“Tread Softly, because you tread on our dreams”: Parental advocacy in suburban school district restructuring

Colin Hill
Yale College, New Haven Connecticut

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Suggested Citation: Hill, C. (2019). “Tread Softly, because you tread on our dreams”: Parental advocacy in suburban school district restructuring (Unpublished Education Studies capstone). Yale University, New Haven, CT.
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Abstract

This study seeks to understand the role of parental advocacy in local school desegregation initiatives. Observational and interview data from an ongoing initiative in Hamden, Connecticut suggest that the ability to influence the decision-making process fell disproportionately in the hands of privileged parents. Complicating the idea that school desegregation initiatives inevitably crumble under the vehement political pressure of public backlash, this study finds that privileged parents in a small but commanding group known as Whitneyville Mobilize used informal channels of advocacy that provided them both power over decision-makers and protection from scrutiny. Although the Board of Education had initially intended to pursue an ambitious redistricting plan, the fear of anticipated backlash from parents with the social capital and political savvy to obstruct the process drove the Board away from this plan, therefore allowing those parents to maintain their advantaged status in the district’s most desirable school. In contrast, structural barriers to advocacy meant that the voices of parents at Church Street, a school serving the district’s highest need students and that would ultimately be closed, were not considered. These findings have important implications for local education leaders pursuing controversial reforms, highlighting the need for fortitude in the face of opposition and active, intentional engagement of the communities that may face barriers to advocacy.
**Introduction**

“Tread softly, because you tread on our dreams,” a teacher pleads into the microphone, addressing the nine members of the Hamden Board of Education and the hundreds of parents and educators assembled in the Hamden Middle School auditorium. She is wearing a light blue shirt emblazoned with the logo of Dunbar Hill elementary school. She just learned that Dunbar Hill could be closed or even demolished. It is about an hour and half into the first of many public meetings in Hamden, and the winding line of parents, students, teachers, and community members indicate it won’t be over any time soon. After an impassioned ode to Dunbar Hill, she steps back from the microphone and turns around to face the back of the crowded auditorium to a resounding ovation from a formidable contingent, at least fifty strong, of Dunbar Hill families and staff. They hold signs to the sky, many handwritten by elementary school children, with sayings like “SOS Dunbar” and “Save Dunbar Hill.” Over the course of the three-hour meeting, about fifty people would share their thoughts, most taking advantage of the loose enforcement of the three-minute limit. Visibly weary, the Board made quick work of wrapping up the meeting once public comment finally ended around 10pm. Although most of the crowd had left by this point, one member expressed gratitude for those who shared their feedback: “you’ve been heard.”

In a decision-making process that would attempt to balance the input of so many stakeholders, this seemingly simple affirmation would become much more complicated: what does it mean to be “heard” when your child’s school could close? Who was not “heard”? In a suburb where two elementary schools—one serving only 33% minority students and the other 88% minority—can exist less than three miles apart, these questions get to the heart of the systemic disparities that manifest in our public schools. American public schools, funded primarily by local property taxes, reflect and reinforce historical patterns of housing segregation. As a result, schools remain segregated
along racial and class lines, even within suburban communities perceived to be more homogeneous than urban ones.

Reform efforts have faced both political challenges and mixed results—school choice, for instance, has been shown by some studies to actually exacerbate segregation by spurring “white flight.” Another approach to desegregate schools is restructuring, which typically involves redrawing attendance zones or consolidating schools to actively combat segregated housing patterns, thus creating a more diverse student body at each school. Like school choice, however, restructuring efforts are politically difficult and often lead to significant resistance from various contingents of parents—whether based on school affiliation, neighborhood identity, or political belief. It is not uncommon for parents to mobilize, attempting to sway the ultimate decision to incorporate their concerns, which may include: long commutes to their students’ new schools, perceived decline in educational quality, or reduced neighborhood cohesion, among many other academic, social, and political issues.

The importance of school desegregation policies, nonetheless, rests in the social, academic, and even economic benefits to integrated schools. There is a rich body of literature on the benefits of attending a diverse school, and the findings are generally positive. Regardless of background, students who attend a racially diverse school reach higher levels of achievement, experience increased social-emotional and physical well-being, and are more likely to attend college. In the long-term, improving outcomes for all students reaps social and economic benefits that feed directly back into the schools in the form of human and economic capital. It is a critical caveat, however, to note that racial inequities can—and often do—exist in ostensibly “diverse” schools. Even in so-called “integrated” schools, pernicious patterns of segregation can emerge. Academic tracking is the most

1 Renzulli and Evans, “School Choice”
2 Bergman, “The Risks and Benefits of School Integration”; see also Reardon, “60 Years after Brown”
3 “The Benefits of Socioeconomically and Racially Integrated Schools and Classrooms.”
4 See notes 3 and 4
5 Acs, “The Cost of Segregation”
studied example, with a well-documented under-representation of minority students in upper-level classes. In recognition of this, it is important to distinguish between desegregation, which involves placing previously separated groups in the same environment, and integration, which requires meaningful interaction between those groups and equitable treatment in a shared environment. In the context of schools, desegregation therefore is a legal remedy only addressing between-school segregation, whereas integration is socio-cultural, going a step further to also address within-school segregation. Such is the pressing, and yet-to-be-answered, problem facing education policymakers across the nation: how can districts ensure high-quality, diverse schools in a way that appeals to families from all backgrounds and ensures equitable opportunity for students?

This capstone is a case study of one community trying to answer exactly this question. Hamden, a racially and socioeconomically diverse suburb neighboring New Haven to the north, recently made the decision to undergo a district restructuring plan which includes both school closures and redistricting. With approximately 5,500 students, of whom 28% are black, 19% Latino, 39% white, 8% Asian and 41% Free and Reduced Lunch eligible, Hamden is one of few diverse towns in Connecticut, a state where most municipalities are either mainly white or mainly black and Latinx. This characteristic of Hamden is salient here because Connecticut is one of only three states, including Michigan and Washington, with racial balancing laws dating from the 1970s designed to combat segregation within towns; the laws attempt to achieve this by establishing specific school diversity targets. According to this law and data from the 2017-2018 school year, three of Hamden’s eight elementary schools were in what’s called “impending imbalance,” meaning that the disparity between the district minority percentage and the school minority percentage was between 15 and 25

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6 Adair, Desegregation; Diamond and Lewis, Despite the Best Intentions; Hochschild, The New American Dilemma; Tyson, Integration Interrupted
7 Krovetz, “Desegregation or Integration”
8 “District Profile and Performance Report”
9 “Regulations to Implement the Racial Imbalance Law”
percentage points. Across the state, 24 schools in 12 districts were in impending imbalance. However, the racial imbalance issue was not the sole impetus for the Board of Education to begin the restructuring process. In light of cuts in state spending on public education, Hamden was facing a budget crisis: projections indicated that taking no action would lead to a deficit of almost 8.8 million dollars. In addition to dropping state revenues, local tax revenues were suffering in Hamden as well, in large part as a result of dramatically declining enrollment. In just the past 10 years, K-6 enrollment had dropped just under 10 percent, with a further drop of 20 to 23 percent forecasted in the next 10 years. As a result, the town was left to grapple with the legal (and for some, moral) obligation to desegregate schools and the financial obligation of ensuring long-term fiscal sustainability. Given these multifaceted—and often competing—goals, the Hamden Board of Education decided to pursue a plan branded as “Rethink, Restructure, Results,” or “3R” to both consolidate and diversify the elementary schools.

The last three decades of school desegregation efforts nationwide have been characterized by two overarching trends: (1) a gradual loosening of court oversight over school desegregation and (2) a shift from 

\textit{mandatory} desegregation policies to \textit{voluntary} desegregation policies. The Hamden case and its broader Connecticut context, therefore, are in some ways a deviation from these trends. The state oversight of desegregation and the Board’s choice to pursue a combination of school closures and intra-district magnet schools, mandatory and voluntary desegregation policies respectively, makes this case in some ways a return to a bygone era of school desegregation—or perhaps a harbinger of a new era characterized by stronger governmental efforts\textsuperscript{14} to mandate diverse schools.

\textsuperscript{10} Milone & Macbroom, “Redistricting / Realignment Scenarios”
\textsuperscript{11} Connecticut State Department of Education, “2017 Public School Enrollment by Racial Imbalance”; Only 4 schools in 3 districts exceed the 25 percentage point threshold to become fully imbalanced.
\textsuperscript{12} District Management Group, “Financial Analysis”
\textsuperscript{13} See note 10.
\textsuperscript{14} See the recent New York Times coverage of Mayor Bill de Blasio’s call for enforcing diversity targets in New York City’s public schools.
By investigating certain aspects of the decision-making process over the past year, I hoped to understand how diverse suburbs grapple with the decision—whether moral, legal, or economic—to restructure schools. These aspects include: the initial commitment to redistrict, the establishment and refining of different scenarios, input-gathering at public meetings, and reactions to the ultimate policy decision. As communities around the state and the nation confront the inequities of segregated schools, it is of tremendous importance to analyze how the process unfolds, who determines how it unfolds, and how different parts of the community are impacted by the ultimate decision. Redistricting can be disruptive, and care must be taken to ensure that the burden of changing schools does not fall disproportionately on already marginalized groups. This is easier said than done, however, given the well-documented ability of affluent, white parents to wield “cultural, social, and symbolic capital” in crafting highly effective mobilization efforts.15

My overarching research question attempted to understand parents’ reactions, broadly conceived, in the long, complex redistricting process. More specifically, I was interested in how these reactions did (or did not) manifest in some form of advocacy, whether public or private. The differences in advocacy, furthermore, were not just in extent but in impact. My core research question, therefore, asked what role, if any, advocacy plays in the decision-making process.

➔ How do parents react when a school board in a racially diverse suburban town attempts to redistrict?

◆ What groups of parents engage in advocacy as part of this reaction, and what does this advocacy look like?

◆ How does this parental advocacy influence the decision-making process?

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15 Lareau, Weininger, and Cox, “Parental Challenges to Organizational Authority”
In answering these questions, I hope that my findings will have broader implications on how we think about the intersection of parental advocacy and school diversity initiatives. Currently, parents are often portrayed as political obstacles to local education reforms like restructuring. Perhaps, a more thorough and inclusive understanding of why and how parents choose to get involved in school diversity initiatives, and what impact this involvement has on the ultimate outcomes, could improve what often becomes a protracted and heated decision-making process.

**Literature Review**

At the very core of this redistricting initiative is a long legacy of government-sponsored and societally-upheld discrimination which continues to disadvantage certain communities socially, politically, and economically. The broad issues of educational inequity and housing segregation are systemic because of this legacy. The motivation for—and importance of—this study is rooted in a specific, unique, and compelling instance of a community plagued with these issues and trying to combat them. Hamden’s segregated schools and neighborhoods are, as is true in many districts, a product of this discriminatory legacy. This literature review begins by outlining broad trends in the highly intertwined legal and political histories of school segregation and housing segregation in the United States, with a brief snapshot of Connecticut’s economic and demographic context. It then narrows it focus to the evolution of desegregation initiatives in the North, and racial balancing laws in particular. Lastly, it brings parents into the picture, and examines the ways in which they mobilize in response to desegregation initiatives today.

