



THE CONNECTICUT POLICY INSTITUTE

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research-driven public policy for Connecticut*

Closing Connecticut's Achievement Gap Through Public School Choice

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Principal Author: Daniella Rohr

Ms. Rohr is a Fellow at the Connecticut Policy Institute and a student at Yale Law School. She previously worked as a public school teacher at Girls Prep Bronx, a charter school in the South Bronx.

We are grateful for the input we received from a number of other education policy experts and practitioners from Connecticut and around the country.

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Introduction

Connecticut has the country's largest educational achievement gap between low-income and non-low income students. This gap is not principally a consequence of high achievement by wealthier Connecticut students. Rather, it derives from the fact that the state's low-income schools perform worse than low-income schools in most other states. Of students across the country on the free and reduced lunch program, Connecticut's students ranked 47/50 on fourth grade math ability, 33/50 on fourth grade reading ability, and 44/50 on eighth grade math ability.¹ In the spring of 2012, just 60% of low-income Connecticut twelfth graders graduated from high school.²

The magnitude of performance improvement required in Connecticut is sufficiently great that the state must do more than enact incremental tweaks. Systematic change is necessary.

One impediment to systematic improvement in Connecticut's public schools is the state's hostile attitude towards public school choice. Though Connecticut does offer some public school choice options to lower-income students, the way the state and most districts fund and regulate public education has prevented Connecticut's choice regime from being as widespread and effective as it could be. In spite of the state's most recent education reform efforts, these obstacles remain in place.

School choice is not an end in and of itself. But the experience of other states has shown that if structured and implemented properly public school choice works for improving low-income students' educational achievement. Connecticut should take full advantage of this vehicle for giving every student in the state, regardless of family wealth, the opportunity to receive a quality education.

This paper recommends a series of concrete steps Connecticut state and local governments can take to close the state's achievement gap through greater and more effective use of public school choice. The recommendations address how public schools are funded and organized, what types of choices are available to students and their parents, and what information families can access to make those choices in an informed manner.³ The recommendations are based on proven results in other states and success stories within Connecticut.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

1. Connecticut's school funding system – centered on bureaucracies, not students – is antiquated, inequitable, and fails to incentivize school performance and innovation. The state should replace this system with a “money follows the child” funding system that allocates a certain amount of money for the education of each student and transfers that money to whatever public school the student attends. The allotted amount per student

¹ 2011 data acquired from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/statecomparisons/>

² Report from the Connecticut Commission of Educational Achievement, 2012. http://ctedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/CCER_2012Report.pdf

³ Consortium for Policy Choice Research in Education, *Doing School Choice Right: Preliminary Findings*. http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/pub_dscr_prelim_apr06_0.pdf

should be based on a weighted needs-based formula, which allocates more money for students whose education is more costly, such as those in poverty, English Language Learners, and special education students.

2. Connecticut should make greater use of open enrollment programs within and across districts. In these programs, students can transfer to any public school within their host district or to a public school within a partner district. Experiences in Wisconsin, Michigan, and elsewhere have shown that these programs have positive outcomes for all schools and districts involved. The competition for students served as a catalyst for underperforming schools to improve, and high-performing schools were able to integrate new students without any detrimental impact on the school's overall educational outcomes. To incentivize districts to adopt open enrollment programs, the state could condition state education funding on participation in a program of a minimum size.
3. Connecticut must ease restrictions on charter schools, which are among the harshest in the country. Specifically, the state should close the funding gap between charter schools and other public schools and eliminate the dual authorization process for new charter schools, wherein the state board of education approves the charters but the state legislature must separately approve funding for each school. Connecticut's large urban districts with long charter waitlists – particularly Bridgeport and New Haven – should make greater use of district-charter partnerships in which district-affiliated charter schools work collaboratively with school districts and are included in performance reports on district progress.
4. Connecticut should incentivize pedagogical innovation to expand the variety of choices available to families. For instance, the state and / or specific districts can help incentivize blended learning innovation – which combines online learning with traditional face-to-face teacher instruction – through programs similar to Kentucky's Hybrid-Learning Grant Program. This program provides grants to teachers to develop blended learning curricula and renews and expands those grants if the blended learning programs are successful at attracting and educating students.
5. Connecticut needs to do a better job providing students and parents with accessible and digestible information about the choices available to them. Specifically, the state should develop a single bilingual website that includes an interactive search tool providing any family in the state with their full set of public school choices and a standardized single-page fact-sheet with relevant information about that school. Each district should create a multi-lingual Parent Information Center (PIC) located at a central location within the district. The PICs should offer a list of all schools available to district students (with information about test scores, teacher quality, and curriculum), information on how to choose a school, school tours and open houses, school registration counselors, and computers connected to the internet, on which parents can research schools. The PICs should also enlist parent volunteers to help organize workshops for other parents and advance word-of-mouth networking about school choice opportunities.

Rationale and Details of Policy Recommendations

1. Fund Students, Not Bureaucracies

Connecticut's school funding system has been the target of reform efforts for the better part of two decades, but in spite of these efforts it remains inequitable and un conducive to accountability, innovation, and student achievement.

Since the late 1980s, Connecticut's Education Cost Sharing (ECS) program has used state taxes to fund public education grants to poorer districts. The ECS program has been successful in eliminating overall inequality between poorer and wealthier districts – the wealthiest twenty percent of districts in Connecticut now spend roughly the same per student as the poorest twenty percent of districts.⁴ But it is riddled with its own deficiencies and inequities. First, the formula estimates district wealth through a formula that involves imprecise approximations. Second, districts receive money based on the number of students living in their catchment area, regardless of how many of those students attend schools of choice – like charter schools and inter-district magnet schools – that are funded not through districts but through separate line items in the state budget. Third, once districts receive ECS grants there is no mechanism to ensure that the districts themselves spend the money efficiently or equitably.⁵

This antiquated school funding structure results in arbitrary discrepancies in per-student funding both across low-income districts and within each of those districts. For instance, Bridgeport students receive on average about \$13,000 per year in funding, while New Haven students receive nearly \$18,000 per year.⁶ Among New Haven public schools, the Wexler/Grant middle school spent \$2,000 per student less than the Lincoln-Basset middle school even though Wexler/Grant has more high-poverty students, as well as more ESL students and special education students.⁷

Additionally, the system severely underfunds schools of choice and provides limited incentives for schools to perform at a high level. On the contrary, districts that have the most students leaving underperforming schools to attend charter or magnet schools are *rewarded* with higher per-student budgets than they otherwise would have. Meanwhile, certain high-performing charter schools like Amistad Academy in New Haven are forced to indefinitely leave thousands of low-income minority students on wait-lists because the schools can't access funding to expand their operations.⁸ As a result, Connecticut's school funding structure is not only inequitable, but it is also ineffective at inducing schools and districts that do have money to efficiently direct it towards student learning. As the chart below indicates, in Connecticut's low-income districts

⁴ ConnCan, *The Tab*: <http://www.conncan.org/sites/default/files/research/TheTab.pdf>, figure 1, page 9.

