

*Historical Memory and the  
Transformation of City and Suburban Schools*

Jacqueline Katz

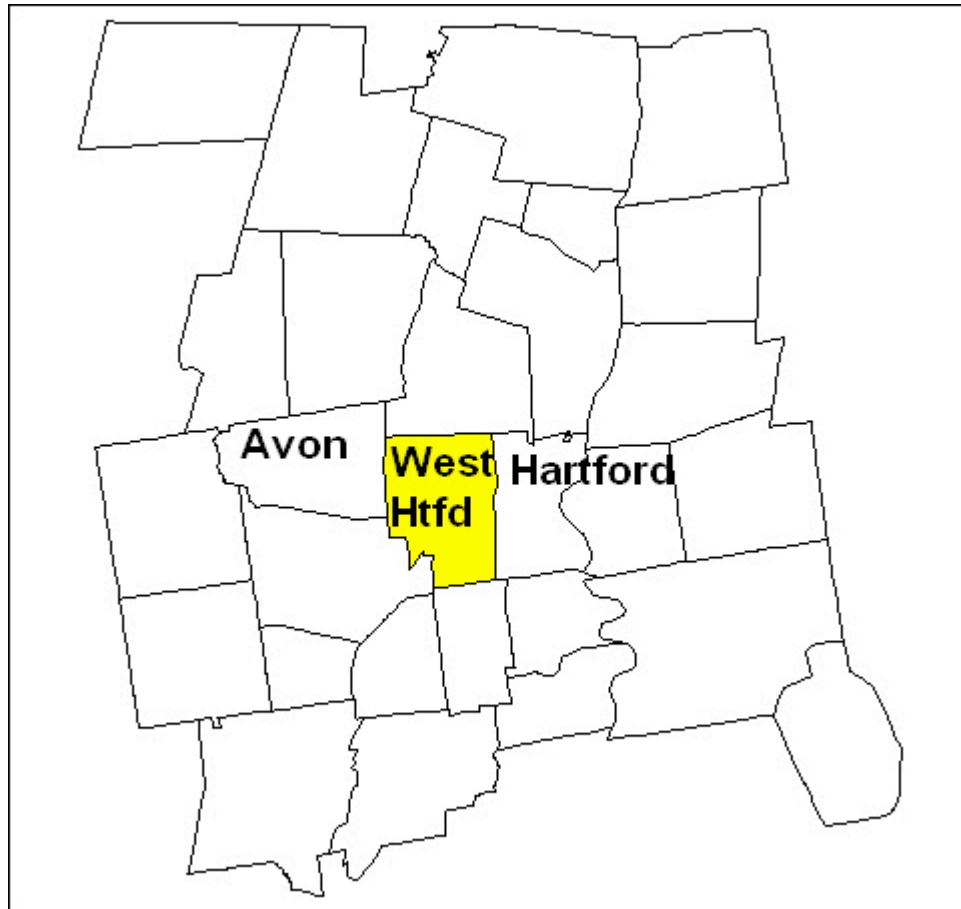
December 20<sup>th</sup> 2004

Ed Studies Senior Research Project

Trinity College

As the United States grew in population during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cities and suburbs began their expansive development. Since the US provides public education, schools were an important part of this development. One factor that can influence the development of schools is the perceptions that people have of the school district. Perceptions of school quality have changed over time and all these perceptions are subjective and influenced by different factors. Within each individual city and suburb there exists a unique history of the development of schools.

In Connecticut, the Greater Hartford area has had a complex history in its last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Hartford Public city schools, that were once considered to be the greatest schools in the area and even the country, have declined in prestige while the suburban schools surrounding Hartford are now perceived to be the better schools in the area. Some of those schools such as schools in Avon and Farmington, have taken off to be considered some of the best schools in the country. The study looks at the city of Hartford and focuses on the surrounding suburbs of Avon and West Hartford.



