leaving the state well short of its desegregation goals. Simply put, suburban districts in the region have not yet provided a sufficient number of seats to meet the student demand for the program. However, local districts do not make such decisions in a vacuum – there are important issues of funding, transportation, student support, coordination and capacity that have to be addressed by the state before the program can grow to its full potential. This study explored these issues in depth and includes recommendations to improve and expand the Project Choice program for participating towns and students.

In looking to the next phase of compliance with the *Sheff v. O'Neill* mandate, Project Choice could have a larger role than in the past. This is largely because the program is the most efficient means of placing students in integrated school placements. Typically, an interdistrict magnet school will take several years of marketing and awareness among suburban parents to attain a meaningful degree of racial integration. In contrast, placements in the Project Choice program provide Hartford students with immediate access to integrated

schools and classrooms – usually in exemplary learning environments.

Though the program's growth has lagged, there appears to be ample capacity in suburban school districts to accommodate additional Project Choice students. Of the 27 participating districts, ten provide less than 1% of their seats to Hartford students, and every district is under 3% of total enrollment. The state of Connecticut's school facility capacity data, which looks at only physical school capacity, suggests there may be thousands of potential seats in already existing suburban schools. This rough capacity data needs to be supplemented by a careful district-by-district review of actual capacity in the suburban districts, to determine fair target goals for each town in the region. If there were greater funding for Project Choice—for faculty, staff, and curriculum materials—suburban districts could use their excess capacity to accommodate more Hartford students.

The slow growth and low suburban participation rates in Hartford's Project Choice program stand in sharp contrast to similar programs in Boston, Minneapolis, and St. Louis. In these cities, suburban districts are taking significantly larger numbers and proportions of students. In Boston's METCO program, for example, Boston minority students account for more than 3% of district enrollment in fourteen suburban districts. One suburban Boston district enrolled 415 METCO students in 2006 (in contrast, the largest participating district in the Hartford area enrolls 96 Project Choice students).



Even at the current low participation rates, Project Choice students make up a substantial percentage of the total Black and Latino enrollment in most participating suburban districts – in other words, without this program, student diversity would decline significantly at many suburban schools. The Choice program, by creating more diverse schools, brings substantial benefits to participating Hartford students and to suburban students and districts. Research on the long term benefits of integration, including studies of Hartford’s Project Concern, shows that students of color in integrated schools are more likely to graduate from high school, go on to college, and graduate from college than their segregated peers. There are also benefits for all students, including white suburban students, such as improved cross-racial understanding and communication skills and a reduction in racial prejudice and bias, as well as improvements in critical thinking skills associated with exposure to a broader cross section of student backgrounds.

In addition to the long term benefits of diversity for students and society, there is recent evidence that Hartford students participating in Project Choice are doing better on standardized achievement tests. More than half of Project Choice students are performing at or above proficiency on state standardized tests in both mathematics and reading, rates that are higher than their Hartford Public School peers and black and Latino students statewide. This is perhaps not surprising, in that many of these suburban schools are high achieving, resource-rich environments with relatively small class size and low percentages of low-income students – which makes it more likely that adequate teaching resources can be devoted to each student’s needs. These recent achievement results are consistent with achievement studies of Hartford students in the Project Concern program in the 1960s and 70s.

The youngest Project Choice students also show impressive academic gains. In the “Early Beginnings” program, an interdistrict kindergarten program (offering half day kindergarten along with a full day enrichment option in selected suburban districts), Hartford students had large gains in language acquisition.

In trying to ascertain the reasons for the slow growth in the Project Choice program, we interviewed nearly fifty participants and observers in the program and reviewed the roles and responsibilities of the key “stakeholders” in the Project Choice program, including the State of Connecticut, the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), the *Sheff* plaintiffs, the state courts, the suburban school districts, and Hartford families participating in the program. While each of these entities has an important role, our primary conclusion is that responsibility for the program is too diffuse – there is no central “champion” for the program.

**The State of Connecticut:** One conclusion we reached, as have others, is that the State of Connecticut – through its Commissioner and Department of Education – must play a lead role as the champion for expansion and primary implementer of Project Choice. The state can no longer play a passive role in the Choice program if this program is to significantly expand. It must become an active partner with CREC and the local districts, but it also must lead, fund, monitor, and enforce Choice program obligations. Their obligations include:

**Adequate per pupil funding for suburban districts:** The recent increase in per pupil reimbursement to suburban districts will help in expanding the Choice program, but this is still far from adequate. Fair reimbursement for Hartford students will enable suburban districts to fund the

teacher training, district coordinators and other program enhancements that are necessary to support Project Choice students in the district and possibly reduce student attrition.

**Transportation funding:** The recent increase in Project Choice transportation funding from \$2100 per student to \$3250 per student is very helpful, but will not necessarily be adequate to reduce long bus rides until the efficiency of bus routes is increased by larger district enrollments in the program. Until enrollment reaches this point, funding should be maintained at an adequate level to ensure that no students have longer than a one-hour trip to school, and that all students have access to after-school athletics and other extracurricular activities.