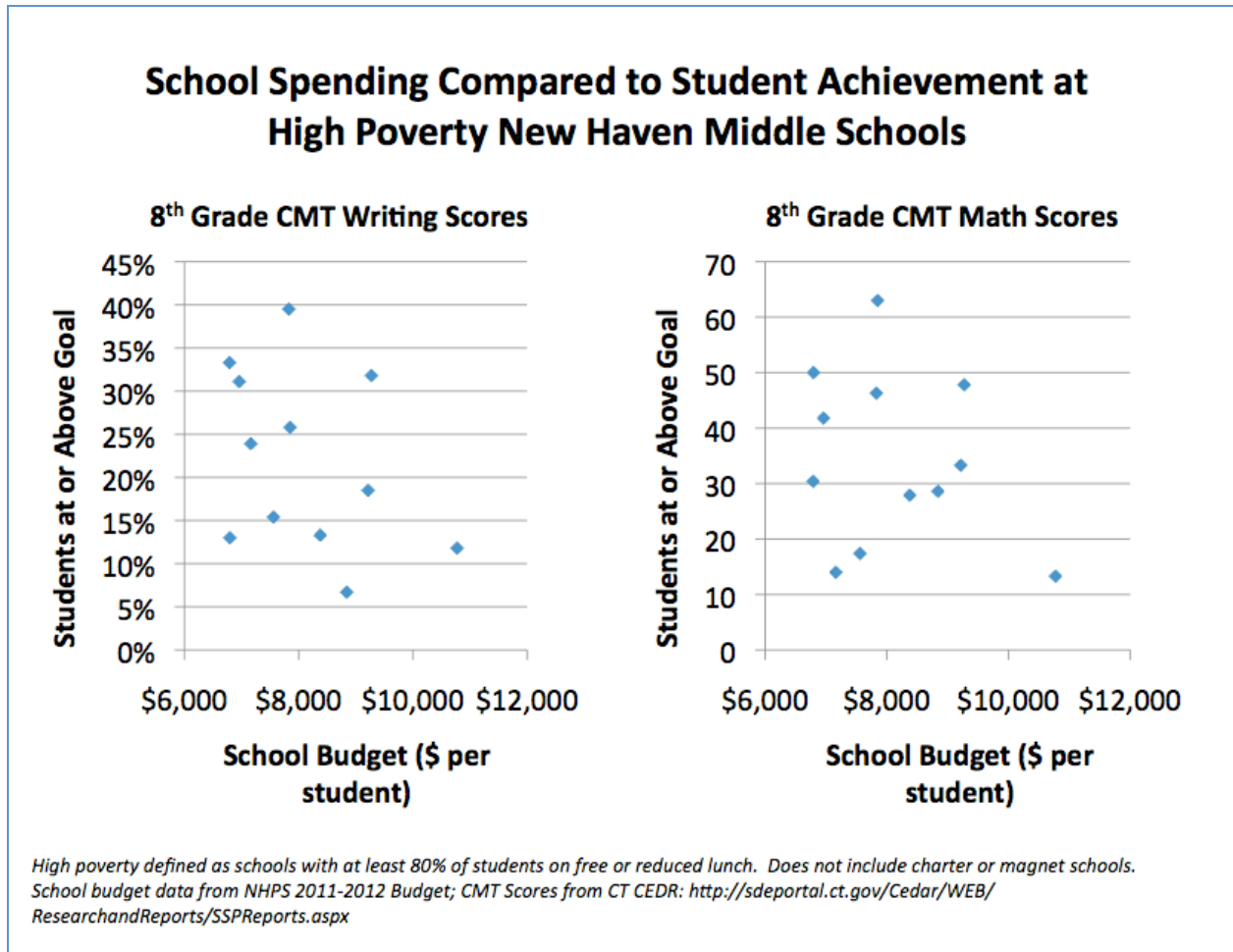
⁵ The one exception to this is for the state's conditional grant program for Alliance Districts. But this represents less than 2% of total ECS funds.

⁶ *How Districts Stack Up Per-Pupil*, May 31, 2011: <http://blog.ctnews.com/education/2011/05/31/how-districts-stack-up-per-pupil/>.

⁷ School budget data from NHPS 2011-2012 Budget; CMT Scores from CT CEDR: <http://sdeportal.ct.gov/Cedar/WEB/ResearchandReports/SSPReports.aspx>

⁸ For the 2011-2012 school year, Amistad Academy had 782 students on their waiting list. <https://www.ctmirror.org/sites/default/files/documents/Waitlist%202011-12.pdf>

there is little correlation between spending per-student and educational outcomes.⁹



At the root of all these shortcomings is the same underlying problem: Connecticut’s school financing is structured around bureaucracies, not students. To ensure that choice succeeds in Connecticut, the state should tie money to the one group in the education system to which they should be unconditionally committed: students.¹⁰

To do this, Connecticut should adopt a “money follows the child” student-based allocation model, weighted to the students’ needs. In this model students “carry” their allotted per-pupil funding with them to whichever school they attend. The allotted amount per student should be based on a weighted student formula, which allocates more money for students whose education is more costly, such as those in extreme poverty, English Language Learners, and special

⁹ The chart on New Haven middle school data is included as illustrative of a broader trend in Connecticut. Only one city was included in this chart to ensure consistent budget reporting practices. Additionally, the numbers don’t add up to \$18,000 because they don’t include expenditures made at the district level. Data compiled as part of a collaborative project between CPI and the Roosevelt Institute at Yale University.

¹⁰ Hill, Paul T. *Learning as We Go: Why School Choice Is worth the Wait*. Stanford, CA: Education Next, 2010, p. 102.

education students. Several states and districts, including Rhode Island, San Francisco, and New York City have implemented per-pupil cost formulas that could be a model for Connecticut.¹¹

A money-follows-the-child funding model would eliminate the inequities that plague the current ECS system, while also providing incentives for schools to improve their educational product. When schools risk losing funding if students leave, they are induced to provide quality educational opportunities so that students don't leave. They provide new offerings, eliminate wasteful spending, improve teacher professional development, and take other actions that improve educational outcomes. Similarly, district leadership becomes more incentivized to close down failing schools that no one wants to attend, open new schools that better meet community needs, replace ineffective administrators, eliminate unnecessary overhead, improve curricular offerings, and take other steps to improve educational outcomes across the district.