This development of Hartford, Avon and West Hartford schools can be examined through many means. West Hartford is in between Hartford and Avon and thus it makes sense to look at these cities that exist parallel to each other. Also, these areas represent a diverse and urban city, a fairly homogenous town and a very diverse town. For these towns, there is quantitative data such as the US Census and school fiscal data. This statistical information can be used to discuss certain aspects on how schools and towns were developing. This kind of data has been used to describe relationships between school funding and school quality. However, this information can be limiting as it allows for comparison based solely on statistical information. On the other hand, qualitative data like oral narratives or newspapers can help to explain this development further than statistical data. These sources have not been used as much to discuss the development of

schools and cities and suburbs. However, without qualitative data, the development cannot be explained to its fullest for qualitative data provides information that other forms of data cannot explain. Looking at Census data, one can see where people are moving and the different demographics of a community. But a more complete picture of the development can be formed if other historical documents are used to show the reasons why people were moving and the different perceptions of the time. Qualitative sources provide a more social history that when used in conjunction with quantitative data provides a greater historical picture. This paper uses quantitative data to discuss how schools were developing and to see the variations between different types of historical documents. This paper focuses on schools in metropolitan Hartford during the 1940s through the 1970s, specifically the perceptions of school quality that can be determined from oral history interviews, newspapers and other documentary sources.

### **Thesis**

This paper argues the following two points. First, while there are variations between the different oral histories in describing the rise and fall of city and suburban schools, the strongest variations exist between oral histories and other historical documents, such as town annual reports and newspapers than within the interviews themselves. Furthermore, town by town oral histories contain even less variation and are oftentimes more positive about schools. Secondly, over time, perceptions of schools have changed for various towns, rising in some and falling in others.

### **Significance**

This research is important for several reasons. Firstly, the more current oral history interviews give insight into how people are developing their perceptions about

schools. They mention the different sources they use to gain information about schools and how they form their judgments. This shows us how people make their opinions so that we can determine the best ways to inform the public about schools. Perhaps it is necessary to let the public know about schools through other publications rather than newspapers where the information is not an accurate reflection of what is actually happening. Moreover, the criteria people use to judge schools may change over time. This shows the different ways that people are judging schools and the more emphasis they put on certain criteria throughout time can help to illustrate how society has been changing. For example, an increased interest on testing in oral history interviews reflects how our educational system currently focuses on standardized tests for most student assessment. The different issues that people focus on during different points of time can show us what is important during the different time periods. The different perceptions are a direct reflection of society's values.

Also, this paper shows that there are many different perceptions of schools in the Greater Hartford area and some of them may be surprising. Some people may assume schools in Hartford are bad schools because of certain statistics and newspaper articles but after reading the opinions of people who are not represented in newspapers who have contrasting opinions and believe that Hartford has good schools, people can start to question their predispositions about schools in the suburbs and in Hartford and make new judgments with all the evidence available.

In addition to the aforementioned significances, the way people are thinking can have a strong effect on a town. One aspect it can affect is property values. When people believe their school system is superior then it can drive property values up because

people want to live in a community where schools are good and are willing to pay more money. The quality of the schools can affect how much the houses are sold for. Also, some people would argue that schools had an impact on the growth of suburbs but in metropolitan Hartford people who moved from the cities have not been asked if that was their reason for moving. The new information can allow people to rethink the development of schools in Hartford County and force people to look at the development of schools in new ways. The variations between historical documents and oral histories can provide more insight into how city and suburban schools were developing and perhaps help people make more informed judgments about schools in the Greater Hartford area.

### **Secondary Sources**

Since my research is on the perceptions of people from oral history interviews and how it compares to other historical documents, there are two kinds of secondary sources that were most important to consider when designing and carrying out my research project and paper. The first group is texts that focus on this development of cities and suburbs using oral history interviews. Since oral histories are a more recent tool in researching the past, there are fewer texts that use oral histories especially when studying cities, suburbs and schools. The second kinds of sources I have are research studies and texts that use oral histories in conjunction with other documents to discuss the past.