**Systemic roots: housing segregation**

Legally-sanctioned practices and policies limited housing options for minorities and deepened both economic and racial segregation. The practice of redlining, for instance, allowed
lenders to systematically deny loans to minority communities, depriving them of the opportunity to invest in their neighborhoods and build intergenerational wealth.\textsuperscript{16} Fueled by neighborhood-based school assignment and the local property tax funding of schools, these disparities manifest in public schools across the nation.\textsuperscript{17}

While the vast majority of education policy decisions happen at a state or local level, the systemic roots of school segregation are deeply intertwined with federal policy. Even the emergence of compulsory public education, which began in Massachusetts in 1852 and became nationwide by 1918,\textsuperscript{18} occurred under the doctrine of “separate but equal,” which was formally upheld by \textit{Plessy v. Ferguson}.\textsuperscript{19} Through most of 20th century, federally-sanctioned discrimination extended beyond public institutions and into every aspect of civic, social, and economic life. In 1934, the Federal Housing Administration was created to underwrite federally-insured mortgages in order to aid economic recovery after the Great Depression. This recovery, however, was not for everyone. For more than three decades, the FHA engaged in redlining practices which unfairly discriminated against minorities by denying them federally insured home loans, causing home values in inner-city, minority-heavy neighborhoods to plummet.\textsuperscript{20} Although the Fair Housing Act of 1968 put an end to redlining,\textsuperscript{21} the housing segregation it created and the damage it inflicted on communities of color are still felt today. Even where neighborhood segregation has improved, minority families still have significantly lower levels of wealth, because the plummeting home values of years past limited (and continue to limit) the intergenerational transfer of wealth.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{16} Rothstein, “The Making of Ferguson”; Shapiro, Meschede, and Osoro, “The Roots of the Widening Racial Wealth Gap”;
\textsuperscript{17} Reardon and Bischoff, “Income Inequality and Income Segregation”
\textsuperscript{18} Katz, \textit{A History of Compulsory Education Laws}
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Plessy v. Ferguson}, 163 United States Reports 537 (1896).
\textsuperscript{20} Rothstein, “The Making of Ferguson”
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Fair Housing Act of 1968} (Pub. L. No. 90-284, 82 Stat. 73)
\textsuperscript{22} Shapiro, Meschede, and Osoro, “The Roots of the Widening Racial Wealth Gap”
Systemic roots: school segregation

While legally-sanctioned housing discrimination was not eliminated until 1968, the federal government had taken a firm stance against racial discrimination in schools 14 years earlier. The landmark Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision marked a turning point in the history of school segregation. In overturning the doctrine of “separate but equal”, this decision heralded an era of court-ordered desegregation, which particularly in the South, made meaningful—if slow—progress toward desegregating schools. By the 1980’s, in fact, public schools in the South were more desegregated than anywhere else in the country. Desegregation initiatives in the North, on the other hand, were limited. Dismantling the myth that Northern schools are driven by a “de facto” kind of segregation much more innocent than the “de jure” segregation of the South, Matthew Delmont evokes a “vast web of governmental policies that produced and maintained racially segregated neighborhoods and schools in the North.” Nonetheless, the “de facto myth” allowed citizens and lawmakers to abdicate legal responsibility for the realities of racial segregation in the North. But it was more than rhetoric—Title IV, section 401b of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 declares that:

“Desegregation” means the assignment of students to public schools and within such schools without regard to their race, color, religion, or national origin, but “desegregation” shall not mean the assignment of students to public schools in order to overcome racial imbalance.

This declaration, Delmont argues, was deliberately designed to focus federal desegregation enforcement efforts away from the North.

As time passed, a decline in public support and a Republican-appointed judiciary spelled the end for Brown-era desegregation orders. In 1991, the Supreme Court ruled in Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell that districts that had made “good faith” efforts toward desegregating their

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24 Cascio et al., “From Brown to Busing”; Reardon et al., “Brown Fades”
25 Delmont, Why Busing Failed
26 Civil Rights Act of 1964, 88-352
27 See note 25.
schools could be released from court oversight. This ruling had a profound impact on the state of desegregation efforts: between 1991 and 2009, Reardon et al. find, over 200 districts were released from court oversight; however, the decision to release a district did not seem linked to the success of the court order in desegregating schools. While the return to local control was preferable to many districts hoping to maintain the status quo, ongoing research suggests that the effects of *Brown* have faded substantially, fueled in part by re-segregation in areas formerly under court oversight. With significantly weakened federal mandates, community groups were able to challenge the authority of local education leaders to implement the desegregation levers that had seen some success. Federal efforts for school desegregation, therefore, have shown promise as a tool to at least ostensibly desegregate schools; however, the repeated weakening of the federal government’s scope in regulating school diversity has left the task of desegregation to state and local officials.

**Desegregating schools in the North: from mandatory to voluntary**

The most famous example from history is busing, now widely seen as a failed experiment that neither desegregated nor improved schools. Matthew Delmont’s extensive analysis of busing programs suggests that most failed not due to some fundamental flaw in the concept of busing, but rather “because school officials, politicians, courts, and the news media valued the desires of white parents more than the rights of black students.” In part because the perceived failure of busing led policymakers to favor voluntary over mandatory methods, desegregation policies have evolved over time. This evolution, however, was *enabled* by the aforementioned relaxing of legal oversight in the past few decades.

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29 Reardon et al., “Brown Fades”
Choice-based policies, which have become popular in urban districts, promise to provide parental agency and high-quality education to students who would otherwise be trapped in low-performing neighborhood schools. School choice initiatives may take many forms, including charter and magnet schools, open enrollment policies allowing children to transfer between urban and suburban schools, and private school vouchers. Few districts have successfully desegregated schools this way, but this is not to say choice-based reforms can't be successful. Cambridge, Massachusetts, for example, has used a very successful “controlled choice” policy since 1981 which not only gives parents agency in choosing a school for their child, but ensures that the schools are socioeconomically balanced. This is the result of a tweak to the policy in 2001 which established that a school's percentage of students on free and reduced-price lunch must be within 10 points of the district average. The process of student assignment, however, is holistic in nature: parents list their top three schools, and factors such as socioeconomic status, gender balance, and preparation for specific programs are considered. As a result, while many districts are re-segregating, students in Cambridge are attending more racially and socioeconomically diverse schools and outperforming similar districts on state tests.

In some cases, however, choice-based policies have actually exacerbated racial segregation across schools. While there has been significant political and scholarly interest in the implementation and efficacy of voluntary desegregation initiatives, which tend to cause less white flight than mandatory plans, there is a need to understand what, if any, choice-based policies could effectively combat segregation. We know that choice can work—in fact, interdistrict magnet schools in Connecticut were shown to improve student achievement and offer a less racially and

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31 Cullen, Jacob, and Levitt, “The Effect of School Choice on Participants”
32 Hannah-Jones, Keynote speech at Magnet Schools of America conference
33 Orfield and Frankenberg, Educational Delusions?
34 Learned-Miller, “Cambridge Public Schools”
36 Rossell and Armor, “The Effectiveness of School Desegregation Plans”
economically isolated environment to urban students. As choice-based desegregation initiatives spread across Hamden, across Connecticut, and across the nation, it will be important to understand not just their effect on schools’ academic performance, but also their ability to disrupt deeply entrenched patterns of segregation.

**Racial balancing as desegregation**

Another method of enforcing desegregation is to mandate certain levels of racial diversity. These kinds of policies are often agnostic to how students are actually assigned to schools, and instead define a set of diversity thresholds. No more than 75 percent of students admitted by lottery to magnet schools in Hartford, Connecticut, for instance, can be black or Hispanic. Some selective middle schools in New York City are beginning to set aside a given proportion of seats for low-income, English-learning, and homeless applicants. While some urban districts have begun to implement such racial and socioeconomic balancing criteria, they are rare on a state level, with Connecticut as one of only three states that legally enforce specific diversity criteria. Because they are so rare, there is little scholarly work on evaluating the effectiveness of racial balancing laws that set specific targets. Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest that racial balancing may be less effective than socioeconomic balancing at improving academic achievement. Racial balancing laws like Connecticut’s, which are described in further detail in the Case & Methodology section, represent a marked departure from the general trajectory of school desegregation initiatives, which have trended toward locally-controlled, community-driven, and voluntary solutions. With school desegregation often falling in the hands of local and regional school boards, community engagement becomes an

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37 Bifulco, Cobb, and Bell, “Can Interdistrict Choice Boost Student Achievement?”
38 Thomas, “Do Magnet Schools Need White Students to Be Great?”
39 Edelman, “NYC Schools to Give Priority”
41 Orfield, *Dismantling Desegregation*
important factor in implementing any kind of policy. Parents, as the “customers” of public schools, have a stake in how such policies affect their local schools.

**Capital theory: a framework for parent involvement**

Alongside policy efforts, researchers have recognized that parents employ an enormous variety of tools to support or oppose desegregation efforts, and can have a dramatic impact on the outcome. Building off of a Bourdieusian framework, Lareau et al. conceptualize the “toolbox” of parental involvement in education as three different kinds of capital: cultural, social, and symbolic. Cultural capital can take the form of “institutionalized high-status cultural signals” or professional expertise; social capital encompasses interpersonal networks; symbolic capital captures broad attitudes and perceptions about oneself. The disproportionate distribution of non-economic capital can impact the ability of parents to participate in and influence decisions affecting the education of their children—and of others’ children.

In order to fully understand the implications of restructuring and other desegregation initiatives, it is critical to analyze both the decision-making process and the community’s reaction to that decision. Many scholars, in grappling with the latter, focus on how white families exploit their residential mobility to take their children out of diverse schools and place them in private or out-of-district schools, or how they perceive declines in school quality upon an influx of minority students. Few, however, address the tools employed by such parents in influencing the decision-making process. Here, the aforementioned capital framework proposed by Lareau et al.

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42 Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”
43 See note 15.
44 Jaeger, “Does Cultural Capital Really Affect Academic Achievement?”
45 See note 15.
46 See note 1.
47 Goyette, Farrie, and Freely, “This School's Gone Downhill”
48 See note 15.
offers a lens through which to understand how parents get involved in school desegregation efforts specifically.

Unsurprisingly, parents do indeed attempt to influence the decision-making process. Lareau et al., in one of few scholarly analyses of an entire redistricting process, detail the impressive extent of parent involvement in a school district referred to as “Kingsley” and how they effectively deployed the three types of capital to stymie policy decisions.\(^\text{49}\) Parents deployed cultural capital by using the research skills and professional networks afforded to them by their high levels of education to amass a reserve of reliable evidence to use for offering new ideas and critiquing the Board’s claims. Well-connected parents exercised social capital by leveraging their extensive interpersonal networks and organizational abilities to collect information, mobilize supporters, and voice their opinions. Some parents even exploited political connections to local representatives in hope of placing political pressure on the Board.\(^\text{50}\) With regards to symbolic capital, some parents felt that their child being reassigned to a less favorable school betrayed an implicit “social contract” which brought them to their neighborhood in the first place: that living in a school’s attendance zone guaranteed a seat for their child. Others, in exchange for what they perceived as unacceptable hardships, demanded compensation in the form of tangible improvements to the “inferior” school (e.g. curricular and extracurricular programs).