Evidence from states and municipalities that have money-follows-the-child funding structures has demonstrated that these effects are real. New York City, for example, adopted a needs-based money follows the child funding structure in 2007. By 2009, students in New York City elementary and middle schools made substantial progress at every grade level in English language, arts and math, and outpaced gains made by students in the rest of the state. In math, the percentage of students in grades three to eight at or above goal rose from 65.1 percent to 74.3 percent. In English language arts, the percent of students in grades three to eight at or above goal rose from 50.8 percent to 57.6 percent.¹²

San Francisco Unified School District witnessed similar positive outcomes after instituting the money-follows-the-child funding model in 2002. In the six years following the district's adoption, the number of students who scored "proficient" or "advanced" in English Language Arts on the California Standards Test rose from 35 to 56 percent. Math scores of "proficient" or "advanced" similarly spiked from 37 percent in 2002 to 62 percent in 2008.¹³ The San Francisco model also increased funding equity, increasing the resources allocated to high-poverty schools relative to low poverty schools.¹⁴

To implement money-follows-the-child, the state legislature can require that all education spending in the state be allocated to each student based on the weighted needs-based formula, and mandate that the spending follow the child to the public school of his or her choice. Alternatively, the state could condition the awarding of ECS grants on districts themselves adopting money-follows-the-child.

In the absence of state action, Connecticut's districts can and should implement the program at the local level on their own. For instance, in 2008, Harford implemented an open choice system, which provided students the opportunity to select from a wide range of public school options. To support this model, the district adopted a Student Based Budgeting (SBB) program, in which funding is weighted according to grade level and academic need. In addition to increased needs-

¹¹ Center for American Progress, *The Design of the Rhode Island School Funding Formula*.
http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2011/08/pdf/rhode_island_reform.pdf

¹² <http://reason.org/files/wsf/newyork.pdf>

¹³ Reason Foundation, *Weighted School Funding: San Francisco Unified School District*
<http://reason.org/files/wsf/sanfrancisco.pdf>, p. 136

¹⁴ *Id.*, p. 137

based weights for English Language Learners and students with special learning needs, SBB also uses student achievement data (based on Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) and Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) scores) to identify students eligible for additional funding. Students who are dramatically below grade-level on the assessments are weighted at a “well below standards” of .10 or \$639. Those who are below grade-level, but closer to proficiency are weighted at a “below standards” of .05 or \$320. Additional funding is also provided to students designated as “gifted and talented.”¹⁵

When this program was first implemented, the high school graduation rate was 29 percent and the third-grade reading level was 23 percent. By 2011, the high school graduation rate had risen to 52 percent and third-grade reading level to 53 percent.¹⁶ Hartford’s program could be a model for other Connecticut districts, especially large urban ones like New Haven, Bridgeport, Waterbury, and New London.

Connecticut should also employ a money follows the child approach as it expands funding for pre-K early childhood education for lower-income families. Research has demonstrated that access to quality pre-K opportunities makes students more likely to be successful in elementary school, middle school, and high school. Studies have shown that students who attend high-quality pre-K programs were less likely to drop out of school, repeat grades, or need special education services, as compared with similar children who did not have such exposure.¹⁷ Similarly, the well-known Abecedarian Study, a rigorous scientific study of preschool programs in North Carolina, found that students who attended high-quality early education programs experienced greater academic success and educational attainment.¹⁸

However, the track record for government-sponsored pre-K programs such as Head Start has been mixed. In 2010, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released the *Head Start Impact Study*, which traced the progress of three and four year old students from Head Start through kindergarten and first grade. The study compared the four-year-old group to similar children who did not have access to Head Start, and found that access to the program failed to raise the cognitive abilities or future educational success of participants in areas such as language skills, literacy and math skills, and school performance. The study also found that Head Start had little to no effect on socio-emotional, health, or parenting for the participating children.¹⁹

The reason for this mixed record is similar to the reason more school funding has not translated into better results for students in Connecticut public schools – funding is structured around bureaucracies, not students. As a result, the programs are largely unaccountable to students and parents for the results they deliver. Funding pre-K programs through a money-follows-the-child program would create more accountability, incentivize innovation, and lead publicly funded

¹⁵ Reason Foundation, *Weighted School Funding: Hartford Public Schools*. <http://reason.org/files/wsf/hartford.pdf>

¹⁶ Connecticut Policy Institute, *Reforming Connecticut’s Schools: “The Four Big Things”*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Barnett, W.S., “Long-term effects on cognitive development and school success,” in Barnett, W.S., and Boocock, S.S. (Eds.), *Early Care and Education for Children in Poverty*, pp. 11-44, Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1998.

¹⁸ Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, *Early Learning, Later Success: The Abecedarian Study*.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Head Start Impact Study Final Report*.
http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/hs_impact_study_final.pdf

early childhood programs to be just as effective as the private programs currently available to wealthier families.

2. Expand open enrollment programs

Adopting a money follows the child program is a critical first step to closing Connecticut's achievement gap through more effective school choice. But students' ability to carry funding to their public school of choice does little good when they have few schools to choose from. To increase the number of schools available to Connecticut residents, the state should make greater use of open enrollment programs within and across districts.

Open enrollment programs allow districts to reap the benefits of public school choice – greater accountability, responsiveness to students and parents, and opportunities for innovation – while preserving the traditional structure of public education.²⁰ The program is especially beneficial to lower-income families. One of the arguments behind local control of public education is that families can relocate to a higher performing school district if they are dissatisfied with their current schools. Lower-income families, however, cannot avail themselves of this option as they generally cannot afford to easily move. Open enrollment allows lower-income families to have the same public school choices that wealthier families already have.²¹

A few of Connecticut's larger districts already provide open-enrollment programs, but most of the state's 167 school districts are too small to implement meaningful choice programs within the district. Putnam County, for example, has been classified by the state as a "priority school district," due to low academic performance. This district is home to only one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. Even the state's larger districts like Hartford and New Haven are small by national standards. If Connecticut's district lines were the same size as districts in North Carolina, Florida, and Maryland, there would only be two districts across the entire state. New York City, with three times the population of Connecticut, constitutes a single district.

Given the limited opportunities for meaningful intra-district choice programs in Connecticut, the state should focus on expanding inter-district open enrollment programs to provide students and families with public school choices. These programs give students the ability to transfer to different public schools within their host district or to a public school within a different district entirely.

