

Pre-Kindergarten Availability and Access in Hartford Region Magnet and Open Choice Schools

A Sheff Movement Policy Brief, March 2015
By Mira Debs

I. Executive Summary

With 2,135 spots, the Greater Hartford Area's Magnet and Open Choice Pre-K program is one of the largest public pre-K programs in the state. It has played an important role in expanding universal preschool in the Hartford region, both supporting Hartford's underserved families and attracting suburban families to integrated school options.

This Policy Brief will address some of the common questions about the scope and demand of the program (hereinafter called "RSCO Pre-K," after the Regional School Choice Office that coordinates the Sheff interdistrict programs and administers the lottery) including: How many Hartford and suburban students are in publicly funded Pre-K programs of all types? How many RSCO Pre-K seats are available? How do available RSCO Pre-K seats correspond to demand, particularly between Pre-K and Kindergarten? And finally, what are potential obstacles for families in accessing RSCO Pre-K programs?

Findings:

As of 2013-14, 68% of Hartford Public School (HPS) students enter Kindergarten with Pre-K experience compared to 66% in Bridgeport and 58% in New Haven. 32% of Hartford Public School kindergarteners do not have preschool experience.¹

These numbers represent major progress in expanding early education since 2007, when only 34.2% of children attending Hartford Public Schools (HPS) had preschool experience – in other words, the percentage of HPS children receiving preschool education doubled between 2007 and 2013.

RSCO data shows that 2,135 students were enrolled in RSCO Pre-K programs throughout the Hartford region in 2013-2014, 64% from the suburbs and 36% from Hartford. At the same time, suburban applicants outweigh Hartford applicants by a ratio of 3 to 1, and the overall suburban population (defined here as the 39 towns in the RSCO transportation zone) is over seven times larger than the population of the city of Hartford.² Hartford families have 38% likelihood of getting a RSCO Pre-K offer, while suburban families have a 17% chance of an offer.

The greatest number of magnet elementary seats are available at age 3 for both Hartford and suburban families, but more Hartford families apply to magnets when their children turn 5, when there are far fewer seats available. At age 5, Hartford families have the best chance of getting into suburban Open Choice districts.

Two factors may result in the relatively lower number of application numbers from Hartford families at pre-K3: the lack of pre-K transportation to magnet schools within Hartford and limited information about the odds of admission to different pre-K programs.

Policy Recommendations

Transportation: The state currently provides Pre-K transportation for Hartford families to Open Choice and magnet schools outside of Hartford. We recommend that this be expanded to provide Hartford families with pre-K transportation to magnet schools within Hartford. We also recommend that the \$5 a day stipend for suburban Pre-K families be directed to families that most need it on an income-basis.

Information and Access: RSCO Pre-K providers are increasingly coordinating their recruitment of Hartford families. These groups should continue targeted and coordinated outreach to Hartford families about their full range of options, particularly the importance of entering the Pre-K3 magnet lottery and Hartford families' best options at age 5.

II. Introduction: Why Pre-K Matters

The remedy in the *Sheff v. O'Neill* case is intended to provide Hartford area students with quality, integrated education choices. A key design of the resulting magnet schools has been to start young with public pre-K programming. The Sheff Movement coalition has [continuously advocated](#) for the expansion of high quality, integrated preschool for families in the Greater Hartford area.

Many researchers have demonstrated the importance of quality public preschool programming for the benefit of each child and for our society's economic and social well-being.³ Low-income students attending racially and economically diverse preschools, in particular, have been shown to have even greater academic achievement than at racially and economically isolated preschools.⁴

The emphasis on early education is also increasing around Connecticut. Between 2009 and 2013, the state spent nearly \$1.25 billion on early learning and development programs, a 12% percent increase in funding over previous years.⁵ Connecticut just received a [\\$12.5 million federal Race to the Top grant](#) to expand public preschool. Governor Malloy has committed to a goal of [universal pre-K](#) by 2019 throughout the state, using a combination of public and private programs available to families on a sliding fee scale. With this

renewed policy focus, it is important to examine the reach of the RSCO Pre-K program in the context of public pre-K in the Greater Hartford region.