Understanding the tools and motivations for parents who do not get involved is just as important—if not more important—than those who do. Several studies suggest that socioeconomic status is an important determinant of who gets the power to influence school closure decisions, with higher income parents possessing easier access to Board officials and other avenues for providing input.\(^\text{51}\) In socioeconomically diverse communities, therefore, public institutions play an important role in enabling—and limiting—civic participation. The often bureaucratic procedures of local politics

\(^{49}\) See note 15.
\(^{50}\) Ibid.
\(^{51}\) Hess and Leal, “The Opportunity to Engage”; Finnigan and Lavner, “A Political Analysis of Community Influence”
has the potential to alienate residents who do not know, for instance, where and when public officials meet and how to participate in these meetings.\textsuperscript{52} It is often at these meetings where it is decided which schools are “failing” (whether academically, physically, or financially) and should therefore be closed. Because socioeconomic and sociopolitical barriers limit access to these meetings, organizational “failure” in a school district is not a well-defined outcome, but rather one constructed by the stakeholders with the power to do so.\textsuperscript{53} The numerous and often competing goals of various stakeholders—the state, the Board, parents, and others—underscore the importance of understanding how, and by whom, school “failure” is defined and constructed.

At some point in the process, parents must move from participating in the decision-making process to reacting to the decision itself. These reactions warrant attention, because they have the potential to alter the long-term trajectory of school desegregation initiatives.

**Parent and community reactions to redistricting initiatives**

While there is an overall lack of research specifically on redistricting efforts, there is an especially pronounced absence of attention given to the subjective reactions of community members after a decision is made. The research that has been done tends to favor more quantitative, long-term analyses over more qualitative and immediate reactions. The scope and timeframe of this study allow me to investigate these reactions rather than the long-term social or economic impacts; this narrowed focus is not just a relatively novel contribution to the literature, but also permits a nuanced picture of how parental attitudes evolve before, during, and after the redistricting decision is made. The often protracted and emotional process can threaten community cohesion, trust in local governance, and exhaust public resources.\textsuperscript{54} Nonetheless, it is important to consider the long-term impacts of

\textsuperscript{52} Boles, *The Egalitarian City*
\textsuperscript{53} Deeds and Pattillo, “Organizational ‘Failure’ and Institutional Pluralism”
\textsuperscript{54} See note 15.
redistricting so it is clear what could be at stake. The following subsections highlight key findings from studies of communities in the years after a redistricting policy is implemented.

*Decline in property values.* Home values are deeply tied to perceptions of school quality.\(^5^5\) These perceptions are related to countless factors, some concrete (e.g. test scores, facility quality) and others abstract (e.g. community cohesion). When redrawing attendance zone threatens school quality—or even just *perceptions* of school quality—property values will likely drop. This was the case in one Ohio district, where a disruptive redistricting policy led to a 9.9% drop in home values, a drop significant enough to have ramifications for the property tax base that funds the schools.\(^5^6\)

*White flight.* Many scholars have found white families tend to flee diversifying schools in favor of more racially homogenous options, including private schools or other suburban districts.\(^5^7\) It is critical to make an important distinction between school quality and perceived school quality. Many white parents claim to remove their kids from diversifying schools based on concerns over some element of the educational process, Renzulli and Evans note; but even when you control for measures of school quality (e.g. test scores, safety, graduation rates, class sizes), the proportion of non-white students in a school remains important for white parents’ perceptions of the school’s quality. A recent study of residential mobility and neighborhood composition suggested that white parents are in fact leaving diversifying schools and neighborhoods. Five years after a redistricting policy had been implemented in Charlotte, North Carolina, it was found that white residents were responding to changes in school composition: those living in neighborhoods with increasing levels of black students moved to

\(^{55}\) Black, “Do Better Schools Matter?”

\(^{56}\) Bogart and Cromwell, “How Much Is a Neighborhood School Worth?’

\(^{57}\) Clotfelter, “Are Whites Still ‘Fleeing?’”, see also notes 1 and 46.
neighborhoods with schools that had seen a decline in black students, whereas black residents did not move.\textsuperscript{58}

While we can learn about the short-term and long-term outcomes of redistricting initiatives by studying their history around the nation, Connecticut’s racial balancing law and Hamden’s choice to close two schools make this case a notable departure from this history, which in recent years has seen the loosening of legal mandates and a move toward voluntary desegregation policies. There is also a dearth of research on communities as socioeconomically and racially diverse as Hamden, and in particular, how this impacts the way different parent groups talk about school diversity. While parental involvement is the core interest in this study, the combination of financial and diversity considerations makes the political process and the deliberations of the Board of Education uniquely complex; no study has thoroughly discussed the way in which local officials navigate important, but often competing, goals. Understanding the evolving decision-making process in Hamden thus contributes to existing research by representing contextual factors and challenges heretofore untheorized across various disciplines.

While there is significant literature on the role of parental advocacy, there is a need to better understand other elements of the decision-making process and the sociopolitical forces that underlie the community’s response. Previous school diversity efforts have been largely either unsuccessful, unpopular, or both. By developing a nuanced understanding of the (often conflicting) priorities of parents and local education officials, I hope to illuminate what strategies can improve the decision-making process for all parties involved.

\textsuperscript{58} Weinstein, “The Impact of School Racial Compositions”
Case & Methodology

Changing Hamden, changing goals

Historically, Connecticut has been one of the most affluent states in the country: but this affluence is heavily concentrated in the suburbs, while major urban centers like Hartford, New Haven, and Bridgeport struggle with high poverty rates.\(^{59}\) Weak regional governance of Connecticut’s 169 fragmented districts, Dougherty and co-authors argue, has enabled a political climate in which “self-interested suburban policies with state governmental support have generated some of the nation’s highest levels of inequality.”\(^{60}\) The ways in which this wealth inequality affects community involvement in school diversity initiatives is understudied; most case studies on the topic\(^ {61}\) focus on predominantly white, affluent suburbs with high concentrations of wealth.

Hamden, however, does not fit this description. Like many inner-ring suburbs in Connecticut, it has changed drastically in the past few decades. At about 62% percent students of color, Hamden is a racially diverse suburb—but this was not always the case: just 20 years ago, Hamden only comprised 34% students of color.\(^ {62}\) The increasing diversity in Hamden is more than just racial, too: the district has seen substantial increases in the number of students with special needs, English-language learners, and students living in poverty.\(^ {63}\) Politically, the town is predominantly liberal: the council members elected by each of Hamden’s nine districts and the mayor are all Democrats, as well as six of nine school board members. These contextual factors are important in framing our understanding of how the community responded to the complex and constantly evolving “Rethink, Restructure, Results” or “3R” initiative, which began in the fall of 2017.

\(^{59}\) Enrich, “Race and Money, Courts and Schools”
\(^{60}\) Dougherty, On the Line
\(^{61}\) Lareau and Muñoz, “You’re Not Going to Call the Shots”; McGrath and Kuriloff, “They’re Going to Tear the Doors Off This Place”; see also note 15
\(^{62}\) Connecticut State Department of Education, Public School Enrollment Trend
\(^{63}\) See note 12.
The process

The political process of enacting this plan has been enormously complex, and will likely continue for at least another three years. In addition to the Board members themselves, input was sought from a wide range of consultants and stakeholders: educational consulting firm District Management Group provided fiscal analysis, civil engineering firm Milone & MacBroom advised on facilities planning and attendance zone maps, architect John Ireland drew up construction and renovation plans, and countless parents and concerned community members voiced their opinions in public forums, both virtual and physical. The plethora of input made the Board’s task an unenviable one.

The process began over a year ago in the fall of 2017, when the Board heard a presentation from the District Management Group about the impending budgetary issues facing Hamden. For the next year, the planning happened mostly out of the public eye, the Board working with their consultants to develop and refine various scenarios. In June 2018, Hamden Superintendent Dr. Jody Goeler received a letter from the state notifying him that three elementary schools were in impending imbalance. While the Board would “not be required to file a plan,” (emphasis mine) the letter noted, it is strongly encouraged in order to “maintain balanced schools so that each child has the advantage of attending a school that is as diverse as possible.” After this critical juncture, the restructuring plan began to attract increasingly more public interest, in part driven by an article in the New Haven Register that encouraged residents to share their input online and at upcoming public meetings. PTA’s and other parent groups organized meetings at their schools to discuss the seven potential scenarios that the Board had been evaluating; these meetings often involved Superintendent Goeler or a Board member being present to field questions and concerns from parents eager for more information. As public interest—and with it outcry—increased, the Board reacted by creating

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64 Wentzell, *Racial Imbalance Letter*

65 Lambert, "Hamden Board of Education Seeks Public Input"
opportunities for public involvement, including an online survey and a series of public meetings through the fall.

At the first of these public meetings in late September, almost a year after the whole process began, the Board revealed three updated scenarios to a tense crowd comprising hundreds of Hamden residents. These meetings, typically held in a conference room designed for no more than 40 people, had to be held at the Hamden Middle School auditorium to accommodate the massive crowds. The most important and highly-anticipated element of the new scenarios was which schools were on the chopping block. Recognizing the complexity of the decisions they would have to make, the Board shared a set of five goals. In this study, I focused on three of the Board’s five stated goals.66

1. **Scale use of facilities to address declining enrollment trends**

When introducing the 3R initiative to the public at a meeting in September, Jody Goeler spoke to the many “unsustainable trajectoies” facing the district, and described the Board’s goals as a commitment to “stop kicking the can down the road,” as past generations had.67 Declining enrollment was one of these trajectoies: Hamden’s student body had shrunken almost 15% since the 2007-08 school year.68 With the projected utilization of elementary seats projected to drop from 90% to 77% in the next five years, operating eight elementary schools had become fiscally unsustainable.

2. **Provide opportunities for great fiscal sustainability**

Yet another one of the “unsustainable trajectoies” evoked by various public officials was the budget crisis faced by Hamden and the state at large. Years of underfunding from the state

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66 The two additional goals include moving 6th grade to the middle school and taking back a school building from Wintergreen Interdistrict Magnet School that had been leased to the ACES Educational Cooperative for a period of 20 years.
67 Jody Goeler, BOE meeting, 24 September 2018
68 See note 10.
and budget cuts from the town have strained taxpayers in a town with already astronomical mill rates. If the Board were to do nothing, their budget deficit could reach almost $9 million in just four years. The immediacy of the budget crisis and the fierce opposition to raising property taxes meant that financial considerations underscored essentially every aspect of the decision-making process.