States across the country have adopted various types of large-scale open enrollment regimes. Their experiences have demonstrated that all schools involved benefit from the competition and innovation expanded public school choice generates.²²

Wisconsin, for example, adopted an inter-district open enrollment program in 1998. Under this

²⁰ Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, *Education Policy Brief: Open Enrollment in K-12 Public Education*,

²¹ *Id.*, p. 3

²² Open enrollment has also been found to promote economic diversity within schools and school districts. See THE CENTURY FOUNDATION, *Divided We Fail: Coming Together Through Public School Choice*, 2002. See also Richard Kahlenberg, *The Future of School Integration: Socioeconomic Diversity as an Education Reform Strategy*, 2012.

program, all districts in the state sign on to accept transfer students. As a result, students can apply to enroll in any public school in any district across the state. Families are able to apply to three outside districts, including specific schools within these districts. Though some districts require reapplication before the student enters middle, junior high, or high school, transferring students are generally not required to reapply each year. While transportation is not covered for students participating in the program, low-income families – that is, those whose children are eligible for free or reduced lunch – can apply to the state’s Department of Public Instruction for a partial reimbursement of the transportation costs.²³

Though there is no cap on the number of students a district may accept, receiving districts may refuse students on account of space, class size, or racial imbalance. The sending district may refuse to allow a student to transfer only if the child has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or if the result of the student transfer would be overly financially burdensome or create racial imbalance. Wisconsin’s program includes two funding restrictions on transferring students that promote productive competition between districts. First, the receiving district receives state aid for each child that enters the district. Second, the sending district (resident district) must pay for special education services. An early report found that the program led one third of administrators to consider new methods of retaining students and attracting new ones under open enrollment.²⁴

A recent study of Wisconsin’s open enrollment program found that districts that lost students to competing districts witnessed improved student outcomes, and districts losing the largest portions of students saw the largest improvements.²⁵ Notably, the incorporation of new students into receiving schools had little to no effect on student outcomes at those schools. The fact that these schools maintained relatively high levels of achievement is evidence of their ability to attract new students from underperforming schools while continuing to educate at a high level.²⁶ The program’s growth over time is further evidence of its success. In its initial year, the program had 2,464 student participants. By 2010, that number grew to more than 28,000 students, which is almost 3% of all students in Wisconsin.

Other states have had similarly successful experiences with inter-district open enrollment. In 2000, Stanford economist Caroline Hoxby studied the academic impact of the competition created by inter-district open enrollment. She examined school choice systems in Milwaukee, Michigan, and Arizona, and evaluated their impact. Her study found that inter-district choice had a positive, statistically significant effect on student achievement. In generalizing from the findings of her research, Hoxby’s study found that metropolitan areas adopting full inter-district choice (i.e. in which all districts within the metropolitan area participate), increased their eighth-grade reading achievement rankings by 3.8 national percentile points, tenth-grade math

²³ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Memo to Parents about Filing Transportation Reimbursement Claims, 2012-2013.

²⁴ Peabody Journal of Education, *Going Charter? A Study of School District Competition in Wisconsin*.

²⁵ Foundation for Education Reform and Accountability, *Open Enrollment: Using Public School-Choice Options to Improve Student Performance*, p. 13

²⁶ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2011-2012 data analysis.

<http://data.dpi.state.wi.us/data/StateTestsPerformance.aspx?OrgLevel=st&GraphFile=GEDISA&S4orALL=1&SRegion=1&SCounty=47&SAthleticConf=45&SCESA=05&Qquad=performance.aspx&STYP=5&TQSubjects=CORES UM&TQShow=LICSTAT&SubjectID=0AS&Grade=99&Group=AllStudentsFAY;>

achievement rankings by 3.1 national percentile points, and twelfth-grade reading achievement rankings by 5.8 national percentile points.²⁷

Connecticut state law allows for various forms of inter-district open enrollment programs. The state has a mandatory program for so-called “priority” districts: New Haven, Bridgeport, and Hartford.²⁸ In these districts, students can attend traditional public schools in nearby suburban towns, and vice versa. Enrollments are typically offered by school districts based on the space available, and lotteries are used when the number of applicants exceeds the number of seats available. The state pays the receiving district a per-student grant, with the amount per student increasing as the number of participating students increases.²⁹ As opposed to in Wisconsin where only low-income families get transportation reimbursement, transportation for all participating students in Open Choice is paid for by the state.³⁰

These programs have had positive outcomes for students. In 2008, a higher percentage of Hartford students participating in the Open Choice program scored at or above proficiency on the CMT in both math and reading than those who did not. This gap between Hartford Public School Students and Open Choice students was particularly noticeable in reading. On average, 55% of participating students in grades 3-8 scored at or above proficiency, as compared to the district average of 39%. High school students fared similarly with 69% of Open Choice students scoring at or above proficiency as compared with the district’s 49%.³¹

In light of the high levels of participation and student achievement, the state legislature should expand this mandatory inter-district open enrollment program to other underperforming school districts such as New London and Waterbury. The state legislature should also continue providing transportation as part of these expanded programs

State law also provides for voluntary inter-district open enrollment plans for any district within the state, allowing local and regional boards of education to offer inter-district public school choice programs.³² However, very few districts in Connecticut have taken advantage of this opportunity. Districts with underperforming schools should do so. Ansonia and Derby, for example, could provide each of their students with the ability to enroll in a school in the neighboring district. Both districts are small, and each has struggled with student achievement.³³

²⁷ Caroline M. Hoxby, “How School Choice Affects the Achievement of Public School Students,” in Paul Hill, *Choice With Equity*, (Stanford, California: Hoover Press, 2002), http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/0817938923_141.pdf.

²⁸CGS 10-266aa

²⁹ Connecticut Department of Education, *A Guide to Public School Choice for Students and their Families*. http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/equity/choice/public_school_choice_2012.pdf

³⁰ Greater Hartford Regional School Choice Office, *What You Need to Know: Transportation*, <http://www.choiceeducation.org/transportation>

³¹ Sheff Movement, *Project Choice Campaign: Final Report*. <http://www.sheffmovement.org/pdf/ProjectChoiceCampaignFinalReport.pdf>

³² CGS 10-226h. The statute focuses on especially on programs that reduce racial, ethnic and economic isolation. All choice programs, even those between low-income districts, can help alleviate these forms of isolation.

³³As of 2011, 51 and 60% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch in Derby and Ansonia respectively. <http://www.endhungerct.org/ct-hunger-map>. In 2012, 39% and 46% of fourth grade students, and 38% and 64% of eighth grade students in Derby scored at or above goal on the CMT in math and reading respectively. In Ansonia,

To incentivize districts to act, the state could condition receipt of ECS grants on districts participating in open enrollment programs that involve a minimum number of schools.

Allowing students to cross district lines would give students and families more choice, as well as introduce competition and encourage innovation within the districts. As Wisconsin's experience demonstrates, properly designed inter-district choice is a win-win for all the districts involved.

Funding these programs would require each district to adopt a money follows the child model discussed above. Under that model, the money allocated to a child in one district, would follow him/her to the neighboring district.

3. Ease Restrictions on Charter Schools

Another important vehicle for public school choice is charter schools. Charter schools are public schools established as non-for-profit organizations contracted by the state. As such, they have the freedom to adjust their curriculum, school calendar, and pedagogic practices, while still being accountable to state and Federal governments for student achievement. Students are selected to the schools by a randomized lottery, and enroll free of tuition. Nationally, two million students are enrolled at 5,618 charter schools, with an additional 610,000 students currently on charter school waiting lists.³⁴

A myriad of studies have compared student achievement in charter schools to district-operated schools of equivalent demographic makeup. The results of these studies have been mixed, as different charters have had varying levels of success compared to their district counterparts. Though not all charter schools have been successful, even studies reporting variation in overall charter school effectiveness have found that within high-poverty, urban areas, students enrolled in charter schools have demonstrated higher achievement than demographically equivalent students in district-operated schools.