First, the book “The Old Neighborhood” by Ray Suarez focuses on cities around America and uses oral histories to show the different perceptions people have about the development of cities and suburbs.<sup>1</sup> Suarez is a journalist who asked people in several

---

<sup>1</sup> Suarez, Ray The Old Neighborhood: what we lost in the great suburban migration, 1966-1999. New York: Free Press, 1999.

cities about their feelings on the development of the city and the neighboring suburbs. However, his methodology is fairly limited. He does not set up interviews with people and does not analyze the differences between the interviews. He is presenting different opinions that people from the cities have about the history and development of the city. He travels all over the country and presents several different cities like Brooklyn, Cleveland and Chicago. During his book he reviews the perceptions that people have about the city and shows how the cities have changed and how people have remembered what has happened. He discusses the role of race in the suburbanization of America, a 'white flight'. He also talks about the role of schools in this suburbanization although his analysis is very brief. Overall, the historical analysis of his book is less than complete. He discusses the role of race if suburbanization and how it has affected America, in his case, America is not as unified as it once was, but lacks analyzing the past in order to provide a more analytical view of American city and suburbs.

My research is different from Suarez's in many ways. First, my research is focusing on schools in cities and suburbs, not focusing on the development of just the city and city schools. I am specifically studying the perceptions of schools, although the perceptions on the development of cities and suburbs will also be implicitly in my paper. Instead of focusing on suburbanization and the social aspects of it, I am focusing on schools and their role in the development of suburbs. Also, my methodology is different and more refined. During the oral history interviews I conducted with suburban and former city residents, there were interview guides that asked specific questions about the development of schools in metropolitan Hartford. Suarez did not conduct formal interviews with people and did not have such a specific interview guide. He asks more

general questions because he is not trying to answer a specific research question but merely find out general perceptions and discuss a general history of suburbanization. Lastly, unlike Suarez, I am using additional historical sources along with the recently conducted oral history interviews. I am studying the oral history interviews and then also comparing them to other documents to try to gain a more complete picture of how schools were being perceived in the Greater Hartford area. Since Suarez does not compare the interviews with other documents from the time period, his book only reviews the perceptions of people then there is less historical analysis.

The second major source I used to support my research is the materials that exist on oral histories, especially ones that center around the theme of historical memory. One researcher who has produced many works based on oral histories is Alessandro Portelli. Portelli uses testimonies collected at the time of certain events and compares these accounts to other documents from the time or from interviews where people remember the event. This is called historical memory and researchers how people remember the past. Some people remember the content of the event very differently then what other accounts from the time period say. One example is a piece called “The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event.”<sup>2</sup> He examines a protest in Italy during 1949. He looks at accounts of the event from a newspaper to try to get an accurate idea of what happened. After looking at documentary sources from the time, he conducts interviews with people in the present who were at the event in questions and asks them about it. After, he compares the two sets of documents to see the discrepancies. When researching the death of this worked, Luigi Trastulli, he finds that people do not remember several

---

<sup>2</sup> Portelli, Alessandro The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories. Suny Press: 1991.

things about the event. He finds that people misremember the event in comparison to the documentary evidence from the time period and they reconstruct the past not to an individual basis, but tend to have similar misconstructions of the past. They forget when the event took place and even why there was a protest. “The discrepancy between fact and memory ultimately enhances the value of the oral sources as historical documents. It is not caused by faulty recollections...but actively and creatively generated by memory and imagination in an effort to make sense of crucial events and of history in general.”<sup>3</sup> People actively generate these memories that do not match up to other historical documents. When people look at the present they alter the way they view the past to help them understand where they are today. Portelli’s other works are about the Nazi massacre in Rome and the battle of Valle Giulia and use the same process and draw the same conclusions. Portelli leads the way for this type of research since he comes to realize how oral histories can be distorted memories and that the value of these different perceptions helps to explain the importance of the time period and the way people were thinking and how things are different today.