3. Create sensible attendance zones that more closely reflect our demographics and meet state regulations for diversity

The 3R initiative began with the intention of redrawing attendance zones. By reassigning students in a way that combated segregated housing patterns, the Board hoped to not just meet—but exceed—the diversity thresholds set by Connecticut General Statute 10-226; these thresholds are based on the percentage of minority students in each school compared to the district overall. While Superintendent Jody Goeler on several instances described the Board’s efforts as both a legal and moral obligation, the language of the statute makes no reference to any sanctions that could result if a district fails to balance its schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>2017-18 Enrollment % Minority</th>
<th>2017-18 % Imbalance</th>
<th>2017-13 Enrollment % Minority</th>
<th>2017-13 % Imbalance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring Glen</td>
<td>335 32.6% 29.38%</td>
<td>429 32.6% 23.73%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Street</td>
<td>300 87.7% 24.88%</td>
<td>371 83.3% 26.09%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peters Street</td>
<td>315 85.7% 23.48%</td>
<td>388 79.9% 22.67%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bear Path</td>
<td>421 42.8% 10.22%</td>
<td>463 35.0% 21.34%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shephard Glen</td>
<td>302 78.8% 16.78%</td>
<td>336 69.1% 12.64%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Woods</td>
<td>344 44.2% 17.84%</td>
<td>461 36.0% 20.16%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridge Hill</td>
<td>339 74.3% 22.72%</td>
<td>314 79.4% 18.98%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunbar Hill</td>
<td>254 69.3% 6.50%</td>
<td>308 66.6% 10.15%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Districtwide (K-6) | 2690 62.07%  | 2954 56.4%  |

* 2017-18 and 2017-13 data are from Encompass Health, an independent organization. See note 9.

This chart, prepared by demographer Milone & Macbroom, indicates schools that are in “impending imbalance” (yellow) or “imbalance” (red). Looking at the 2017-18 school year, note how Spring Glen has the largest imbalance but is considered safe because it has earned “diverse school status.”

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69 See note 9.
The outcome

The following months were filled with information sessions, public meetings, and Board of Education workshops—often lasting upwards of 3 hours—at which these scenarios were evaluated, refined, and debated until late November,\(^{70}\) when the Board voted unanimously on the following restructuring plan, which would roll out over the course of the next three years, as long as construction projects and funding decisions occur without delay:

1. *Move 6th grade students from elementary schools to Hamden Middle School*
2. *Close and repurpose Church Street Elementary School*
3. *Close and repurpose Shepherd Glen Elementary School*
4. *Petition the Legislative Council for the transfer of the Wintergreen facility to be incorporated back into the Hamden Public School system*
5. *Direct the Superintendent to develop intra-district magnet programs and obtain Board approval for implementation*
6. *Direct the Superintendent to develop a districtwide universal pre-K program and obtain Board approval for implementation.*\(^{71}\)

This final vote underscores the puzzle that drives this study: why did the Board step back from their initially ambitious goal of redistricting? At a Board of Education workshop in late October, the members discussed different mechanisms for creating diversity, and decided to postpone the drawing of attendance zones and instead focus on implementing intra-district magnet schools that, ideally, would foster diversity through parent choice. This shift in thinking mirrors the broader trend of school desegregation policy moving from *mandatory* policies to *voluntary* ones. In order to understand how the Board’s thinking evolved, it is important to understand the nature of the process and its various stakeholders. The parents who rely on the public schools to educate their children, of course, have stakes in this process. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that parents have mixed perceptions on the weight of their public input, but more surprising was the fact that even those making the decisions had widely varied perceptions, particularly when it came to the school closure

\(^{70}\) It is worth noting that the vote was initially supposed to happen in late October, but was delayed a month in part due to ongoing negotiations with ACES, the company that manages Wintergreen Interdistrict Magnet School. The option of ACES buying the building from the town was on the table, but no deal was ever reached. The additional month, however, did also allow the Board to conduct several additional workshops around the other aspects of the plan.

\(^{71}\) Hamden Public Schools, “Reimagine Restructure Results Legacy Page”
decisions. While Superintendent Goeler\textsuperscript{72} felt the closure decisions were solely based on facts and not influenced by the strength of advocacy, Board member Laura,\textsuperscript{73} a white woman,\textsuperscript{74} described public meetings as “tremendously influential.”\textsuperscript{75} This study aims to elucidate what is not immediately apparent in public meetings and interviews: the invisible forces that determine who shows up, who is heard, and who is listened to.

**Methodology**

**Public meetings and interviews**

My research methodology included observations at public meetings, qualitative interviews and online data in order to capture the breadth, depth, and purpose of the organizing efforts occurring across the neighborhoods, schools, and constituencies of Hamden. Through these observations, the study reveals novel insights on the ways parents talk about complicated issues of race and diversity in both public and private settings.

Observations at a total of 35 hours of Board of Education meetings throughout fall 2018 gave me a “birds-eye view” of public opinion, allowing me to see the diversity of arguments and beliefs held by the parents who showed up. I never made public comments at meetings; however, I did use the opportunity to talk informally with other attendees and get the contact information of potential interview subjects. Because public meetings are allowed to be recorded by law,\textsuperscript{76} I audiotaped and selectively transcribed statements\textsuperscript{77} made by attendees and Board of Education members.

\textsuperscript{72} It is worth noting that although Jody Goeler is not a voting member of the Board of Education, he was present at all the meetings and participated actively in the Board’s discussions.

\textsuperscript{73} This name, and the names of all Board members, are pseudonyms.

\textsuperscript{74} In this study, I note the race of every pseudonymized person the first time I name them in the text. Although it may seem gratuitous at times, I considered it important to show the kinds of voices that are represented in my paper.

\textsuperscript{75} Laura (pseudonym), personal communication, 13 February 2019

\textsuperscript{76} Connecticut Freedom of Information Act

\textsuperscript{77} Due to the relatively low quality and high volume (about 25 hours) of audio from public meetings, transcribing them in full was not feasible. I instead relied on my detailed field notes to highlight what I saw as illuminating statements or key moments.
The major drawback of public meetings was that any individual person has very little time to speak, which has the consequence of providing a great breadth of information, but not much depth. Interviewing parents of elementary-age students, Board of Education members, and other public officials allowed me to get a richer sense of how various stakeholders are responding to the 3R initiative. I personally interviewed nine parents and four public officials, including the superintendent, assistant superintendent, a town councilman, and the principal of Church Street School. I also collaborated with students in Professor Mira Debs’ Cities, Suburbs, and School Choice seminar, who interviewed six board members, one parent, and a Democratic Town Committee member. The recruiting of participants happened primarily through snowball sampling, direct emails, and postings on public forums such as town Facebook pages. Pseudonyms were assigned for all participants except those in professional school leadership positions, including Superintendent Jody Goeler, Assistant Superintendent Chris Melillo, and Church Street principal Karen Butler, and care was taken to protect the identity of those given anonymity. Interviews were semi-structured and took place in coffee shops, offices, places of business, and homes, and lasted between half an hour to an hour and fifteen minutes. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Interviewers also wrote field notes about the interviews to highlight salient themes.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in this project was hearing voices that were representative of the Hamden community. As an outsider to Hamden, my only connections to residents were through people I met at public meetings and my advisor’s connections to fellow Spring Glen parents, both groups that skewed towards relatively privileged white parents. Despite deliberate efforts to interview parents from a range of neighborhoods and socioeconomic backgrounds, of the ten parents I interviewed, seven were white and five were parents at Spring Glen. Dunbar Hill, Helen Street, and Wintergreen parents made up the rest of my sample. I made deliberate efforts to have representation from Church Street and Shepherd Glen parents while also being sensitive to not exploit their trauma.
for my research. I made extra efforts in accommodating these parents’ schedules and commitments, offering to meet at a time and location convenient for them. Unfortunately, I was ultimately not able to interview any Church Street of Shepherd Glen parents, but aim to forefront their voices in this study nonetheless.

Beyond the limitations of my own network, there are several explanations for why it proved difficult to represent the voices of parents of color and parents at the schools slated for closure. One possible factor is that the closure of a neighborhood school is a devastating event for the communities they serve, and parents may therefore be reluctant to participate in an interview around such an emotional topic; I felt an added responsibility not to exploit a traumatic event. To this end, it is important to reflect upon my own identity and subjectivity as a researcher. As a Yale student without children in Hamden schools, an outsider to this process, I do not share in this experience with the people I interview, which may have limited my ability to build trust and rapport with some of the interviewees. More important, perhaps, is my positionality as a white male. In some cases, this worked to my advantage as white parents, especially white fathers were willing to tell me things in private that they did not want to say in public. But it certainly limited my sample, and throughout my analysis I reflected upon how this mediated the kind of perspectives I heard. I also recognize that there is a long history of white institutions misrepresenting, exploiting, and ignoring people of color in education research. Now realizing how central Church Street was to this study, I would have liked to have multiple years to foster a relationship of trust with the communities most affected by the decisions. I discuss how these limitations may have impacted my finding later in the paper.

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78 Milner, “Race, Culture, and Researcher Positionality”
Primary source analysis

Close-reading primary sources gave richness and purpose to my understanding of the process by illustrating the specific social, political, and rhetorical strategies employed by all concerned parties, including parents, the Board, or external consultants. In addition to public meetings, a significant amount of discourse occurred online, on various social media platforms. ThoughtExchange, for example, is a forum set up by the school board on which nearly 1,000 participants shared their concerns about the redistricting process. I also collected flyers, pamphlets, email scripts, fact sheets, and other materials used by parents to disseminate information and “rally the troops.” Analyzing these sources help me understand the intricacies of how parents leverage their social networks to organize opposition or support for the redistricting efforts. See the Appendix for a list of primary sources I consulted.
Analysis and Findings

After interviews were completed, they were transcribed either by hand or with the assistance of the automated software Trint and then analyzed through qualitative coding in NVivo. My coding process was inspired by methods of grounded theory, in which “systematic, yet flexible” analysis of qualitative data is used to construct theories grounded in the lived experiences of respondents.79 As recommended by Charmaz, rather than applying preconceived themes to the data, I began by writing granular, line-by-line descriptions that identified actions or processes. Then, I took a second pass and tested the most common or salient themes against my whole body of data, with an eye toward both confirming and disconfirming evidence, eventually settling on the coding scheme I would use to sort my data. Interview protocols and coding schemes can be found in the Appendix at the end of the document.

Although financial and time considerations prevented me from transcribing the approximately 35 hours of audio from public meetings, I took extensive field notes that documented individual comments from both the community and the Board. I recorded the timestamp from my audio recorder approximately every five minutes, which later allowed me to find specific comments in the recording. I looked to Irving Seidman’s Interviewing as Qualitative Research for guidance on extracting the most salient themes by unearthing connections and letting “quantity […] interact with quality.”80 I was careful to allow my thematic constructs to emerge from the experiences of my interviewees, rather than predetermined categories I had in mind. This rigorous coding process helped me mitigate my subjectivity as a researcher, which inevitably colored the way I interpreted the words of my interviewees.

79 Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory
80 Seidman, Interviewing as Qualitative Research
Findings

If there was one thing that was constant in the 3R process, it was change: changing meeting times, changing goals, changing parent advocacy. The most notable change, however, was the shift away from the initial goal of redrawing attendance zones to a more moderate—and voluntary—desegregation policy of intra-district choice.

