



Simplifying the Lottery Process: Preferences

A Sheff Movement Policy Brief

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Overview

The current school choice process makes it particularly challenging for Hartford area residents to determine their chances of getting into a regional integration program. This is partly because the school-by-school system of “lottery preferences” is unnecessarily complicated.

This policy brief provides an in-depth look at the system used for lottery preferences for regional integration programs (interdistrict magnet schools and the Open Choice program) in Greater Hartford. We believe that the preference system for student admission needs to be more transparent. The State needs to work with school providers to make this a simpler and more easily accessible system.

Introduction

Anyone who has gone through the school choice process in Hartford knows that the system is complicated. There are two separate lotteries—one for regional magnets and Open Choice, which is run by the Regional School Choice Office (“RSCO”) and another, known as “Hartford Choice,” which is run by the Hartford Public Schools for Hartford children applying to non-magnet schools. Parents choose from many different options, including: magnet, charter, technical, and neighborhood schools as well as the Open Choice program. There are many different magnet school providers (Hartford Public Schools, CREC, Goodwin College, and other magnet and town providers).

The confusing system of admission preferences for magnet schools is another challenge for Hartford parents. Each magnet school and magnet school provider has its own criteria for preferences. It is unclear how much a preference, or multiple preferences, will help an applicant. Magnet providers often change the rank order of preferences each year, depending on the applicant pool, in order to ensure some access to students with no preferences at all. As the RSCO catalog states, “Preferences and school pathways are not a guarantee of placement.”

Here is what the system of Hartford preferences looks like for 10 selected magnet schools in the RSCO catalog:

Breakthrough Magnet School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neighborhood (Hartford residents) School Pathways: To Connecticut IB Acad., CT River Acad., Great Path Acad., High School, Inc., Journalism and Media Magnet, Pathways Acad. of Technology and Design, R.J. Kinsella Magnet, Sport 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> and Medical Sciences Academy, University High School of Science and Engineering Sibling (only PK3 and PK4) Staff Zone 3 (Hartford residents)
Breakthrough II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neighborhood (Hartford residents) Sibling (only PK3 and PK4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff Zone 1 (Hartford residents)
Capital Community College Senior Magnet Academy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sibling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff
Capital Preparatory Magnet School – Lower School Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neighborhood (Hartford residents) Staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Zone 2 (Hartford residents)
Capital Preparatory Magnet School – Upper School Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff 	
Classical Magnet School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School Pathways: Incoming from Glastonbury-East Hartford Magnet School, International Magnet School for Global Citizenship, Museum Academy, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reggio Magnet School of the Arts, University of Hartford Magnet School Sibling Staff
Connecticut IB Academy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner districts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School Pathway: Incoming from Breakthrough Magnet School
Connecticut River Academy at Goodwin College	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School Pathways: Incoming from Breakthrough Magnet, Environmental Sciences Magnet School at Mary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hooker, Two Rivers Magnet Middle Sibling Staff
Discovery Academy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sibling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff
Environmental Sciences Magnet School at Mary Hooker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neighborhood (Hartford residents) School Pathways: To Connecticut River Academy at Goodwin College, Great Path Acad., High School, Inc., Journalism and Media Magnet, Pathways Academy of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technology and Design, R.J. Kinsella Magnet, University High School of Science and Engineering Sibling Staff

As the chart demonstrates, some schools have neighborhood and “zone” preferences for Hartford residents. Others do not. Some schools have extensive pathway programs, others do not. Many schools have “staff” and “sibling” preferences, but it is not clear how these interact with other preferences. And RSCO does not explain how multiple preferences are ranked or factored together.

The Hartford Public Schools brochure does not include any information about preferences for their separate “Choice Lottery,” although they also use a combination of neighborhood, zone, and sibling preferences.

The Consequences

Fairness: The magnet providers adjust the ranking of preferences each year in an effort to give access to as wide a range of Hartford families as possible. Yet when there isn’t clear information about how the system works, parents can question the fairness of the process.