However, my research differs from these examples of oral histories for several reasons. First, my research is not focusing on a single event as Portelli’s does; I am looking at an extended time period. I am examining a forty plus year span and comparing the oral histories to documents that exist during this entire time period as well. This is an extension on secondary literature since it is examining an entire time period. Also, there is a difference since I am not just comparing oral histories and newspapers, but comparing these perceptions and testimonies to other historical documents like town

---

<sup>3</sup> Portelli, Alessandro The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories. Suny Press: 1991.

and Board of Education reports and minutes. Portelli uses only oral histories and newspaper accounts to discuss the past. By using other documentary sources, a more complete analysis of the past can be gained. These are the two crucial ways that my research is going beyond existing literature on oral histories and historical memories.

The secondary literature that has been conducted on cities, suburbs and schools, perceptions of schools and other oral history research is limited. There have been books, one titled Picture Windows, that discuss suburbanization, but they are limited in their discussion of schools and of historical memory and thus not very helpful in this project. My research uses current interviews and historical documents in comparison with each other to examine the development of schools in a particular area. While I am examining only metropolitan Hartford, the information gathered could be generalized to find out how people are viewing schools and whether the many perceptions from newspapers, interviews and other sources complement or contradict each other. The secondary literature that exists is helpful in preparing my project but my research is going beyond what is presently written.

### **Sources and Methods**

Since this paper examines perceptions of schools in the Greater Hartford area then it is important to gather perceptions from as many different sources as possible. Oral testimonies, newspapers, town meeting minutes and annual reports include perceptions from town officials, school officials, educators, professionals, journalists and also, just residents. There are several collections of oral history interviews that contain over 70 interviews with various residents of metropolitan Hartford.

<b>Interview Collection</b>	<b>Number of Interviews</b>	<b>Year Conducted</b>	<b>Description</b>
Pine Grove School Interviews	7	1975	Interviews about a 1940s schoolhouse in Avon.
City to Suburb Interviews	38	2002	Interview with former residents of Hartford and their reasons for moving into neighboring suburbs.
West Hartford Voices Project	10	2003-2004	Conducted by the West Hartford Historical Society with residents who have lived in West Hartford from 1950 to 2000 and their perceptions on schools.
Metropolitan School Quality Interviews	19	2004	Conducted with real estate agents, school officials and teachers about the rise and fall of school quality in metropolitan Hartford.

The first collection of interviews is about an Avon 1940s one-room schoolhouse and are rich with perceptions of schools in Avon during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These interviews are with former teachers and students of the school. The City to Suburb

collection provides perceptions of schools from the 1940s through 1960s and includes information about suburbanization. The interviewees were found through referral sampling through local historical societies and senior centers. Although it was not random, it was important to find people that moved from Hartford to neighboring suburbs in a specific time period so it was very difficult to find these people by random. These people moved at different times and from different parts of Hartford and are considered to be a representative sample. The third collection provides more recent perceptions on city and suburban schools as they contain perceptions from the 1960s to 2004. The interviewees were chosen by the West Hartford Historical Society and the interviews were used more to give a general feeling of school quality in West Hartford rather than gain any specifics since the sample many not be representative.

The most recent interviews conducted were with certain specialty groups such as real estate agents, school officials and teachers and their perceptions of cities and schools in metropolitan Hartford. These interviews are with professionals that had more contact with the schools and the development of the town and provide a more insightful view of the development of Hartford County. The interview guide for the Metropolitan School Quality interviews included questions about people's perceptions of schools in the Greater Hartford area and more specific questions about school quality.<sup>4</sup> These people were chosen by looking through newspaper articles and yearbooks to find names of teacher and administrators as well as through referral sampling. Although one can argue that this sample is not representative, it is since in most stable school systems there are only so many principals and administrators to choose from. When selecting people,

---

<sup>4</sup> Appendix A

especially people who had been around longer, many had moved or passed away and were thus ineligible as I was searching for perceptions of school quality over time and if people had left the area then they would not have perceptions that spanned the forty year span I was examining. There are only so many to choose from and since newspapers and yearbooks were used to find names then I would consider this source to be representative. All the oral history interviews will be looked at for their content and quantified so that general claims about people's opinions can be made.