In this section, I examine two specific, and opposite, groups of parents: Whitneyville Mobilize, who exerted a great deal of influence on the 3R process, and Church Street parents, whose advocacy was essentially absent at public meetings. In the first section, I give a brief overview of the general “pulse” of public comments, particularly with regard to school diversity. In the second section, I will describe how the extensive, oppositional mobilization of the small—but politically powerful—group of affluent white parents known as Whitneyville Mobilize happened largely through informal channels, and shifted the trajectory of the Board’s decision-making process before regular public meetings on the issue even began. This challenges the notion, I will argue, that desegregation policies face obstacles only because of vocal and visible backlash, and instead suggests that (1) disproportionate access to informal, private channels of advocacy and (2) anticipated backlash from specific groups is enough to limit the success of desegregation policies. In the third section, I will then use the case of Church Street parents to illustrate how this undermines the voices of the communities most impacted by the policies being decided. Finally, I conclude with limitations, implications, and recommendations for ongoing desegregation work in diverse communities.
ATTITUDES TOWARD SCHOOL DIVERSITY

When I began my research in April 2018, I combed through case studies of suburban districts that had gone through similar desegregation efforts. Case after case, the story seemed the same: affluent and highly-involved white parents, equipped with political savvy and a sense of entitlement, staged an overwhelming resistance that inundated local officials with endless letters, long public meetings, and even lawsuits.\(^81\) Parent comments in public forums like those from the recent redistricting battle in the Upper West Side are loud, angry, even racist.\(^82\) I therefore came to expect the same once public meetings began in Hamden. It seems that the Board agreed, opening public comment at the first 3R meeting by asking for civility, asking that the community not “doubt the sincerity of the Board.”\(^83\) Some aspects of this and future meetings aligned with my expectations: the majority of those who spoke were white, meetings did often last around four hours, and the level of mobilization among some groups of parents was impressive. What surprised me, however, was that with very few exceptions, comments were thoughtful, civil, and productive. As white parent James put it, “the ugliness in Hamden has been smaller than I expected.”\(^84\)

In fact, parents consistently went beyond simply avoiding “ugliness.” In public meetings and in interviews, parents displayed a commitment to diversity, with many citing it as a reason they chose to live in Hamden. Samantha, a white parent at Dunbar Hill, the school which most closely resembles the demographics of Hamden, moved to the neighborhood to provide her children a “diverse environment that's going to be reflective of the world that they're going to be entering into.”\(^85\) Some parents believed so strongly in the value of diverse schools that they were open to their child being uprooted and sent to a new school. Matt and his wife, white parents at Spring Glen Elementary, desirable for its high academic rankings and rich extracurricular offerings, decided that if a plan

\(^{81}\) Lewis-McCoy, *Inequality in the Promised Land*; see also note 15.
\(^{82}\) Robbins, “Upper West Side Uproar”
\(^{83}\) John, BOE meeting, 24 September 2018
\(^{84}\) James, personal communication, 20 February 2019
\(^{85}\) Samantha, personal communication, 14 February 2019
“moved our child but served racial justice, and served the racial rebalancing that we thought would be important for the greater good, that we were going to not even see it as a sacrifice, but see it as a positive for our children.”\textsuperscript{86} While it is important to remember that social desirability bias may influence participants’ responses, it is nonetheless notable that at the surface level, Hamden appeared to be an exception to the trend observed by Thomas Shapiro, in which white parents with school-age children move away from diverse environments.\textsuperscript{87}

Thus emerges a puzzle: with a community largely committed to diversity and a racial balance mandate to support it, why did the Board of Education step back from an initially ambitious plan which would redraw attendance zones to create “whatever percentage, whatever type of diversity”\textsuperscript{88} desired and instead approve a voluntary program of intra-district choice, which leaves the task of desegregation in the hands of parents? In order to answer this question, it is helpful to look at those who opposed the redistricting and how they did it.

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WHITNEYVILLE MOBILIZE

Behind closed doors: privileged access to informal advocacy

Public meetings are the primary channel through which the Board of Education solicited input—and often criticism. The vast majority of criticisms at early public meetings were not related to redistricting concerns (i.e. specific attendance zone boundaries or busing), but a combination of emotional pleas about the schools at risk of closing, questions about the decision-making process, and calls to forefront conversations of racial equity. All things considered, the Board did not receive much public backlash on the redistricting element of their plan. Yet at a workshop about a month later, Board member Mark, a white man, noted that “we don't have to do anything with attendance zones today, tomorrow, next year. We have to do it in 2 years or 3 years, after all the construction we're

\textsuperscript{86} Matt, personal communication, 13 February 2019
\textsuperscript{87} Shapiro, The Hidden Cost of Being African American
\textsuperscript{88} Katie, BOE workshop, 29 October 2018
anticipating is done, and all the movement is done."\textsuperscript{89} While funding and construction considerations were likely an important factor in this shift in thinking, there is ample evidence to suggest that political pressure from a group of predominantly white Spring Glen parents, received outside of public meetings, may have played an important role as well.

Spring Glen is widely regarded as the most desirable elementary school in Hamden, both for its high performance on state tests\textsuperscript{90} and the walkable character of the surrounding neighborhood. One of the neighborhoods in its attendance zone is known as Whitneyville, a predominantly white and middle-class neighborhood south of the school from which students are bused to Spring Glen. In six of the seven redistricting scenarios initially presented to the Board in March 2018, all or most of the Spring Glen section of Whitneyville was drawn into a new school: in five of those plans, families would be attending Church Street, the poorest and lowest-performing school in the district.\textsuperscript{91} This sparked a flurry of conversation among parents in the neighborhood, a conversation which “was dominated by fears predominantly that Whitneyville students were going to end up at Church Street.”\textsuperscript{92}

A group of about 25 Whitneyville families coalesced through backyard meetings and established a secretive coalition they referred to informally as “Whitneyville Mobilize.” Small but impressively organized, the group used a private online organizing platform to share information and correspondence from their extensive personal and professional networks, which included school board members, PTA leaders, and even state representative Mike D’Agostino. With the seven scenarios threatening to move their children out of Spring Glen, both Board members and parents described what they saw as fierce opposition: James, a fellow Spring Glen parent who was not a member of Whitneyville Mobilize, saw “a lot of hand-wringing about that plan,”\textsuperscript{93} and Board member

\textsuperscript{89} Mark, BOE workshop, 29 October 2018
\textsuperscript{90} Connecticut State Department of Education, \textit{Performance Index, 2017-18}
\textsuperscript{91} Milone & Machroom, “Enrollment Projections”
\textsuperscript{92} Sean, personal communication, 27 March 2019
\textsuperscript{93} James, personal communication, 20 February 2019
Carol, a white woman, evoked an unpleasant scene: “a parent in Whitneyville screaming ‘You can’t move my kid! I don’t want to go to Ridge Hill. I wanna stay at Spring Glen.’ They’re the screamers.”\footnote{Carol, personal communication, 15 February 2019}

Interestingly, none of this “screaming” happened at public meetings. Instead, it happened through private connections, reflecting the ways in which access to social capital affords privileged parents disproportionate influence over the decision-making process.

By the nature of this kind of informal advocacy, collecting information about the activities of Whitneyville Mobilize proved difficult. However, other organizing groups were much more willing to provide me with access to their own advocacy tools. A group of parents who formed a coalition to push the Board to forefront racial equity in their discussions, for instance, shared internal documents like fact sheets and email scripts with me. Those affiliated with Whitneyville Mobilize, on the other hand, were much less forthcoming: perhaps because they are aware that their group could be perceived to be part of the “ugliness” that James evoked. The advocacy of Whitneyville Mobilize, therefore, was in many ways a mystery. The result of this advocacy, however, can be observed indirectly through the evolution in the Board’s thinking.

In September 2018, six months after the initial seven scenarios were released, the Board updated the public with three new scenarios, all of which reversed the fate of Whitneyville. Of these scenarios, two had Whitneyville completely in Spring Glen’s attendance zone, and the third had a tiny sliver of Whitneyville going to Ridge Hill, an average-performing school.\footnote{See note 10.} Whitneyville Mobilize exerted political pressure on the Board under the veil of informal channels. These channels protected them from scrutiny and privileged them with access to information and influence. It was through these channels that Whitneyville Mobilize realized their goal—and maintained their privilege:

“After the first official meeting on the 24th, we had a backyard meeting where a member of the Whitneyville Mobilize group said that they had a conversation with a member of the school board, who implied that of the scenarios that they had considered to that point, the first seven were not really an option—which is why they had ended up with the next three.
And [they implied] that Whitneyville was not going anywhere. And [they] did this verbally and then verbally walked back, in the same interaction. As if perhaps [they] had said too much and then sort of walked it back a little bit. 96

This interviewee, a white man and a de facto leader within Whitneyville Mobilize, continuously insisted that their communications with the Board between March and September were merely about getting more information, rather than pushing for any specific outcome. However, it is worth mentioning that this interviewee was notably secretive about the nature of these communications. Those privileged with access to informal channels of advocacy—and the profound power they afford—are able to guard this access precisely because the channels are informal, hidden from the public eye. The story of the 3R initiative is not just about access and advocacy, but access to advocacy.

“There will be a reckoning”: the power of “anticipated backlash” 97

Returning to the puzzle described at the beginning of this section, we can now see the nature of the advocacy from privileged parents opposed to redistricting. In order to understand why the Board changed its trajectory, however, we must also understand the influence of this advocacy, in some cases even before it happens.

Lewis and Diamond explain how Board members and community members alike are often acutely aware of the formidable resistance that privileged parents could summon, should their advantaged status be threatened, and as a result they make concessions in anticipation of a backlash. 98

Jody Goeler, based on his interaction with “a couple people at Spring Glen who are really concerned about their children having to move schools,” anticipated that Spring Glen would be “the community that will resist the most around moving kids.” 99 Board member Carol expressed a more cynical tone

96 Sean, personal communication, 27 March 2019
97 Lewis and Diamond, Despite the Best Intentions
98 Ibid.
99 Jody Goeler, personal communication, 7 February 2019
towards Spring Glen’s exclusivity, calling it “its own little community, it’s kind of like put a fence around, [caricature voice] we don’t want anybody, and we don’t want to leave,” a comment that mirrors one from Rochelle, a black parent who described her own Spring Glen neighborhood as “very territorial.” For now, Board member Mark suggests, privileged parents are pretty quiet because it will be a few years before attendance zones are drawn and in the meantime, the closure of Church Street and Shepherd Glen does not affect them. Backlash from Spring Glen parents was treated as essentially inevitable. The delay of the redistricting decisions, therefore, was perhaps an effort by the Board to allow themselves to achieve at least a part of their mission without what one Board member, a white woman, called the “bee’s nest” of angry Spring Glen parents getting in the way. The sheer power of anticipated backlash was enough to impede the Board’s initial redistricting plan. For now, the Whitneyville group is dormant: “once it was clear that the status quo was the status quo,” Sean admitted, the “level of involvement [...] dropped to zero and stays at zero to this day.” But they are ready to mobilize once again should their neighborhood become threatened. “There will be a reckoning,” he warned, when “the balancing issue rears its ugly head.”

When it comes to the role of public input in controversial educational decisions, some might argue that we should listen to the parents who speak up: after all, why would we penalize parents who simply want the best for their child and their child’s school? This mentality, however, implies that some parents care less about their children’s schools or simply need to be better at advocating. To understand how these assumptions are not just misconceived, but harmful, we will use parental advocacy from Church Street as a case study.