III. Hartford and suburban students in publicly funded Pre-K programs

In Connecticut, the state and federal government provide public funding to a wide range of public, private and community-based programs through School Readiness, Head Start, Special Education and Title 1 funding. In 2013-2014, Hartford area magnet and Open choice schools offered 2,135 Pre-K spots, representing 23% of the 9,148 publicly funded Pre-K spots in the Greater Hartford region.

Table 1: Pre-K Students in Publicly Funded Programs in the Greater Hartford Region⁶

| Program | Hartford Students | Suburban Students | Total by Program Type | % of Total Publicly Funded Students |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Magnet and Open Choice ⁷ | 775 | 1360 | 2135 | 23.3% |
| Charter and Other Programs | 26 | 433 | 459 | 5% |
| Head Start | 402 | 1124 | 1526 | 16.7% |
| Child Development Centers | 105 | 412 | 517 | 5.7% |
| School Readiness (Public Programs in Child's hometown) | 335 | 569 | 904 | 9.9% |
| School Readiness (Private Programs in Child's hometown) | 801 | 988 | 1789 | 19.6% |
| Special Education Programs ⁸ | 226 | 1563 | 1789 | 19.6% |
| Title 1 (federal funds to districts) | 0 | 29 | 29 | 0.3% |
| Total | 2670 | 6478 | 9148 | |

This data shows that current publicly funded Pre-K offerings are spread out over a number of programs and funding sources. Magnet and Open Choice programs represent the second largest number of students after the School Readiness program. Moreover, the RSCO Pre-K programs provide additional advantages. In addition to the academic gains of attending a racially and economically integrated program (mentioned above), RSCO Pre-K are among the few free tuition programs. Most other Pre-K programs provide services on a sliding scale basis.

Even with the wide range of choices available, there are still a number of Hartford area students who do not attend preschool at all, setting them at an academic disadvantage at the beginning of their education. As of 2013-14, only 68% of Hartford students had preschool experience before kindergarten, compared with 83% across the state. The Hartford figure is higher than Bridgeport (66%) and New Haven (58%), in part due to the number of Sheff Hartford magnet programs.⁹ But the fact that 32% of Hartford children are entering kindergarten without preschool experience demonstrates there is still a significant shortage for the students who need preschool the most.

IV. Availability of RSCO Pre-K seats for Hartford and Suburban Students

In this section, we examine how Pre-K slots vary by program provider. The following table, based on 2013-2014 RSCO data, breaks down the distribution of Hartford versus suburban students among the four magnet school operators in the Hartford region (Hartford Public Schools (HPS), Capitol Regional Educational Council (CREC), Bloomfield School District and Goodwin College). The final category is the Open Choice program, which sends Hartford students into the suburbs and enrolls suburban students in Hartford community schools.

Table 2: Hartford Area Magnet School Pre-K Enrollment Data, October 1, 2013¹⁰

| Magnet/Open Choice Program | Hartford Pre-K | | Suburban Pre-K | | Total |
|-------------------------------|----------------|------------|----------------|------------|-------------|
| | Students | Hartford % | Students | Suburban % | |
| Hartford Public Schools (HPS) | 322 | 43% | 431 | 57% | 753 |
| CREC | 326 | 36% | 591 | 64% | 917 |
| Goodwin | 66 | 39% | 105 | 61% | 171 |
| Bloomfield School District | 34 | 15% | 196 | 85% | 230 |
| Open Choice | 27 | 42% | 37 | 58% | 64 |
| Totals | 775 | 36% | 1360 | 64% | 2135 |

Of 2,135 pre-K spots, 64% are suburban students while 36% are Hartford students. At the same time, the suburban population (defined here as the 39 towns in the RSCO transportation zone) is almost one million people, compared with 125,017 for the city of Hartford.¹¹ As the discussion in Section 5 will show, suburban applicants also outweigh Hartford applicants by a ratio of 3 to 1. On average, Hartford families have a 38% likelihood of getting a RSCO Pre-K offer, while suburban families have a 17% chance of an offer.