Another qualitative source that is used are newspaper articles from the Hartford Courant and from local town newspapers. Through newspapers, specific interest groups are represented as well as the perceptions of many different kinds of people that are not covered by the oral history interviews. The town meeting minutes and annual reports from specific towns provide first hand information about what the town's leaders thought about their schools. Also Board of Education reports and minutes provide insight into the way the town and schools is developing. Through all these different sources, the perceptions of many people can be gathered and compared among each other. The oral histories are grouped together as one set of sources and then compared to other documentary sources like newspapers, town annual reports and town meeting minutes. All these sources provide a well-rounded approach in discussing the perceptions of city and suburban schools.

The different oral testimonies will be compared among each other to see how different towns are seeing themselves and other towns. The interview guide designed for some of the oral history interviews asks people to discuss the schools in their town as well as schools in the surrounding towns and cities so there are many perceptions

available from this source.<sup>5</sup> Since the more recent oral history interviews are the ones that provide the most direct answers to questions about perceptions of schools, certain towns in the Greater Hartford area will be focused on more than others. Specifically, Avon and West Hartford have the most oral history interviews and so more claims can be made about perceptions of schools in those towns. Although this paper discusses perceptions of schools in all of the Greater Hartford area, Avon and West Hartford do have more evidence and so more claims will be made about them. However, many perceptions of schools in Greater Hartford area are available from oral history interviews as well as from other documents.

### **Suburbanization and Schools**

During the 1940s through 1970s there was a shift in population from the city of Hartford to surrounding suburbs like Avon, Bloomfield and West Hartford. This shift can be looked at from different perspectives. Some historical accounts, like newspapers and town documents believe better schools in the suburbs attracted people enough to move away from the city. However, this contrasts with oral history interviews with people who moved out of Hartford into neighboring suburbs during the same time period.

Former residents of Hartford, especially those moving to more rural towns like Avon and Bloomfield in the 1940s and 1950s claim that their reasons for moving out of the city had to do with desire for larger or more affordable homes, more land, and leaving a city that in their eyes was not as safe or an ideal place to raise children in. All these interviews with former residents are people that had child before moving out of Hartford. Therefore, one would assume that they would consider schools when moving out of

---

<sup>5</sup> Appendix A

Hartford since they had young children at the time. One former resident who moved out of Hartford in 1952 says, “Now we didn’t come to Avon because of the schools, we just thought it would be better to have a lot more land for the kids to play around in.”<sup>6</sup>

Another former resident who moved in 1955 claims, “Well I think my primary reason for coming to Bloomfield was that I could find affordable housing and that I liked the mix of the population.”<sup>7</sup> This type of sentiment is present in over 20 interviews with people who moved out of Hartford into neighboring suburbs. Another Avon resident says, “Well we were just married in ‘50 and we were looking for a place to build a home and this seemed like good area. My husband had a business in Hartford and had some customers who lived out here so that brought us out here to look around. And we just liked it.”<sup>8</sup> This former resident agrees with the earlier testimonies that schools were not part of her reason for moving into Avon. None of these interviews mention schools as a reason for moving into Avon during the 1950s and 1960s. They mention more land, the country life and affordable housing as major reasons for moving from the city and did not mention schools.

In contrast, some historical documents give the schools much more credit in attracting new residents and their importance in the growth of the town. A 1950 document entitle, “Report of Supervisors”, a document that discussed the general affairs of the town states, ““Educational opportunities in rural towns are now so attractive that city dwellers are moving into the smaller towns in a steady stream.”<sup>9</sup> This Avon document claims that the schools were attracting people into towns in the 1950s, which

---

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Clifford Floyd by Jacqueline Katz, June 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Ruth Cohen by Jacqueline Katz, June 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Eleanor Mazur by Jacqueline Katz, July 2003.