For instance, in a 2010 study of 36 randomly selected charter middle schools across 15 states, Mathematica Policy Research found that on average the schools were no more or less effective than traditional public schools, but that within low-income urban areas the charter schools consistently delivered superior student outcomes, especially in math.³⁵ Similarly, a study conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford examined whether charter school students in New York City outperform their traditional public school (TPS) of equivalent poverty levels, race/ethnicity, special education needs, geographic location, and other demographic factors. The study found that a typical student in a New York City charter school gains more reading and math ability in a year than his/her TPS counterparts. This learning advantage was particularly pronounced in Harlem, a largely low-income community. Though the study found evidence of a select number of underperforming charter schools, it concluded that they are offset by the proportion of charter schools that either are already achieving at high levels

56% and 41% of fourth grade students, and 48% and 61% of eighth grade students scored at or above goal on the CMT in math and reading respectively.

³⁴ House Education and the Workforce Committee, *Did You Know? 10 Fast Facts on School Choice*.

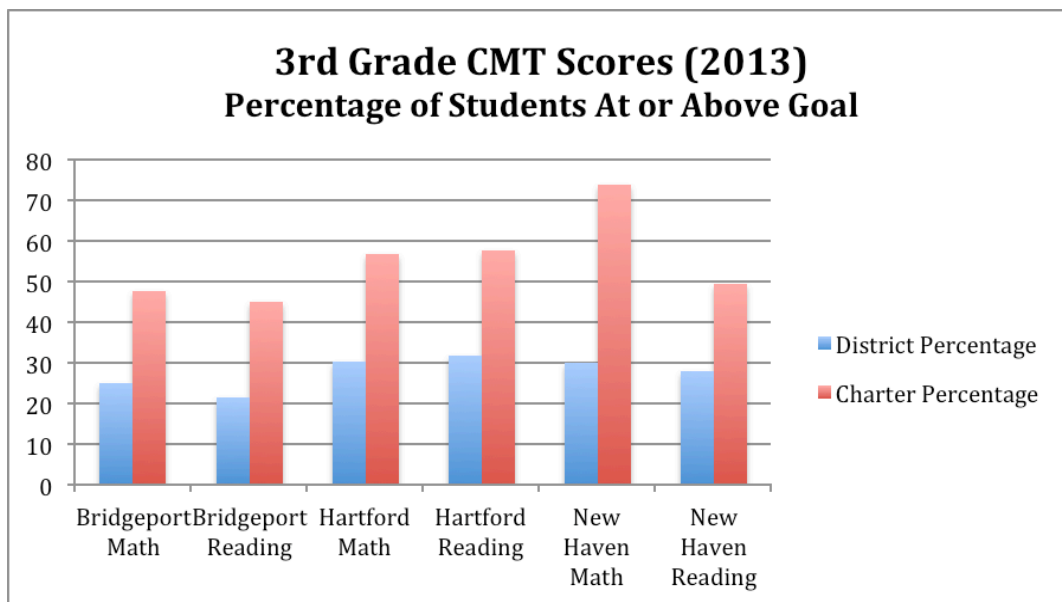
<http://edworkforce.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=318240>

³⁵ Mathematica Policy Research, *The Evaluation of Charter School Impacts*. http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/newsroom/releases/2010/Charterschool_6_10.asp.

or are positioned to reach those levels due to rapid growth rates in student achievement.³⁶

Connecticut’s experience with charter schools reflects these national findings. Nearly 90 percent of Connecticut charter school students are enrolled in schools that outperform district-operated public schools in their host districts.³⁷ Connecticut charter schools have been particularly effective at improving educational outcomes for high-poverty students. In New Haven, for example, 72% of fourth grade charter school students who were eligible for free and reduced lunch scored “at or above goal” in math on the 2012 CMT, as compared with only 37% of their district counterparts. In an analysis of student performance on the Connecticut Mastery Test from 2006 to 2011, the Connecticut Charter School Network found that each of the 12 charters examined outperformed traditional public schools in their host districts in math. In reading, 9 of the charters studies outperformed traditional public schools in their host district and charters overall outperformed host districts in reading by an average of 3.9 percentage points. This means that in CT in 2010, classes that had been in a charter school for 5 years were 19.5% more proficient in reading than if they had not attended that school.³⁸

As evidenced in the graphs below, all elementary and middle school charters in Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven outperformed their host district in 2013.³⁹

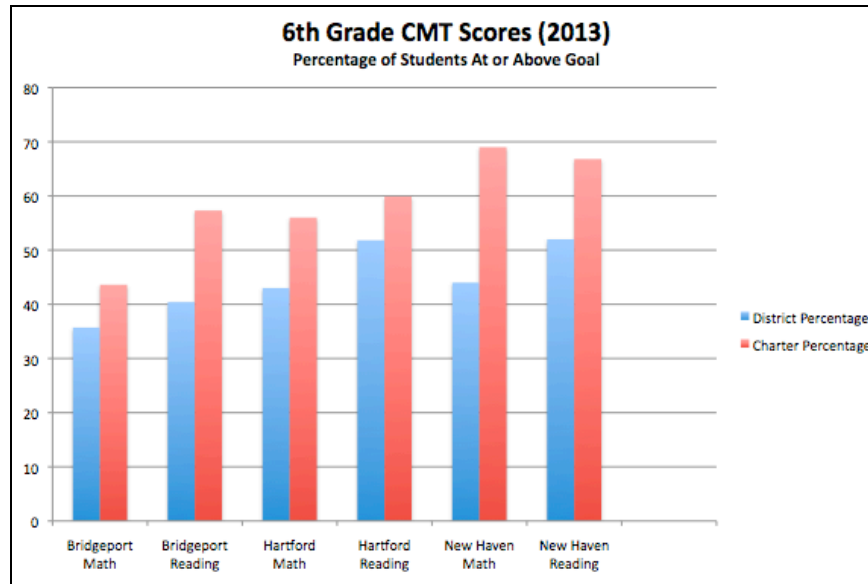


³⁶ Id.

³⁷ ConnCan, *Quick Facts: Charter Schools in Connecticut*.

³⁸ Connecticut Charter School Network, *Measures of Success: What standardized test scores reveal about charter schools in Connecticut*

³⁹ The discrepancy is equally great across grade levels and other subject matters. Data from CMT reports database, cmtreports.com



The success of charter schools both in Connecticut and nationally is hardly surprising. Unlike district-operated schools, charter schools can only exist if students and their families voluntarily decide to attend them. This makes them more accountable for their performance and receptive to student needs.⁴⁰ This is particularly true in Connecticut where – as discussed previously – there is an antiquated school funding structure and a dearth of open-enrollment programs.