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100 Carol, personal communication, 15 February 2019
101 Rochelle, personal communication, 15 February 2019
102 Mark, personal communication, 16 February 2019
103 Melanie, Board Member, BOE workshop, 29 October 2019
104 Sean, personal communication, 27 March 2019
105 Ibid.
106 It is worth reiterating the difficulty, described in the Methodology section, I faced in finding Church Street parents who could give me a primary narrative; nonetheless, my own observations at public meetings and the reflections of those with ties to the community tell a compelling story.
CHURCH STREET PARENTS

The Board understood that there were socioeconomic barriers to Church Street parents' participation, but they underestimated the extent of disenfranchisement that led Church Street parents to disengage from the process. Despite their neighborhood school being on the chopping block, parents from Church Street were nearly absent at public meetings. Of the 41 people who spoke at the first public meeting in September, only two were from Church Street, and no Church Street parents made comments at any future public meetings. Contrasting this with the consistent and vocal presence of Dunbar Hill parents, who as described in the Introduction occupied the same block of the auditorium at every meeting, armed with their matching shirts and handmade signs, it becomes clear that the communities that stood to be impacted by school closure decisions were not equally represented at public meetings. Much to the credit of the Board, those interviewed did not attribute Church Street’s absence to a lack of caring, except for Carol who noted, “I don’t think they’re as married to the school.” Instead, they spoke compassionately about the socioeconomic barriers that may have prevented Church Street parents from attending public meetings. Laura, for instance, called Church Street’s absence a “symptom of the inequities that exist within our school district,” in that these parents may be working multiple jobs to support their families, and do not have the luxury of attending meetings. The Board’s sympathy for Church Street

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107 These figures come from my field notes, in which I documented every person who spoke. However, a few speakers did not identify their school affiliation or did not have one.
108 Carol, personal communication, 15 February 2019
families was admirable, but their understanding of the complex structural disadvantages that these families face was only surface-level.

The shortcomings of the Board’s understanding is best captured by Amanda Lewis and John Diamond in their book *Despite the Best Intentions*, where they note that “gaps in material, cultural, social, and symbolic resources [...] enable some to translate their care into more advantages for their children.” Comments from the Board of Education about the socioeconomic barriers facing parental involvement from Church Street indicate an understanding of the gaps in *material* resources, but neglect the importance of *cultural, social, and symbolic resources*. Parents at Church Street are predominantly working class, with higher poverty rates and lower household incomes than the rest of Hamden,\textsuperscript{109} and therefore are less able to draw upon professional expertise to critique the information presented to them. In contrast, parents from Spring Glen often referred to their medical and educational expertise in public testimony.\textsuperscript{111} Church Street parents likely do not possess the same kinds of high-powered connections that allowed Whitneyville Mobilize to build political pressure. However, these more intangible disadvantages did not go completely unnoticed. They were abundantly clear to Spring Glen parent Rochelle, who drew on her experience as a black parent to understand why Church Street parents weren’t showing up: “I'm a black person so I can speak on behalf of that community. You know, we take a lot, we just—we don't fight anymore. We've been beaten down to the point we're just like, 'whatever.'”\textsuperscript{112} Whether or not Rochelle really understood the Church Street families, she identified a broader concern among Hamden black families, a theme no Board member mentioned in interviews: a sense of *disenfranchisement* among the Church Street community, and more broadly, black parents. Church Street principal Karen Butler, herself a black

\textsuperscript{109} Lewis and Diamond, *Despite the Best Intentions*
\textsuperscript{110} *Families: Income Below Poverty Level, 2017*
\textsuperscript{111} BOE meetings, 24 September and 2 October 2018
\textsuperscript{112} Rochelle, personal communication, 15 February 2019
woman, who began her first year as principal there in October, echoed this sentiment when asked to describe her conversations with parents:

\[ This \text{ is a community who feels in many ways that they've been dumped on or forgotten. There are some that have the mindset, \text{“well, I go to the meeting and I say something, so what, they're still going to do what they're going to do anyway.”}} \]^{113}

It is on the topic of this disenfranchisement that the disconnect between the Board of Education, which includes only one black member, and the lived experience of the Church Street community is most stark. So stark, in fact, that one Board member had the complete opposite impression:

\[ I\text{ actually reached out to different principals, they had just come and gone, to understand why Church Street wasn't really being participatory. And the answer I got, basically was, \text{“these people are very hard working, some of them work two, three jobs, and they don't have a lot of time to attend a lot of meetings, but more importantly is that they trust that their best interest will be taken to consideration when you make your decision.”}} \]^{114}

Mark reached out to former principals to try and better understand the school community, but ultimately he remained distanced from the Church Street families themselves. While no Board member explicitly admitted that the absence of Church Street parents at public meetings contributed to their ultimate closure decision, perhaps this absence made it politically easier to close their school. It was “gonna be way more of a fight,”^{115} said Dunbar Hill parent Samantha, to close a school with “300 angry families [...] who clearly have an organized front.”^{116} In addition to political pressure, the testimony of Board member Alex (a Hispanic man), who attended a parent meeting at Helen Street, indicated that the perceived strength of a school’s community also played an important role in closure decisions:

\[ \text{We [himself, Mark, and Superintendent Goeler] had a meeting with the Helen Street community, and we learned a lot. And that was very interesting to me, because it was an instance in which I was able to see that whatever thoughts or preconceptions I arrived with changed over the course of that meeting. [...] It wasn’t hard to read that the fabric was healthy. The community was a healthy community and it would be a mistake to break it.}} \]^{117}

\[ ^{113} \text{Karen Butler, personal communication, 25 February 2019} \]
\[ ^{114} \text{Mark, personal communication, 16 February 2018} \]
\[ ^{115} \text{Samantha, personal communication, 14 February 2019} \]
\[ ^{116} \text{Ibid.} \]
\[ ^{117} \text{Alex, personal communication, 14 February 2019} \]
It is clear that the advocacy of Helen Street families had an impact on Alex, and perhaps other Board members as well. While informal advocacy and the fear of anticipated backlash saved Whitneyville from redistricting, the lack of advocacy (and therefore anticipated backlash) may have driven the Board to close Church Street over Helen Street. To be clear, it is impossible to say whether closing Church Street was the “right” or “wrong” thing to do: many competing factors made the closure decisions far from objective. It is possible that under some weighting of these factors, closing Church Street is “best” for the town. However, by allowing input only through channels that privilege the voices of well-resourced parents, the Board of Education failed to consider the needs of the Church Street community in its planning.

LIMITATIONS

As with any findings derived from a case study, it is important to consider their limitations with respect to both internal validity (i.e. do the findings hold true within Hamden) and external validity (i.e. do the findings apply to contexts other than Hamden).

Obstacles related to my sample, my data, and my positionality may pose threats to the internal validity of this study. As discussed in the Methodology section, my sample was neither racially nor socioeconomically representative of Hamden. A disproportionately white and affluent group of interviewees likely skewed my perceptions toward voices of privilege, rather than those who will be most affected by the Board’s decisions. Likewise, this study centers around advocacy that was hidden and absent which presents unique challenges for data collection. While more direct access to the inner workings of Whitneyville Mobilize and the testimony of Church Street parents would have allowed me to portray a primary narrative of the groups’ respective modes of advocacy, the reflections of knowledgeable observers and the ultimate outcome are still significant. Most importantly, however, it is crucial to reflect on how my own positionality could affect my conclusions: as a white person, as
a person who has never lived in poverty, as a student at an elite university, my lived experience is vastly different from the many families of color who will be disrupted by school closures. This limited not only my ability to recruit a representative sample, but also my capacity to understand the challenges they face and the community significance of their neighborhood schools. I did my best to center their experience, even if it ended up being more indirect than I would have liked.

It is perhaps more difficult to understand how well these findings apply outside of Hamden. This was an enormously complex process designed to address the specific problems facing Hamden, and this study’s focus on a narrow aspect of this process does not suggest that only this aspect is important, but rather that it is important in a way that is previously not understood. The phenomena of informal advocacy and anticipated backlash could apply to a wide range of districts undertaking any kind of controversial reform. Whether the task at hand involves school closures, attendance zones, or other kinds of restructuring, the sociopolitical forces that shape parental advocacy will likely influence the decision-making process.

With an initiative as complicated as it is consequential, it is tempting to get lost in speculation and counterfactuals. What if the Board stuck to their guns on the attendance zones? What if Church Street had shown up more, would their school still be closed? The reality, however, is that in a process with so many goals, so many changes, and so many stakeholders, there is no simple way to explain the decisions that were made—let alone the decisions that were not. It is more productive, therefore, to discuss the implications of the above findings for the ongoing 3R initiative in Hamden.

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**IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Underscoring both cases is the importance of meaningful and transparent community engagement. While the informal channels utilized by groups like Whitneyville Mobilize may be difficult to democratize, input-seeking through formal channels, like public meetings, offer the
opportunity to level the playing field when it comes to whose voices are heard. When asked about community outreach efforts, Board members recognized, as discussed above, that attendance at public meetings is not representative. Even among those who do attend the meetings, those who speak, Helen Street parent Vanessa observed, were those who “felt welcomed in the space,” that space being one which “really privilege[s] whiteness.” A Hispanic woman herself, Vanessa went on to explain that this phenomenon is driven by the fact that the Board of Education is not representative of the community they serve. With only two people of color on a nine-person Board, communities of color may feel further alienated from engaging in public meetings. It is not enough that “every meeting is public and all meeting notes are published,” as one Board member responded to criticisms of transparency in the Facebook group “Hamden Progressive Action Network.” Many community members suggested that the Board could more meaningfully engage with different school communities if they did a “roadshow,” hosting public meetings at various school sites in southern Hamden where the socioeconomic barriers to access are greatest. This recommendation underscores the value and necessity of active and intentional community engagement in diverse school districts.

It is also worth considering the implications of these findings for the long-term, broader future of school desegregation in diverse communities. While the uniqueness of Connecticut’s racial imbalance law is not to be dismissed, the definition and enforcement of the mandate is deeply flawed in a way that penalizes schools serving predominantly students of color while protecting disproportionately white schools. The mandate’s simplistic binary categorization of race into “white” or “minority” was a consistent complaint, and perhaps one of the few things on which everyone could agree. The unfairness of this definition was particularly relevant to members of the Shepherd Glen community, a school upheld as a paragon of diversity where students represent 60 countries and 24

118 Vanessa, personal communication, 23 February 2019
119 Ibid.
120 Adrianna Bigard, post on Hamden Progressive Action Network (HamPAN) Facebook page
languages. Its “diverse school status” allows Spring Glen, with a 29% demographic disparity, to be considered “balanced” because white students are not counted as being out of balance, while Church Street is in “impending imbalance” with a 25% disparity due to an increased number of minority students. In other words, the law is more generous for schools that are “too white.” While the Board of Education many times committed to exceeding the mandate’s definitions, there was no incentive for them to do so: when the law was first passed, it was intentionally written with no penalties so that local school boards could proceed “in a spirit of cooperation.” The law was further weakened in 1998, when the requirements of local districts were weakened.

Any board of education receiving notification of the existence of racial imbalance as specified in section 10-226b shall forthwith prepare a plan to correct such imbalance and file a copy of said plan with the State Board of Education. Said plan may be limited to addressing the imbalance existing at any school and need not result in a district-wide plan or district-wide pupil reassignment.