<sup>9</sup> FJ Penley. “Report of Supervisors”, Avon; 1950.

contrasts with Avon residents who did not move into Avon for schools. However, there are two interviews that were conducted in 2004 where schools are mentioned. However, consistent with the earlier testimonies mentioned, these former residents did not mention schools as the reason for moving to Avon. They mentioned that they did think about schools, since they had school age children, but they were not the reason for moving as Avon town historical documents would believe. This type of contradiction shows that although people perceive schools and being a pull for people to move into suburbs during the 1940s and 1950s, there is contrasting evidence that would show other reasons for the suburbanization in Hartford County.

These variations can probably be explained with the fact that in the US there is a general belief that schools in the suburbs are the reason for people moving out of the cities. Other things are discussed, but mostly the shift is attributed to schools. This is the case in metropolitan Hartford. People often look to schools to explain the shift from Hartford being the major place to live with the best schools to being the one of the worst cities with sub-par schools. It is easy to pick one thing to explain the shift and since now it seems that schools are the reason that people are choosing between the different suburbs when moving, people want to apply that same theory to the past. However, it is clear that one cannot apply a current trend to a historical event.

### **Controversies in Schools**

Over time, certain school controversies, such as issues over funding, curriculum, and staff have become major issues in the surrounding suburbs of Hartford. In metropolitan Hartford, while archival documentary sources illustrate many different

controversies within schools that appear to be significant controversies, oral history interviews do not discuss the same controversies or refer to them with having the same importance.

### *West Hartford*

In the town of West Hartford when examining controversies during the 1950s through 1970s, people's recollections of significant controversies vary widely from other documentary sources. Newspaper articles from this time period display many different controversies about schools in the town that oral history testimonies do not reflect.

Newspapers articles about West Hartford from the 1950s, 60s and 70s, especially their own local newspaper the West Hartford Times, illustrate many controversies. One controversy discussed in several newspaper articles is the growth in the West Hartford student population. West Hartford has limited space and the town was unsure of how to deal with the growing student body. An article from 1953 mentions these circumstances but not in the form of a controversy. However, one can infer from the article that the four million dollars set aside for the school in addition to \$230, 000 for a recreational center with a swimming pool must have caused some controversy especially since the newspaper covered the story.<sup>10</sup> Also, along with the building of the news schools, there was also 'a debate on the inadequate maintenance of older West Hartford schools...'<sup>11</sup> This debate, during the 1950s, mentions how some West Hartford schools are in need for new desks and new classroom materials than are not being provided. These feelings are being printed by a citizens group in West Hartford who believe that the conditions are 'inexcusable' and that the town needs to respond to the conditions of the schools. This

---

<sup>10</sup> "New Hall High School and the Edward J Hickey Cornerstone Club", West Hartford Times 1953.

<sup>11</sup> West Hartford citizen Group Acts on Schools, 1956.

controversy published by the newspaper shows how the town is not responding to the citizens needs in ways that are satisfying to them. The citizens of the town are the ones who pay taxes and feel that the schools should be providing for their children. These fiscal issues are prevalent throughout this time period in West Hartford. One article mentions that ‘the educational budget was attacked and defended with ardor,’ at a town meeting.<sup>12</sup> Overall, budget issues have been prevalent in West Hartford as seen through newspaper articles and appear to have been major controversies from the 1950s through the 1970s with issues including new schools buildings and maintenance.

Another controversy, which was also a challenge, was the changing demographics of West Hartford that were occurring as early as the 1950s. West Hartford is now a very diverse suburb and this shift began in the 1950s. Schools have to adjust to the new student population and find ways to expand their schools and curriculum to make sure they remain schools that can help all students. A 1958 article describes a report about the schools that was published by the town’s superintendent of schools. The conclusion of the report reads, “Although the need for education will continue for all generations, the specific objectives, content and methods cannot remain static. Our schools must be responsive to cultural change.”<sup>13</sup> The man who wrote this report, superintendent Dr. Thorne caused some controversy himself when he resigned. In the case, the newspaper declares there were groups fighting about whether Dr. Thorne was forced to resign or not, but from the tone of the article it seems as if he was forced to. There were residents who wanted him to be rehired and felt that he was a good superintendent. On the other hand, there were people, mostly people on the Board of Education who wanted Dr. Thorne to