Amistad Academy, a charter school in New Haven, epitomizes how certain schools that are subject to the positive pressures of public school choice can give low-income urban students just as good a public education as students from wealthier families. Opened in 2006, Amistad Academy Elementary School now serves 440 students, 99% percent of whom are African-American or Hispanic, and 86% of whom qualify for free and reduced lunch.⁴¹ On the 2013 Math CMT, 87.7% of fourth graders at Amistad scored at or above goal. This not only outperforms New Haven public schools (35.7%); it compares favorably with achievement levels in Connecticut’s wealthiest districts, such as Greenwich (82.1%) and Darien (87.3%).

Despite the success of its charter schools, Connecticut lags far behind the rest of the country in charter school penetration and growth. Connecticut has only 17 charter schools, projected to serve 7,132 students for the 2013-2014 school year.⁴² These schools make up a mere 1.4% of the state’s public schools, and serve only 1.3% of the state’s public school students.⁴³ By way of comparison Florida’s 583 charter schools make up 13.2% of public schools and serve 6.8% of public school students, and in New York, the state’s 209 charter schools make up 3.9% of all public schools and serve 2.5% of all public schools students. Similar statistics can be found

⁴⁰ Paul Teske, Jody Fitzpatrick and Gabriel Kaplan, *Opening Doors: How Low Income Parents Search for the Right School* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington 2007).

⁴¹ Achievement First Website, <http://www.achievementfirst.org/schools/connecticut-schools/amistad-academy-elementary-school/about/>

⁴² Connecticut Mirror, July 2, 2013, *Charter School Enrollment Ready to Surge*. <http://www.ctmirror.org/story/2013/07/02/charter-school-enrollment-ready-surge>

⁴³ Data collected from Connecticut Education Data and Research (CEDaR), Connecticut State Department of Education.

across the U.S.⁴⁴ Connecticut has one seventh as many charter school students per capita as the country as a whole—a statistic which includes rural states like Montana that have no charters whatsoever.⁴⁵

Connecticut's limited charter school penetration is not due to lack of demand. Close to 4,000 students are on Connecticut's charter school waitlists,⁴⁶ meaning charter school demand nearly doubled the available supply. Rather, Connecticut has fallen behind because of state laws and budgeting processes that are uniquely hostile to charter schools.

First, Connecticut severely underfunds charter schools. A recent study found that Connecticut charter schools on average receive \$12,631 per pupil, while a district-operated public school with the exact same students would receive \$16,476 per student, nearly 25% more.⁴⁷ Moreover, since students looking to enroll in charter schools cannot carry their allotted per-student funding with them to the charter school, any new charter school looking to open or expand needs to lobby the legislature for additional funding. Connecticut's charter authorization system is the only one in the country that has a dual-process wherein the state board of education approves the charters, but the state legislature must separately approve funding for each school.⁴⁸ This process is not only complicated and time consuming, but it also politicizes the approval process by making each charter school approval a matter of lengthy legislative debate. Connecticut's 2012 education reform package increased funding for existing charters by about \$1,000 per student – a one-off small step in the right direction, but one that did little to address the core problems with Connecticut's charter school funding system, as a large funding gap and the dual authorization process remain in place.

The best way to remedy these problems would be to adopt the money follows the child school funding model recommended previously. However, even if the state does not adopt the funding structure, it should close the per-pupil funding gap between traditional public schools and charter schools by increasing charter school funding.

In addition to state-level action, Connecticut's school districts can themselves take steps to use charter schools as a vehicle to improve educational outcomes for low-income students. An increasingly large number of cities around the country – including Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia – have partnered with charter management organizations to create district-affiliated charter schools.

Under this model, districts work to ensure charters have the resources needed to operate, including transportation, security, facilities and maintenance. Districts also work to ensure enough charter school spots are available to meet student demand. In return, the charter operators share their own resources, including leadership training modules, teacher recruitment and professional development strategies, and curricular best practices. Moreover, districts can

⁴⁴ 2012-2013 Data from National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

⁴⁵ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, *Back to School Tallies*
http://www.publiccharters.org/data/files/Publication_docs/NAPCS%202011-12%20New%20and%20Closed%20Charter%20Schools_20111206T125251.pdf, page 2 column 4.

⁴⁶ Data from 2011-2012 academic year, Northeast Charter Schools Network.

⁴⁷ Ball State University, *Charter School Funding: Inequality Persists*, p. 4

⁴⁸ Conn. Gen. Statute §10-66bb

then include affiliated charter schools in their performance reports on district progress. The net result is that the charters and districts become aligned as partners in increasing access to high quality education and developing innovative pedagogic strategies.

Here in Connecticut, Hartford has taken the lead in spearheading district collaboration with charter operators for mutual gain. In 2008, the Hartford Public Schools partnered with Achievement First to open the state's first district-affiliated charter school. In 2010, with support of a grant from the Gates foundation, Hartford further strengthened its commitment to charters by signing a district/charter collaboration compact that committed district and charter leaders to "improve the ways they will work together and influence each other for the benefit of all students in the city, and to ensure that all children have access to high-quality public schools."⁴⁹ Since the opening of the first partnership school in 2008 and the signing of the compact in 2010, Achievement First Hartford has grown to serve grades K-12 and the district has also partnered with Jumoke Academy, the city's other high performing charter school, to turn around a failing district school.⁵⁰

In June 2013, the Connecticut legislature and Governor Malloy commendably passed Public Act No. 13-206, paving the way for other districts in Connecticut to follow Hartford's lead by including district-affiliated charter school in the district's overall performance and in its measure of Adequate Yearly Progress.⁵¹ Connecticut's other low-income urban districts should take advantage of this opportunity. Districts such as New Haven and Bridgeport have charter schools with proven records of success in educating high-poverty students. These charter schools also have dauntingly long waitlists. Creating new district-affiliated charter schools would allow these high-poverty students to attend the school of their choice, while also bringing some of the charter school best-practices to bear in district-operated schools. As in Hartford, localities can adopt special authorization procedures that allow these district-affiliated charter schools to circumvent many of the existing restrictions and impede charter development.

4. Incentivize Pedagogical Innovation Such As Blended Learning

One of the benefits of money-follows-the-child school funding is it will create natural incentives for schools and districts to pursue pedagogical innovation that might attract students and families. But even if the state does not adopt money-follows-the-child, it can create incentives for schools and districts to adopt innovative teaching programs for its students providing them with more choices.

One example of this other states have pursued is incentives for blended learning programs. Blended learning is an educational program that combines online learning with traditional face-to-face teacher instructions. Different schools have implemented different forms of the model, but each involves students learning at least in part through online delivery of content and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home.⁵² Blended learning programs

⁴⁹ Hartford District/Charter Collaboration Compact. <http://www.charterschoolcenter.org/sites/default/files/Hartford-Charter%20Collaboration%20Compact.pdf>.