This distribution of Pre-K spots may be based on multiple factors including the *Sheff* goal of achieving racial and economic diversity in the participating schools, the high demand among suburban families for Pre-K seats, and the location of a significant number of the

Pre-K seats in suburban locations. Given the difference in spots between Hartford and suburban students, it's important to also examine the demand, measured here by the number of families that apply.

V. RSCO Pre-K seats and lottery applications

Next we take a closer look at whether the number of students who apply for RSCO Pre-K spots is proportional to the number of students offered seats. Using RSCO data, we used first-choice applications in order to count only one application per student. To estimate the total number of seats, we used the number of seats offered as of July 2014 (these figures are different from the actual enrollment figures of October 2014 which was not available). Kindergarten data is evaluated later in this report to consider whether the demand changes dramatically after the end of free-tuition preschool.

In Table 3, this data is aggregated across schools. This measure doesn't take into account zone or sibling preferences for Hartford residents, or the suburban weighting by town, but is useful as a rough measure across magnet and Open Choice schools.

Table 3: 2014-2015 Pre-K First Choice Applications and Total Seat Offers in RSCO Pre-K Schools

| Magnet/ Open Choice Program | Hartford Residents | | | Suburban Residents | | | Total Seats |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|----------------|
| | First Choice Applica- tions | Seats Offered | Seats Offered/App | First Choice Applications | Seats Offered | Seats Offered/App | |
| CREC Magnets | | | | | | | |
| PreK3 | 277 | 153 | 55% | 1652 | 231 | 14% | 384 |
| PreK4 | 219 | 23 | 11% | 1326 | 62 | 5% | 85 |
| HPS Magnets | | | | | | | |
| PreK3 | 318 | 179 | 56% | 288 | 206 | 72% | 385 |
| PreK4 | 281 | 123 | 44% | 327 | 108 | 33% | 231 |
| Other Magnets | | | | | | | |
| PreK3 | 53 | 45 | 85% | 384 | 94 | 24% | 139 |
| PreK4 | 24 | 45 | 100% | 215 | 81 | 38% | 126 |
| Open Choice | | | | | | | |
| PreK4 | 310 | 32 | 10% | 327 | 0 | 0% | 32 |
| Total | 1482 | 568 | 38% | 4519 | 782 | 17% | 1382 |

Applications numbers show a high demand from Hartford and suburban families for RSCO Pre-K spots with significant differences between both groups. 1482 Hartford families and 4519 suburban families applied for Pre-K magnet programs in the 2014 lottery. 75% of Pre-K applications came from suburban families and 25% came from Hartford families.

Dividing the total number of seats offered by the number of first choice applications gives us a rough estimate of the percentage offered seats (which does not take into account different applications by school, and the role of zone, sibling and staff preferences and the suburban weighting by town). By this calculation, Hartford families have 38% likelihood of getting a RSCO Pre-K offer, while suburban families have a 17% chance of an offer.

Looking at magnet providers, more Hartford families apply to Hartford magnet schools (599) than to CREC magnets (496) for first choice school applications, while almost five times more suburban families apply to CREC programs than to HPS magnet programs.

Hartford applicants have the strongest chance of a Pre-K3 seat offer at all of the three magnet providers. Suburban families currently have a much greater chance of a seat offer applying to Hartford Pre-K3 programs than to CREC magnets. So then, how much does a child's chance differ depending on whether they apply at age 3, 4 or 5?

Timing of Applications

In order to evaluate whether the chance of admission varies by age, using RSCO lottery and seat offer data, we compiled first choice applications across all providers for ages Pre-K3, Pre-K4 and Kindergarten and compared them to the number of total offers as of July 2014.

Table 4: First Choice Applications by Grade for Pre-K & K in RSCO Pre-K Schools for the 2014-2015 School Year

| RSCO Pre-K Schools | Hartford Residents | | | Suburban Residents | | | Total Seats |
|--------------------|---------------------------|---------------|-------------------|---------------------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------|
| | First Choice Applications | Seats Offered | Seats Offered/App | First Choice Applications | Seats Offered | Seats Offered/App | |
| PreK3 | 648 | 377 | 58% | 2324 | 531 | 23% | 908 |
| PreK4 | 834 | 191 | 23% | 2195 | 251 | 11% | 442 |
| K | 1265 | 568 | 45% | 2321 | 502 | 22% | 1070 |

Suburban families applying to RSCO magnets have similar chances of getting a seat offer at age 3 (23%) and age 5 (22%) with fewer spots available at age 4. In contrast, the number of Hartford applications dramatically increases at age 5. Hartford families have the best chance applying at age 3 (58%), or at age 5 (45%).