---

<sup>12</sup> West Hartford Speaks 1950s

<sup>13</sup> School Subjects and Hours, report by Dr. Edmund Thorne, 1958,

leave. This article puts the residents of West Hartford against the Board of Education who at the end of the article request that the residents drop the issue ‘for the welfare of the 12, 500 West Hartford school children.’<sup>14</sup> However, the changing demographics of the community were the main issues and it posed challenges to the curriculum and school structure.

While West Hartford residents do talk about controversies in their towns, they do not discuss them with such detail or remember the same ones.<sup>15</sup> From their interviews it would appear that West Hartford had many controversies regarding schools although few people remembered the same controversies. Also, former educators in West Hartford discuss some controversies regular residents do not mention or seem to know about. Moreover, the controversies that people discussed are more localized to their particular district or school they worked in. They also mention controversies in individual classrooms or grades.

One educator, who was also on the Board of Education discusses controversies more centralized to particular schools.

A lot of them. Some of them were totally silly. Of course we always had a smoking problem. That was a huge controversy. A dress code was a huge controversy, what people could wear. And then there were some really more fundamental controversies really based on religion. We used to have a Christmas concert, which was quite religious and the administration, the new administration

---

<sup>14</sup> Fact Finders report Read at Hearing on Resignation of Dr. Edmund Thorne, The Hartford Courant, 1963.

<sup>15</sup> **Note:** There are many newspaper articles to examine and I do not claim that I went through every single newspaper article from 1950 until 1980 so there may have been articles addressing such issues. However, in general, the issues that people discuss in their interviews were not of major concern to the newspapers that I examined.

that came in said, ‘no, you can’t do that, that’s offensive to non-Christians.’ And there was a huge battle over that, huge.”<sup>16</sup>

These controversies are not the large budget problems or administrative problems that are discussed in newspaper articles but problems that were smaller, but just as important to the schools themselves. In some cases, perhaps with the dress code controversy, students were involved in that controversy and probably had an affect on the school atmosphere. Yet the newspaper articles do not reflect such controversies. Another former teacher explains,

I think there were some controversies regarding the schools being as good as they were, have such a strong reputation that there was maybe some friction between the town government and the school system. That, you know, the schools were getting a lot of support, a lot of resources, there may have been some jealousy in that. I don’t think it was really horrible, it wasn’t, but I think it was, there might have been some resentment there. I think there was controversy in the schools over districting when, because of population growth in different parts of the town when schools had to be, particularly elementary schools had to redistricted. That was a big deal to a lot of elementary parents. I think there was perception that the North End schools were stronger than the South End Schools. That Hall had a, was a better high school than Conard. So there were times when their was discussion about changing the district lines and as much as people might have wanted some change, there was a lot of, I think fear, that people were very loyal to where they were sending their kids to school.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Jack Darcy, July 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Dennis Carrithers, July 2004.

In this case, the controversy that may have existed between the town and the schools would be something that most people and newspaper writers would not know about. The tensions this educator discusses between school and town officials would have been something that was kept out of the public view. No one would want to know about problems within the town government and schools because it would make the situation seem unstable. People may lose faith in the school system or it could start a larger town controversy that would be centered on what this educator describes as, “jealousy”. These kinds of controversies are ones that were purposely kept out of the public sphere and this is why talking with educators is so important when examining perceptions of public schools. Interestingly, several articles do discuss problems within the schools in West Hartford, specifically problems between the administration, namely the superintendent and teachers. This is one issue that did not come up in any of the interviews although several people had been working during the 1968 school year when this article was printed.<sup>18</sup>

Also, a former principal in West Hartford mentions different controversies, “Oh yes, at that time, one of the controversies was whether West Hartford would become a two high school community or remain one...That was also controversial, getting support for the notion of two high schools and a new building in the north end of town...Yes, I think in those days, there were some philosophical differences and to how much independence and freedom high school age students should have.” The issue of the new high school was not revealed to be as significant in newspaper articles as this principal

---

<sup>18</sup> “Unrest Blame on Tough Administration” The Hartford Courant, January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1968.

remembers. Also, the “philosophical differences” were probably contained to the school he worked in and therefore would not have been documented by newspapers.