⁵⁰ The School Administrator, Number 7, Vol. 68, *Case Study: How a Compact Works in Hartford*. <http://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=19646>

⁵¹ PA13-206

⁵² Innosight Institute, *Classifying K-12 Blended Learning*

promote tailored instruction as students are able to progress at their own pace and teachers gain the flexibility to differentiate through small-group instruction.

Blended learning is relatively new, but it is rapidly gaining popularity as more and more states and districts offer students and families opportunities to enroll in blended learning programs if they wish. According to the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, an estimated two thirds of school districts now provide a blended learning option.⁵³ Well established blended school providers, such as Rocketship Education and Carpe Diem Schools, are expanding into new states, and providers of fully online schools are transitioning to open new blended schools.

Though there is limited longitudinal data on its effectiveness, a 2010 study from the Department of Education revealed that students engaged in blended learning outperformed those engaged in purely face-to-face or purely online learning.⁵⁴ The study analyzed learning behaviors and data from 50 students, and found that learning outcomes for students who engaged in online learning modestly exceeded those of students who received face-to-face instruction. The study found that blended learning (instruction *combining* online and face-to face elements) produced better outcomes than both purely online and purely face-to-face learning.⁵⁵

Connecticut schools and districts have struggled to keep pace with other states in implementing blending learning programs. A 2012 50-state survey of the current and expected availability of blended learning programs found that blended learning was not available as an option to Connecticut elementary and middle school students, and only available to some (but not most) high school students.⁵⁶ Similarly, Digital Learning Now!, an advocacy group focused on digital learning, ranked Connecticut 47 out of 49 states, and gave the state a failing grade on its Digital Learning Report Card.⁵⁷

Connecticut state law does not preclude the introduction of blended learning programs, as class size and teacher-student ratios for traditional classrooms do not apply to blended programs. Similarly, the state's traditional seat time requirements can be waived to allow for blended learning programs in which students advance once they have shown mastery of the material.⁵⁸

But blended learning programs have failed to develop in Connecticut because the state's school funding structure is not conducive to innovation (as discussed throughout this paper). Introducing money-follows-the-child school funding would go a long way towards remedying this problem. But even in the absence of money-follows-the-child, the state can help incentivize blended learning innovation through programs similar to Kentucky's Hybrid-Learning Grant Program, which is funded by the Kentucky Department of Education.

⁵³ House Education and the Workforce Committee, *Did You Know? 10 Fast Facts on School Choice*.

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of Education, *Evaluation of Evidence- Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies*, p. 16. <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf>

⁵⁵ *Id.*, xiv

⁵⁶ Evergreen Education Group, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online and Blended Learning: An Annual Review of Policy and Practice*

⁵⁷ Digital Learning Now, Connecticut Report Card (2012). <http://www.digitallearningnow.com/wp-content/uploads/reportcard/2012/states/CT.pdf>

⁵⁸ *Id.*

Through this program, the Kentucky Department of Education offers grants to individual teachers to support their experimentation with blended learning. The department provides approved teachers with free blended learning technology (including the Blackboard learning management system and a license to Wimba for classroom webinars), and three weeks of professional development. In exchange for the materials and trainings, teachers build a blended learning course for up to 30 students. The courses, though teacher-designed, are subject to departmental requirements including a pre-and post-course student examination and an end-of-the-unit student opinion survey, as well as teacher participation in an online discussion group to share data and best practices. Teachers also submit an exemplary blended unit of study to the district to be implemented more broadly.

The Hybrid-Learning Grant Program was only implemented in 2009, but initial teacher-reported data from the program shows an increase in student and parent satisfaction. Teachers touted the program as a positive way of providing intervention and extra support to low performing students, allowing students to take responsibility for their own learning, and preparing students for college experiences.⁵⁹

Connecticut should adopt a grant program nearly identical to that in Kentucky. Individual teachers should be able to apply for the program, and the grant would provide approved teachers with free blended learning training, ongoing professional development, and licenses to learning software of the district's choosing. In exchange, the teachers would assess the students regularly, submit an exemplary unit of study for sharing, and report their results to the state to inform future policy.⁶⁰ In order to ensure that the digital content is high quality, all participating programs in Connecticut should be aligned with the new Common Core Standards. Similarly, in order to monitor the quality of the instruction, participating teachers should be required to participate in ongoing professional development and the renewal of a given teacher's grant to continue in the program should be based on student performance. Based on the program's success, the grants can be expanded to be given to individual schools or to districts as a whole.

This recommendation can also be executed on a local basis, by funding and overseeing the grants on the district level.

5. Enhance transparency and accessibility of information about school choices

Perhaps the most critical component of an effective choice regime is the ability for parents to gather the appropriate information to make good choices for their children. Because choice is only valuable if families know what choices exist, transparency and accessibility are vital.

A 2007 CPRE study interviewed 800 low-to moderate-income parents in Milwaukee, Washington, D.C., and Denver about how they gather information and how informed they were about school choice. The study found that the more information-gathering parents are able to do, the more likely they are to report high levels of satisfaction with their choice. The study also

⁵⁹ Id.

⁶⁰ The Innosight Institute, *The Rise of K-12 Blended Learning*, p. 101
<http://www.innosightinstitute.org/innosight/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/The-Rise-of-K-12-Blended-Learning.pdf>

found that the lowest-income parents engage in less information gathering, and report lower levels of satisfaction.⁶¹

Unfortunately low-income and immigrant families in most districts in Connecticut face the near-impossible task of locating information about the choices available to them.

First, there is a dearth of Parent Information Centers (PICs) in districts across the state. In 2001, under NCLB, the Connecticut Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC) was given a 5-year federal grant by the U.S. Department of Education to develop and sustain Connecticut PICs. When funding ended in 2006, PIRC stopped working with districts and families on these PICs.⁶²

Second, websites with school choice information are difficult to find and are filled with opaque, outdated, and conflicting pieces of information. The Bridgeport Public Schools' website, for example, does not contain any information about how families can avail themselves of their many, legally required, school choices. Charter schools such as Achievement First Bridgeport Academy and New Beginnings Family Academy are notably absent from the website's list of schools.⁶³ Similarly, though New Haven Public Schools' website lists school registration information and has a thorough explanation of the district's magnet school system, it does not include information about other forms of choice such as inter-district open enrollment or charter schools. Most significantly, perhaps, there is an absence of comparative academic information—the very type of information that parents value most. The only vehicles through which this type of information is currently available to families in Connecticut are the No Child Left Behind Report Cards (NCLB) available online, and the State Department of Education's Connecticut Education Data and Research website (CEDR). Both sources of information, however, are extremely detailed and statistical and fail to provide families with easily digestible comparative information.

On the state and district level, a series of small, concrete changes could dramatically improve families' access to valuable and digestible information.