In the text above, the bold text represents new language, relinquishing boards of education from creating a plan that addresses segregation across the whole district. As districts around the state continue to adapt to changing student populations, it will be critical for local leaders to understand the shortcomings of the racial balance mandate, and perhaps lobby for a policy that expands the definition of diversity beyond a white/non-white binary.

121 Hamden Public Schools, “Shepherd Glen: About Us”
122 John, personal communication, 11 February 2019
123 See note 10.
Conclusion

This study investigated the role of parental advocacy in Hamden’s sweeping, multifaceted district restructuring initiative. The initially ambitious plan entailed a town-wide redistricting, which aimed to use attendance zones to break the link between housing segregation and school segregation. After months spent at the attendance zone drawing board, after discussing dozens of potential maps, the Board of Education one day decided to step away from redistricting altogether, instead settling on a plan that will rely on parental choice to desegregate the town’s elementary schools through intra-district magnet schools. Challenging the notion that local desegregation initiatives necessarily crumble under the intense political pressure of vocal and visible backlash, this study finds that privileged parents in a small but powerful group known as Whitneyville Mobilize used informal channels of advocacy that afforded them both influence over decision-makers and protection from scrutiny. Such parents never actually had to say a word in public forums. The sheer power of anticipated backlash from parents with the political savvy and social capital to impede the process was enough to push the Board away from their redistricting plans, therefore allowing those parents to maintain their advantaged status in the district’s most desirable school.

Even formal channels of advocacy, however, did not allow all parents to meaningfully engage in the decision-making process and provide their input. Although hundreds of parents spoke at public meetings, parents from Church Street, a school serving the town’s most disadvantaged students and which would ultimately be closed, were notably absent. This absence reveals not just socioeconomic barriers to attending meetings, but possibly a sense of disenfranchisement. Without the same access to advocacy as more privileged parents, the Board’s limited efforts at purposeful community engagement excluded the voices of Church Street parents.

Future research on school desegregation initiatives should continue to examine the informal channels of advocacy that privileged parents use to secure advantages for their children. These
channels are difficult to study because researchers often must rely on secondhand (and frequently secretive) accounts of this type of advocacy. At the other end of the spectrum, it is also critical to illuminate the sociopolitical forces that limit certain parents from engaging in advocacy. A long-term ethnographic study would be beneficial, as it could potentially allow researchers access to these hidden and absent modes of advocacy. Understanding these forces can inform local educational leaders—in Hamden and otherwise—pursuing similar desegregation initiatives.

For Hamden, the 3R initiative is far from over. In some ways, it is just beginning. While Hamden has already made a decision that falls into a long history of desegregation falling on the backs of students of color, ensuring that subsequent decisions (such as the eventual redrawing of attendance zones) do not further disadvantage these students will require intentional—and perhaps unpopular—decisions. It was abundantly clear to me that every member of the Board of Education was genuinely invested in doing what they thought was best for the students of Hamden. With this in mind, the Board should carry this work forward with both a short-term focus on empowering community engagement and a long-term focus on lobbying against the archaic and unfair racial balance law. Attendance zones will need to be drawn eventually, and I hope that the Board of Education will do more than what they have done to ensure that the voices at the table are representative of the diverse perspectives that attract so many people to Hamden in the first place. As changes begin taking place, it is in the town’s hands to wholeheartedly embrace this diversity, both in thought and in action.

School segregation is not and has never been an “issue of the past.” It is perhaps the single greatest threat to public education, and it exists in cities and villages, in wealthy communities and poor ones, in “good” districts and “bad” districts. I hope that the findings presented herein demonstrate not just the difficulty—but also the tremendous importance—of creating schools that reflect the communities they serve.
Acknowledgements

Throughout my academic career, I have come to understand inequities in public schools from many perspectives; I’ve read the work of many great scholars, written policy memos, quantified achievement gaps, and even stepped foot in the classroom. But this project, a year-long qualitative study, was a new endeavor for me, and it would not have been possible without the generosity, guidance, and kindness of the many people I met and consulted along the way.

Over the course of this study, I’ve had the opportunity to immerse myself in a vibrant community that deeply cares about the education of their children. In sitting through hours upon hours of public meetings and having countless conversations with parents around town, I became quickly impressed with the civility and thoughtfulness Hamden residents displayed in grappling with such a complicated decision. Parents and students are deeply attached to their neighborhood schools. I am deeply grateful to the many parents, public officials, and community members who welcomed me into their homes, offices, and schools and took the time to participate in my study.

This project would not have been the same without the students in EDST 240: Cities, Suburbs and School Choice. Their thoughtful questions and their support in interviewing and transcribing Hamden residents pushed this project forward and afforded me access to more data than I could have ever hoped for. As I grappled with my first foray into qualitative social research, I often relied on the guidance of the many incredible experts I have the privilege of knowing: Professor Talya Zemach-Bersin encouraged me to think deeply about my own goals for this project, and Professor Richard Lemons provided invaluable insight along the way. Most of all, I am indebted to my advisor, Professor Mira Debs. She is the one who inspired me to take on this project, and has empowered to not just hone my skills as a researcher, but write something I am proud of.
Lastly, I would like to thank my cohort of fellow Education Studies Scholars. It has been a pleasure and honor to share over half of my Yale experience with such an incredibly passionate and inspiring group of people.
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*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 United States Reports 537 (1896).


"The Benefits of Socioeconomically and Racially Integrated Schools and Classrooms." In *Facts*: 51


Appendix

Interview protocol: parents

1. What school does your child currently attend, and how did you choose that school?
   a. What has your experience been like there?
2. What was your first reaction when you found out about redistricting?
   a. Where did you first hear about the redistricting efforts?
   b. Has your perspective changed at all in the time since? If so, to what do you attribute that change?
3. What do you think about the idea of racial balancing of schools in Hamden and in Connecticut?
   a. What role should it play in the redistricting process? Why do you feel that way?
4. Have you attended any public meetings or board meetings? What has been your reaction to them?
   a. Why do you think people attend these meetings?
   b. How do you think the Board feels about these meetings?
5. What do you think of communication with officials, how has that been?
   a. In your observations, what does the Board seem to prioritize in making their decisions?
      i. Why do you think that is?
   b. How has the Board incorporated public input into their planning?
6. Have you been involved in any parent meetings or advocacy efforts as a result of the redistricting?
   a. How did you hear about parent meetings? Why did you decide to attend (or not attend) them?
   b. Can you tell me more about your conversations with other parents? How has this shaped your perspective?
   c. What kinds of resources and strategies did you (or other parents you spoke to) use to advocate effectively?
7. I know that this has been a charged and controversial process. From what you've observed, what seem to be the main issues at play here?
   a. Why do you think this is such a controversial issue?
   b. What do you think makes people have one perspective or another?
8. What do you plan to do for your child's school next year?
   a. Has redistricting caused you to change your plans? If so, how?
9. What are your concerns about the transition next year? Are there any things that you think would be helpful for district and school officials to do?
10. Are there any questions we haven't asked you that you would like to share?
11. How do you identify your race/ethnicity on a census form?
12. What is your current job?
13. What is your level of schooling?
14. Do you own or rent where you live? If you own, has your property value changed at all in the last few years?
15. If you are comfortable sharing it, what is your family’s annual income?
16. What are the ages of your children, and what schools do they attend?
17. Is there anybody else that you think would be interested in speaking with me?

**Interview protocol: town officials and Board of Education members**

1. What led you to run for a position on the Board of Education/Town Committee/Town DNC, and how long have you served?
   a. Kids in school?/Attended in the past?
2. When you started the 3R (Rethink, Restructure, Results) process, what did you hope would be the outcome?
   a. Any decisions you/the Board made in advance of public meetings? (for eg. Wintergreen, specific Hamden schools closed...)
   b. Of the issues the board was confronting, were there any that were particularly important to you? (budget, school closures or racial imbalance redistricting)
   c. Are there any consequences to having racially imbalanced schools? Loss of $?
3. How were you involved in the decision-making process around the Hamden 3R process, and what was most challenging?
   a. What most surprised you about the process? (actual schools closed, community reaction, level of engagement)
   b. Did you consult other Boards of Ed around the state?
   c. Pressure from the state around racial imbalance?/Federal $?
4. What kind of interactions you were having with parents outside of public meetings?
   a. Emails, phone calls, social media?
   b. Can you tell me a story about a memorable interaction with a particular parent?
5. How much weight do you feel parents had in the process?
   a. Impact on school closures
   b. Impact on decision to delay redistricting
   c. Which community of parents had the biggest impact? Did type of showing up matter?
   d. Was anyone not heard or not present in the process?
6. What do you think will be the long term outcomes of this work?
   a. Has any part of town benefitted more? (North, South)
   b. Has any part of town had to make more sacrifices?
   c. What are challenges? (people moving out of Hamden, backlash, etc)
   d. Has this process resolved the budgetary concerns of the district?
   e. Where does it leave the racial imbalance from the state?
7. Tell me more about why the district hired outside consultants, and what role their reports played in the process.
8. For Board of Ed members: Your board made a unanimous vote in November. What process enabled you to get to that decision?
   a. Influential figures on board? One particular leader?
   b. Did political parties have any stances?
9. Tell us about what you do when you aren’t serving on the Board of Ed/Town committee/Town DNC.
10. Are there any questions we haven’t asked that you think are important to share?
11. Are there any people you think our project should interview as part of this study?

Primary sources
- Transcripts from interviews with 10 parents
- Transcripts, photos, and field notes from observations at public meetings
- Postings on public social media pages
  - Facebook
    - Hamden Progressive Action Network (HamPAN)
    - Action Together CT - New Haven County
  - ThoughtExchange, a forum where over 1000 community members shared their responses (and rated others’ responses) to two questions:
    - What are the most important factors to consider when deciding about closing schools and redistricting students?
    - What are some ideas you have to provide a smooth transition to students and families for any changes that are made?
- Hamden District Profile and Performance Report (2016-17)
- Letter from CT Commissioner of Education informing Superintendent Jody Goeler of impending racial imbalance in three of Hamden’s elementary schools
- Regulations to Implement the Racial Imbalance Law (§§ 10-226e-1—10-226e-9)
- Allies for Integration & Racial Justice in Hamden Public Schools: Organizing Toolkit
- Materials distributed by parents advocating against the closure of Helen Street School
  - Email script
  - Fact sheet with talking points
  - Flyer encouraging attendance at BOE meetings
- Content from Hamden’s redistricting information page, including but not limited to:
  - Current attendance zone map
  - Document outlining goals of redistricting efforts
  - Presentations from expert consultants (District Management Group and Milone & MacBroom)
  - Agendas and minutes from Board of Education meetings