Separated Siblings: While some parents may actively choose to have their children in different schools, sibling preferences are an important incentive that helps encourage families to participate in regional choice. Currently, many Hartford families have children at multiple schools, and sometimes in multiple Open Choice districts. While there is sibling preference for most magnet schools, it does not guarantee sibling admission. In addition, only some Suburban Open Choice programs have preference for siblings applying *at the same time*, but none of the magnet programs do. In the context of a regional education system, splitting up families can result in complicated transportation logistics and can reduce parent participation when parent attention is split between multiple schools.

Access: The more complicated the system appears to be, the more likely it is to deter parents who have less time or who are less experienced at dealing with complex forms. This could have the effect of leaving many children behind, which is counterproductive to Sheff’s overarching goal of eliminating the opportunity gap between students in Hartford and their suburban peers through quality, integrated education. In fact, every year about 2000 Hartford families do not complete either the RSCO application or the local Hartford Choice application.

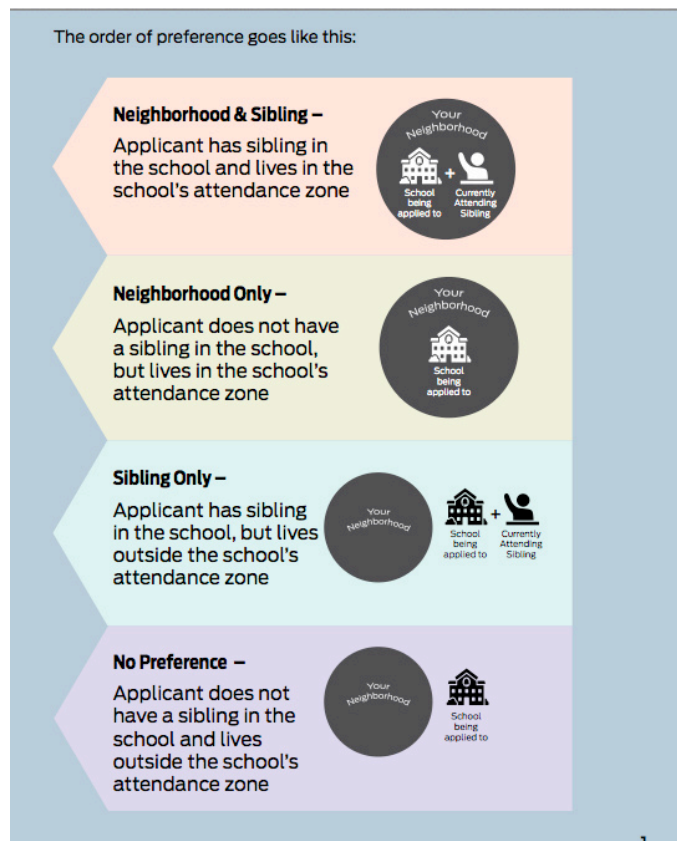
Neighborhood buy-in: We recognize that if neighborhood preferences for some magnets are too strong, they can have the effect of excluding children from more disadvantaged areas of the city. At the same time, including neighborhood preferences gives the community more of a stake in the school. There is no reason that a magnet elementary school cannot also be a quality neighborhood school that contributes to the life of the community.

Simplifying the Preferences System

State and local policymakers might consider drawing from New Haven’s lottery preferences model. In recent years, New Haven, which has a similar lottery for interdistrict magnets, has created a unified hierarchy of preferences for its schools. Here is the system of preferences for New Haven magnet Schools as shown in their 2014 Choice Handbook.

While New Haven schools still vary in their preferences (some schools have neighborhood and sibling, some only have sibling), there is a systematic ordering of preferences, and it is clearer to parents what their chances are.

As a whole, the New Haven Choice process prioritizes keeping siblings together—both if one sibling is already at the school and when there are two siblings applying at the same time.



Recommendations

As part of the broader goal of streamlining the choice process to make it more easily accessible for parents of all backgrounds, we recommend the CT Department of Education work with CREC, HPS, and all magnet providers to develop a unified system of preferences for school admission that is fully transparent to parents and consistent across different magnet schools in the system.

Prepared by Mira Debs for the Sheff Movement coalition, July 2014