First, each district should conduct an audit of their current practices. During the audit, the district should survey local families to gather information on their preferences for methods of gathering information (i.e. accessing information online, through literature, or by speaking to a counselor) and on what they look for when choosing a school. Districts can use these findings to inform the programmatic changes and additions they make. Research has shown that parents and families have very specific practices and preferences when gathering information about their children's education and that families become more invested in a choice system if they feel they've had a role in creating it.⁶⁴ Actively involving parents in the process of creating a district transparency system would therefore kill two birds with one stone – ensuring the district provides parents with the information they need and generating parents' investment in the district's choice system.

⁶¹ Consortium for Policy Research and Education, *Opening Doors: How Low-Income Parent Search for the Right School*, p. 32

⁶² Interview with Marilyn Kirner, Director of Connecticut's State Education Resource Center

⁶³ Bridgeport School District Website: <http://www.bridgeportedu.com/>

⁶⁴ Id.

Second, each district should create one, multi-lingual Parent Information Center (PIC) located at a central location within the district. The PICs should offer a list of all schools available to district students (with information about test scores, teacher quality, and curriculum), information on how to choose a school, school tours and open houses, school registration counselors, and computers connected to the internet, on which parents can research schools. In the 2007 CPRE survey low-income families consistently stated they would benefit from parent information centers,⁶⁵ and PICs have been successful in school districts across the country. In Wake County, NC, for example, local PICs helped contribute to a choice system in which 85% of entering kindergarten students were granted enrollment in their first choice school.⁶⁶

Third, each PIC should enlist local community members to work as parent volunteers. Data suggests that families value the opinions and guidance of other parents most. The 2007 CPRE study, for instance, found that though parents rely on multiple sources of information, they trust “word-of-mouth networks” more than literature or publications, and rely most on other parents rather than on teachers or administrators.⁶⁷ Paul Teske, an expert in parent choice has explained that low-income families, especially those who have also recently immigrated, lack the social connections in communities that often generate information about schools. They also have limited access to the internet and significant language barriers.⁶⁸

The presence of parent volunteers will not only provide additional and valuable information for parents seeking to enroll their child in a new school, but will also create a community-centered experience to generate excitement around school enrollment.⁶⁹ The parent volunteers should provide parent workshops on how to enroll in schools of choice, counseling on specific schools and specific choices, recruitment of families to visit the PIC by visiting community centers, local churches, and community-wide activities, and recruitment of additional volunteers.

Fourth, all districts should create a uniform “Fact Sheet” with information about each school. Parents surveyed in the CPRE study also reported that they desired more comparative information about schools, especially information about curriculum, test scores, and teacher quality.⁷⁰ Connecticut parents also lack access to this information in an accessible and digestible format. The district audits and parent surveys recommended above could help inform what information specifically to include.

Finally, Connecticut should develop a bilingual, single website with three distinct features. First, the website should list the contact information of each district’s PIC within the state. Second, the

⁶⁵ Consortium for Policy Research and Education, *Opening Doors: How Low-Income Parent Search for the Right School*, p. 3-4

⁶⁶ Interview with Michael Alves, former Director of the Federal Title IV Civil Rights Act Unit for the Office of the Commissioner, Massachusetts Department of Education. Currently serves as general manager of “Enroll Edu”, an on-line data management software system specializing in the design and implementation of choice-based equity and achievement driven student assignment policies.

⁶⁷ Consortium for Policy Research and Education, *Opening Doors: How Low-Income Parent Search for the Right School*, p. 39

⁶⁸ Consortium for Policy Research and Education, *Reforming Districts Through Choice, Autonomy, Equity and Accountability: An Overview of the Voluntary Public School Choice Directors Meeting*, p. 9

⁶⁹ Directors Meeting, 9

⁷⁰ Consortium for Policy Research and Education, *Opening Doors: How Low-Income Parent Search for the Right School*, p. 32

site should explain, in a digestible manner, the statewide regulations relevant to school choice. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the site should have a “Digital Guide to Public School Choice.” This guide should be based, at least in part, on Hartford’s “SmartChoices: A Digital Guide to Public School Choice in the Greater Hartford Region.”⁷¹ The guide should be an interactive search tool to help families navigate their choice options. A family accessing the site would enter their address and the age of the student seeking enrollment. The site then generates all of the schools available to that student, classifies them by type (district, magnet, charter, etc.) and plots it on a map. Once all of the options are generated, families will be able to click on a specific school to receive more information.

Conclusion- A Connecticut Plan of Action

This paper has proposed a series of specific and actionable steps Connecticut state and municipal policymakers can take to more effectively use public school choice to drive improvement in educational outcomes. In review, we offer recommendations for reform, with notes on what each stakeholder group needs to do to transform Connecticut’s school choice landscape:

Connecticut General Assembly

- Pass legislation that requires that education funding be allocated to each student based on a weighted per-student formula that provides additional funding for high poverty students, English language learners, and special education students.
- Pass legislation that mandates that these funds follow the child to the public school of his/her choice.
- Fund Pre-K programs through a money follows the child system.
- Expand mandatory inter-district open enrollment programs from Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven to other underperforming school districts.
- Condition state funding to districts on participation in inter-district open-enrollment programs of a minimum size.
- Provide transportation reimbursements for low-income families participating in the above mandatory program.
- Increase funds for charter schools to close the per-pupil funding gap between traditional public schools and charter schools

Connecticut State Department of Education

- Create a grant program that provides approved teachers with free blended learning training, ongoing professional development, and licenses to learning software of the district’s choosing. In exchange, the teachers will assess the students regularly, submit an exemplary unit of study for sharing, and report their results to the state to inform future policy.
- Develop a bilingual, single website that lists the contact information of each district’s Parent Information Center (PIC), explanations of the statewide regulations relevant to school choice, and a “Digital Guide to Public School Choice” that allows families to electronically navigate their choice options.

⁷¹ SmartChoices: A Digital Guide to Public School Choice in the Greater Hartford Region:
<http://smartchoices.trincoll.edu>

Connecticut School Districts

- Implement a weighted student funding formula and allow the money to follow the child.
- Adopt open enrollment programs within each district and in partnership with neighboring school districts.
- Partner with charter schools to create district-affiliated charter schools
- Implement special procedures that allow these district-affiliated charter schools to circumvent many of the existing restrictions and impede charter development.
- Create a grant program that provides approved teachers with free blended learning training, ongoing professional development, and licenses to learning software of the district's choosing. In exchange, the teachers will assess the students regularly, submit an exemplary unit of study for sharing, and report their results to the state to inform future policy.
- Survey local families to gather information on their preferences for methods of gathering information (i.e. accessing information online, through literature, or by speaking to a counselor) and on what they look for when choosing a school. Districts can use these findings to inform the programmatic changes and additions they make
- Create one, multi-lingual Parent Information Center (PIC) located at a central location within the district
- Enlist local community members to work as parent volunteers in the PIC.
- Create a uniform "Fact Sheet" with comparative information about each school in the district.