**CREC program support funding:** Even if the state were to more fairly compensate the suburban districts, the state should continue to fund and further expand the innovative and essential support staff and programs that CREC provides: intervention specialists to assist students with the transition to suburban schools; teacher training programs for suburban teachers; and summer and weekend academic support activities for Project Choice students.

**Marketing and parent education:** Although demand for seats currently outstrips supply, the publicity and marketing of the Choice program has been overlooked. This is a function that the state should lead. It is important that there be a twelve-month plan for continuous information dissemination about the program to all Hartford schoolchildren and their families. There should be a particular emphasis to market the program to families

with young children (where suburban availability is greatest) and in the Latino community. The parent information centers being proposed to consolidate magnet school fairs, application materials, and other information on magnet school programs should also include full information on the Choice program.

**Expand the “Early Beginnings” program:** The proven results of this full day integrated kindergarten program should attract both Hartford parents as well as suburban districts looking to expand Project Choice in the lower grades. The state should also look to expand the New Beginnings concept to its statewide preschool initiatives, to help foster integrated experiences for children in pre-kindergarten. State and suburban officials should recognize, however, that the “Early Beginnings” program will not alone be a panacea, as some parents are reluctant to send kindergarten-age children to school on a bus.

**A Project Choice Advisory Committee:** A standing advisory committee to the Commissioner and State Board of Education should be set up, including all stakeholders in Project Choice, to ensure that a variety of views are received and considered by the state and problems and program needs are dealt with quickly.

**Expectations of suburban districts:** Only the state is in a position to set expectations for each district’s participation in the Choice program. The State Department of Education has an important role to play in setting ambitious but fair annual requirements for each town to significantly expand overall regional participation in the Project Choice program.



### **Capitol Region Education Council**

**(CREC):** CREC was viewed by many people we interviewed as a highly competent administrator of the program. However, as a state grantee, they are not in a position to provide the strong leadership and advocacy that the program needs on the state level. Greater efforts should be devoted to publicity and marketing of the program, as discussed above, and CREC should take additional steps to engage parents and alumni of the program to develop a voice in the region in support of the Choice program – including working directly with the Sheff Movement coalition on parent outreach and engagement.

### **The Sheff plaintiffs and the state courts:**

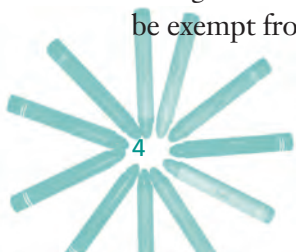
The Sheff plaintiffs can hardly be faulted for the slow growth of the Choice program – they have returned to the trial court three separate times since 1996 to argue that magnet and choice programs are growing too slowly. The state court system, however, has not been quick to support the Connecticut Supreme Court’s mandate. As the implementation of the ruling goes forward, the state courts need to recognize their essential role as part of the implementation process.

**The suburban school districts:** The major barrier to growth of the Choice program is the failure of suburban districts to offer a larger number of seats to Hartford children. Some Hartford-area districts barely participate in the program, and even the districts with the largest participation rates are far below the levels of participation in other city-suburban programs across the country. This is not an issue of capacity – most districts have ample space to substantially increase participation in the program, and only a few districts have a large enough resident minority school population to be exempt from required participation. The

key barriers to greater suburban participation in the Choice program are inadequate per-student funding levels and the lack of clear guidance from the state as to the number of Choice students each district is expected to enroll.

Stronger per-student funding would create incentives for suburban participation, and would eliminate the financial objections of some local residents. Clear fair share participation targets from the state would eliminate the notion that suburban participation is “optional” and would defuse undercurrents of concern that a town is doing more than its fair share, or taking “too many” Hartford students.

Even without waiting for a strong mandate and enhanced funding from the state, there are additional steps suburban districts can and should take to enhance the program. First, and most obviously, towns should offer the maximum number of seats available for Project Choice students, without waiting for state direction. Nearby districts with particularly low rates of participation should take the lead in this process, and local school board members and other political leaders should set a positive town for participation in the program. In addition, increasing diversity of suburban teaching staff is critical (districts should consider implementing city-suburban teacher transfer programs where towns have difficulty attracting teaching candidates of color), as are focused efforts to engage city parents in school-based activities, including the development of “host family” programs. On-going teacher development programs (like the Hartford tours CREC sponsored this summer) can increase sensitivity of suburban staff to the issues faced by Choice students. St. Louis and Boston both have useful models of professional development and student support for suburban towns to consider; perhaps local universities can collaborate on these important projects.





**Hartford families participating in the program:** Project Choice would not exist without the Hartford families and students who participate in Project Choice despite the long hours of transportation, and going to a distant school where they may know few others—sacrifices that are often overlooked. Additional support for Hartford parents to stay connected to their children’s schools may be needed, especially where transportation barriers, distance, and work schedules may interfere. Hartford parents in the Choice program are also in a good posi-

tion to represent and advocate for the Choice program in suburbs and on the state level. All of the participants in the Project Choice program, including CREC, need to work to help give these families a voice so that they too can participate in the implementation of the program and the education of their children. This organizing work has been begun by the Sheff Movement coalition (which sponsored this report), but it will require the support of all the other entities engaged in Project Choice.







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An initiative of the  
Sheff Movement coalition

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**Quality Integrated Education  
for All Children**