Coding scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decision-making process</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>BOE community outreach and transparency</strong></td>
<td>“I think the Board's openness to participation remained limited throughout the entire thing. They had big meetings, and those big meetings were were open and available, and still they were big meetings at the same time on any given night, they didn't do a road show, where we're going to have a meeting at Church Street at three</td>
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o'clock in the afternoon. A couple of Board members met with a couple of PTAs, and the rest were meetings that were held at the middle school in the evening. Their outreach was conservative."\(^{126}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partisanship</th>
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<tr>
<td>“When you get to the Board, you kinda put your R’s and D’s away and we operate basically as a unit, and there’s not a lot of political divide. In fact, there’s probably no political divide except for selection of the chair and secretary.”(^{127})</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public meetings</th>
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<td>“I think - and maybe I’m asking too much of parents - but I think a lot of the public comment geared towards these sort of very emotional displays of “don’t close my school.”(^{128})</td>
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<th>Using consultants</th>
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<td>“One of the things I think that is universally cringeworthy is one of the architects said in front of a group of parents and children, about a potential school, using the word demolished.”(^{129})</td>
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<th>Redistricting maps</th>
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<tr>
<td>“And, we were about two to three years away from full implementation, so the discussion of maps at this point was preliminary. And, it wasn’t helpful to cause anxiety, to add to the nervousness that way, so we sort of decided to take a step back in that regard.”(^{130})</td>
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<tr>
<th>Motivations for 3R</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Budget concerns</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“We basically went 10 years without a real increase in our operating budget. So finances is one part, looking at how we can restructure ourselves to be more efficient.”(^{131})</td>
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| **Declining enrollment** |
| “In absolute numbers we have fewer students, but we actually have more special ed students, more English Language Learners, and more that meet the poverty levels.”\(^{132}\) |

| **Facilities issues** |
| “You know, some of the old brick buildings barely had room for kids to play and bus loops that were adequate. Most of the schools were built for neighborhoods, walkers that come and go.”\(^{133}\) |

| **Racial balance in schools** |
| “I’m not 100 percent comfortable with it. Only because I think it sort of is telling neighborhoods that are heavily balanced one way or the other that you can't get a proper education unless you’re with a |

\(^{126}\) James, personal communication, 20 February 2019
\(^{127}\) Mark, personal communication, 16 February 2019
\(^{128}\) James, personal communication, 20 February 2019
\(^{129}\) Laura, personal communication, 13 February 2019
\(^{130}\) Alex, personal communication, 14 February 2019
\(^{131}\) William, personal communication, 15 February 2019
\(^{132}\) Carol, personal communication, 15 February 2019
\(^{133}\) Chris Melillo, personal communication, 13 February 2019
different kind of person..."\(^\text{134}\)

### Parental advocacy

#### Concerns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment to school community</th>
<th>“Now, if I'm wearing sort of my mom, neighborhood hat, [laughs] the other thing that I also value is the community neighborhood school, which I know sort of almost conflicts with the sort of diversity, and then also the financial stability, of the problem that we have.&quot;(^\text{135})</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burden of integration</td>
<td>“You're telling me that the schools that are predominantly serving black and brown children, you're proposing to close and disrupt those communities. Does no one else see the problem here?”(^\text{136})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Busing</td>
<td>“So if I'm going from South Hamden to West Woods, I'm looking at an hour bus run. You know, say there's 10 stops along the way, traffic and what have you, you could be an hour, two hour round trip. That's a lot, especially for a five year old, to be on the bus for a long time.”(^\text{137})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to diversity</td>
<td>“Because nobody says it. I don't know why, but every parent and every person knows it. You bring these kids in to the mix, it's not like you bring them to the level of the good ones. It's the other way around. You lower your expectations with the whole class.”(^\text{138})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School quality</td>
<td>“...from the meetings I attended at the Keefe Center. the parents at Spring Glen were the most outspoken, saying they don't want the bad kids coming to their school. Their schools have programs that the other schools don’t have. They don't want their kids going there.”(^\text{139})</td>
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#### Mobilization

| Absent parents              | “And so if you've got 300 angry families very visible that are writing letters to the editor, are writing letters to the mayor, are writing letters to the superintendent, are showing up at public hearings, who clearly have an organized front, that's gonna be way more of a fight than unfortunately closing a school where one or two people showed up. Which is very sad, because a place like Church Street needed someone in their corner.”\(^\text{140}\) |

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\(^\text{134}\) Josh, personal communication, 23 January 2019  
\(^\text{135}\) Samantha, personal communication, 14 February 2019  
\(^\text{136}\) Vanessa, personal communication, 23 February 2019  
\(^\text{137}\) Chris Melillo, personal communication, 13 February 2019  
\(^\text{138}\) Anita, personal communication, 13 February 2019  
\(^\text{139}\) Darleen, personal communication, 18 February 2019  
\(^\text{140}\) Samantha, personal communication, 14 February 2019
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Wintergreen parents</strong></th>
<th>“I did not expect the hostility and the pushback from the Wintergreen families and community.”¹⁴¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural capital</strong></td>
<td>“Part of what I do professionally is community engagement, advocacy, community organizing. It’s like my professional skill set made me prime to get this going.”¹⁴²</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social capital</strong></td>
<td>“I’ve got a couple of friends on the Board, and I talk to them from time to time, and we had a lot of conversations over the summer about how this thing was happening.”¹⁴³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Symbolic capital</strong></td>
<td>“To be quite honest, a lot of our public meeting spaces, they really privilege whiteness and hold that up and aren’t very welcoming to people of color. It’s not good enough to just say the door’s open.”¹⁴⁴</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Threat of flight</strong></td>
<td>“And then I went to the principal at the end of the year, and then complained that I’m really displeased, and if this will continue I’ll move into another school district.”¹⁴⁵</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rhetoric</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Individual vs. collective good</strong></td>
<td>“...every parent wants the best for their child, but, how do you kind of shift that conversation to ‘we and our,’ and what’s best for all of our children? And that’s a very hard move.”¹⁴⁶</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public vs. private comments</strong></td>
<td>“...we live in this wonderful world of political correctness and invisible forces that are happening. I don’t think anybody is really brave enough to get up to the mic and say ‘I don’t want my kids going to that school!’ because, you know, it’s in the hood or whatever, and they’re not going to say that. But amongst themselves, they’ll say the things that they really want to say.”¹⁴⁷</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive vs. negative tone</strong></td>
<td>“So, those parents, I think, they made a good case. But they were positive; there was a positive approach. They said ‘don’t do this and I’ll tell you why.’ And, this was a strength-based approach; it wasn’t an adversarial one.”¹⁴⁸</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Coded language</strong></td>
<td>“And I know so from experience that what they will do: starting to</td>
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mix schools that are [pause] from families that are not interested in education.\textsuperscript{149}

### Racial and economic segregation in Hamden

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>North-South divide</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I think we have to start talking in really beyond the talk showing that we are one Hamden, right? We someone threw that out at a meeting once, we’re one Hamden. I think we have to really think about whether or not we are in fact one Hamden and if we are, then we need to start making things more equitable all around, so that really it’s more than just the slogan or a talk.”\textsuperscript{150}</td>
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<tr>
<th>Opportunity hoarding</th>
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<td>“For example, in my children's school, they don't have school-wide plays, but yet in their neighboring school of Spring Glen, they put on two plays every year. When those children go and take drama classes and try out for their school plays, when they all come together in the middle school, who do you think are more likely to get the spots? Who is more likely to be part of the theatre clubs in high school?”\textsuperscript{151}</td>
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### Reactions to final plan

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<th>6th grade to middle school</th>
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<td>“I was not a proponent of moving students from sixth grade to the middle school and talked to Jodi, the superintendent about it and to other board members at length but once they said they wanted to do universal preschool it was like, well that’s a greater good and you need room in schools to do that.”\textsuperscript{152}</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Closing Church Street and Shepherd Glen</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I think the most racially balanced school they have, I believe, was Shepherd Glen and that’s the one that is being shut down.”\textsuperscript{153}</td>
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<thead>
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<th>Intra-district magnet schools</th>
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<td>“I’m not convinced that they're at all prepared for what it means to be designing a magnet program that will actually draw kids out of West Woods and out of Spring Glen and out of Bear Path to Southern Hamden to go to school with a more diverse mix of kids.”\textsuperscript{154}</td>
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<tr>
<th>Taking back Wintergreen building</th>
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<td>“You know I think that this whole process has been a little bit damaging to Wintergreen and its reputation. I mean I think it's hard to have it reported in news outlets. You know, somebody like the superintendent of schools for Hamden saying 'Wintergreen's not the school it used to be.' I think Wintergreen's in a really tough position right now, because they have to sell themselves. And so they're</td>
</tr>
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\textsuperscript{149} Anita, personal communication, 13 February 2019
\textsuperscript{150} Karen Butler, personal communication, 25 February 2019
\textsuperscript{151} Laura, personal communication, 13 February 2019
\textsuperscript{152} Matt, personal communication, 13 February 2019
\textsuperscript{153} Darleen, personal communication, 18 February 2019
\textsuperscript{154} James, personal communication, 20 February 2019
walking this fine line of ‘everything's great! Come to Wintergreen! Apply to Wintergreen!’ Even when things aren't so great.”

| Universal pre-K | “So there are certain components of a magnet school that will attract all students. So if I had universal Pre-K [...] you would attract people from the north and south.” |

Notes on the impact of school closures
The short-term and long-term impacts of school closure have been well-documented, particularly in urban contexts. An extensive study conducted in Chicago, a city plagued by a long pattern of school closures, found no significant overall changes in the math or reading scores of students who endured a school closure; this finding challenges the common notion that closing low-performing schools allows displaced students to attend better schools. Even more troubling, however, is what happens before the school actually closes. Amid the upheaval of the decision to close a school, authors found that students actually experienced a drop in academic achievement in the year before the school closed its doors.\(^{157}\) The promise of upward educational mobility, therefore, is often an empty one. 42 percent of displaced students relocated to a school in the bottom quarter of test score rankings, where they saw losses in reading and math, whereas only 6 percent relocated to a top quartile school, where they saw small gains. Importantly, most of the students in that 6 percent had to travel long distances to their schools, with an average commute of 3.5 miles.\(^{158}\) The ramifications of school closure, nevertheless, go far beyond simply academic. The psychological reaction to school closure at an individual level, for instance, can be long-lasting and damaging. These effects are mediated through the reactions of teachers, parents, and students alike, and may include a sense of loss for their old school, a mistrust of new teachers and peers, and decreased self-esteem.\(^{159}\) Other scholars have focused more on community-level reactions to school closure. Especially in low-income neighborhoods, the local school is often more than just that—it is a gathering place, it is a tie to the neighborhood’s past, a manifestation of generations of collective memory. Such schools often serve the critical role of a gateway to important services and resources for the families that need them most. Closing such a school frays not just community cohesion, but trust in government: in one study, authors described the “fragility of a battle-weary neighbourhood” which grappled with a “generalised feeling of resignation and uncertainty as to which service would be next in line for closure” after their school was closed.\(^{160}\) These kinds of reactions are characterized by sociologist Eve Ewing as *institutional mourning*, a “social and emotional experience undergone by individuals and communities facing the loss of a shared institution they are affiliated with ... especially when those individuals or communities occupy a socially marginalized status that amplifies their reliance on the institution or its significance in their lives.”\(^{161}\) This is why Ewing describes closing schools in marginalized neighborhoods as a violent act. More than simply shutting down a building, closing a school can mean depriving a community of its ability to understand itself.

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155 Sarah, personal communication, 5 February 2019
156 Chris Melillo, personal communication, 13 February 2019
157 Torre and Gwynne, “When Schools Close”
158 See note 112.
159 Valencia, “The School Closure Issue”
160 Witten et al., “Educational Restructuring from a Community Viewpoint”
161 Ewing, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*