Breaking down the Kindergarten applications and seats by program shows that much of the Kindergarten growth is via the Open Choice Program where Hartford Kindergarten students have a 75% chance of a seat offer whereas they only have a 13% chance of a seat offer at an HPS magnet school.

Table 5: Kindergarten First Choice Applications in RSCO Pre-K Schools for the 2014-15 school year.

| Magnet/ Open Choice Program | Hartford Residents | | | Suburban Residents | | | Total Seats |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------|----------------|
| | First choice Applications | Seats Offered | Seats Offered/ Apps. | First Choice Applications | Seats Offered | Seats Offered/ Apps. | |
| CREC K | 298 | 91 | 31% | 1029 | 97 | 9% | 188 |
| HPS K | 461 | 62 | 13% | 908 | 326 | 36% | 178 |
| Other Magnet K | 16 | 47 | 100% | 109 | 77 | 71% | 124 |
| Open Choice K | 490 | 368 | 75% | 275 | 2 | 1% | 370 |
| Total | 1265 | 568 | 45% | 2321 | 502 | 22% | 860 |

The limited number of magnet openings for Hartford kindergarten students is significant. One third of the Hartford area magnet schools have five or fewer spots for Hartford kindergarteners. The limited number of magnet seats for kindergarteners demonstrates the importance of Hartford families applying for magnet programs at age 3 or for Open Choice at age 5. The next section of the report will focus on barriers that may currently restrict Hartford residents in applying to and attending these magnet Pre-K programs.

PART II: BARRIERS TO ACCESS

There is an increasing awareness among policymakers, researchers and journalists that certain Hartford students, especially Special Education and English Language Learners, are under-represented among applicants for magnet programs.¹² The Sheff Movement has called for greater recruiting efforts for under-represented students, and while the state has improved its outreach, barriers still remain. What follows is a discussion of some of these continuing barriers that may make accessing pre-k magnet school openings difficult for Hartford families.

Transportation

Transportation is a significant issue limiting which families can take advantage of magnet preschool offerings in Hartford and elsewhere around the state. Currently transportation for RSCO Pre-K is only available for Hartford students enrolled in magnet and suburban Open Choice programs outside of Hartford. There is no transportation available for Hartford Pre-K children enrolled in magnet schools located in Hartford. Similarly, there is no transportation available for New Haven or Bridgeport Pre-K children enrolling in their area magnet schools.

This lack of Pre-K transportation disproportionately affects poor families. Recent census data shows 34.6% of Hartford families, or 15,876 households, have no vehicle. Similarly, 28% of New Haven households and 21% in Bridgeport also have no vehicle. The lack of a vehicle is used by the US Government as one measure of family poverty.¹³

There is an existing Pre-K reimbursement program, but it disproportionately favors suburban families with cars. Suburban residents who transport their Pre-K child to a RSCO magnet school outside of their town are eligible for a [\\$5 daily stipend](#). There is no equivalent reimbursement for Hartford families, and numerous families have shared with us the financial hardship of extra bus tickets and even paying for a daily taxi to get their Pre-K children to school. Given that the majority of magnet school seats open up at age 3, families without cars statewide are unfairly excluded by the lack of a transportation provision for Pre-K children.

Transportation Policy Recommendations:

- 1) We recommend that the State expand Pre-K transportation for Hartford residents to all magnet schools within Hartford.
- 2) Given that transportation access is an issue in all three cities with magnet programs, a more comprehensive statewide measure should be considered to provide age appropriate transport (with booster seats and seatbelts) in vans for Hartford and suburban three- and four-year-olds free of charge or with a modest sliding fee scale. Transportation arrangements should be an integral part of any universal Pre-K plan for the State of Connecticut.
- 3) As an interim measure, provide free or reduced public bus vouchers to children and parents who ride the city bus to school. Stamford public schools already have a similar arrangement.
- 4) We also recommend that the \$5 daily stipend for suburban Pre-K families be directed to families that most need it on an income-basis.

Information and Access and Policy Recommendations:

As Tables 4 and 5 demonstrate, Hartford families have the greatest opportunity to enroll in RSCO magnet schools at age 3, but they apply in the greatest numbers when their children turn 5, when there are far fewer seats available at magnets, though a large number of Open Choice spots. In the last three years, between 2000 and 3500 families enrolled in Hartford public schools without participating in either the RSCO lottery or the HPS district choice lottery.¹⁴

It is important to continue targeted outreach to Hartford families about their full range of options, particularly with regard to the importance of entering the Pre-K3 magnet lottery. It's a positive step that Hartford Public Schools Choice Office has begun to train a variety of school-based and social services agency staff to advise families on both the Hartford Choice and RSCO lotteries. Yet there is no single information source about Pre-K and school offerings for Hartford families. It is critical to identify one organization that will take the

lead on organizing outreach and creating comprehensive online and print communications that summarize all choices for Hartford parents.

In addition, one's chance of admission varies widely by school and by grade, and families could benefit from focusing their applications where they have a stronger chance of a seat offer. After local New Haven parent organizers [published Pre-K data](#), the New Haven Public Schools began publishing their own admissions [data tables](#) as part of their magnet brochure. Publishing the previous year's application and seat data may help parents to select options where they have a greater chance of admission to a magnet program and better distribute applications to a wider number of schools.

Further Questions

There are a number of unanswered questions about the impact of public Pre-K programming. Education providers have suggested that the expansion of magnet preschool programs results in the transfer of children from private preschool programs, both Hartford community providers and suburban private programs. Many of these are high quality programs, but few are providing as racially integrated a setting for students. While this may result in certain providers having to work harder to fill their seats, this shift has had the net-positive effect of increasing the overall number of racially and economically integrated Pre-K seats in the area. In addition, 32% of Hartford Public School children are still not receiving any pre-k services, and all providers, whether RSCO Pre-K programs, HPS neighborhood schools and community providers must work together to reach these families.

Second, although the Sheff coalition has requested public reports from the State on student attrition, there is little public information available on how many suburban students stay in magnet schools after attending preschool, and what programs are most effective in retaining suburban students through elementary school and beyond.¹⁵ We hope to present a research brief on this topic at a later date.

Conclusion

The Hartford area's RSCO Pre-K programs offer a rich curriculum with highly trained and certified instructors and racially and economically diverse classrooms. Research has shown that these racially and economically integrated preschool environments can give low-income students a strong boost in their early learning. The creation of Sheff magnet pre-K programs has been a critical reason that the number of Hartford Public School students beginning kindergarten with preschool experience, a critical factor in later educational success, has doubled in the last eight years.

An analysis of applications and available seats shows a continued unmet demand from suburban and Hartford families alike for these quality Pre-K programs. There are currently significantly more pre-K applications and spots for suburban families, showing the robust suburban demand for integrated magnet offerings.

Even though Hartford families have a range of Pre-K options, including magnet and Open Choice programs, 32% of Hartford Public School students still enter kindergarten with no preschool experience. Within Hartford, securing transportation for pre-K students to attend magnet schools in Hartford is an important starting point. It is also critical that outreach to Hartford families includes a discussion of the odds of applying to programs at various ages. Coordinating outreach between the state and magnet providers is critical to helping to better guide all families, and Hartford families in particular, through the complicated choice application process.

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About the Author

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Endnotes

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- ⁶ We defined the Greater Hartford region as the 40 towns included in the RSCO bus transportation zone. Data provided by Cyd Oppenheimer at CT Voices For Children and the RSCO Office. When funding sources overlapped, children were grouped by their program's primary source of funding.
- ⁷ RSCO Office Data.
- ⁸ Special Education Programs includes children who attend mixed programs and have no Individual Education Plan.
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