Overall, the oral history interviews were less consistent about the various school controversies. There were many more mentioned but again, they were in single instances. Over the course of 50 years it is to be expected that people push certain issues out of their minds and only remember a few controversies that were significant to them. For some parents, they may be more concerned with growing sizes in the classrooms where other are concerned about the cutting of music programs. A controversy may seem to be significant in a newspaper, but if there are no personal effects then people would most likely not remember it. For instance, controversies over fiscal resources in schools are prevalent in most communities. While some of the interviews mentioned the budget as something that was always considered by the town, the newspaper devoted much more detail and time to these issues. It is easy to see why at the time people were very concerned about how the money was being spent since they would be voting on the issues and paying the taxes. But looking back on the controversies, since fiscal problems have been so common, they are not seen as significant. Even now, newspapers devote articles to fiscal issues but since it is almost every year that there is a problem with the budget, the controversy is not as significant and people are less likely to remember the issues at a later time. They remember what was important to them and since that varies so much the interviews reflect this lack of consistency. Due to the lack of consistency within the documents, although this is interpreted as an interesting commonality, their lack of focus, it is easy to see why they vary with newspaper articles. The articles are from the time period and ‘frozen in time’;

people's memories are not and change. While it is hard to compare the historical documents to the oral history interviews because there is little consistency in the oral history interviews, it still shows how the oral history tend to group together, even if in this case it is a lack of consistency that makes them similar and they are still very different from newspaper articles.

### **School Quality Over Time**

There are many more specific and stronger examples of the differences b/w oral histories and other written documents when researching school quality over time. Many discrepancies exist within individual suburbs regarding the perceived quality of the schools in their neighborhood.

#### ***Avon***

One example is in the town of Avon located to the west of the Hartford. Their school system is currently considered to have a very good educational system. However, there are many perceptions about how the schools developed. In the 1950s the schools were considered rural and outdated by some newspaper and town documents. However, other evidence from oral histories describes the schools in Avon during the 1940s through 60s as good schools and voice tremendous pride in the schools.

The Pine Grove School was a one-room schoolhouse in the town of Avon that was maintained until 1948. The Avon Historical Society conducted interviews with former students and teachers in the 1970s to learn about the Pine Grove School and the experiences that former students and teachers had. Overall, the people interviewed, as well as one interview that was conducted in 2004 for a separate project, expressed

positive memories of the Pine Grove School in contrast to some other documents from the town of Avon.

Former students express the fun they had in school and how they felt that they had good teachers and got a good education. “We always got along good with Mrs. Illusky and I uh, she used to oh, when I stayed after school to write [inaudible] letters, she used to come down and talk to me and tell me I should do better if I wanted to make something of myself. And so, I told, I used to tell her I’ll try.”<sup>19</sup> Former teachers express pride in their curriculum design as well as in the schools themselves. “My daily program provided time for the three R’s. In reading, we had daily oral and silent reading groups. And they use graded books to fit their ability. Also, we had individual reading for those in the first and second grades to strengthen their reading and to overcome their individual problems.”<sup>20</sup> The other interviews conducted express the same pride and belief in the excellent education Avon schools offered during this early time period.

Some documentary evidence also agrees with the students and teachers that Avon schools were high in quality. An Avon town report from 1938 writes, “Avon schools are good schools. They have more than a local reputation. Visitors from any parts of the United States and several foreign countries have visited them during the past year.”<sup>21</sup> Also, oral history interviews with residents from surrounding suburbs and the city of Hartford show a belief that schools have always been of high quality. A resident of Hartford remembers Avon schools being good school as far back as the 1940s and 50s.<sup>22</sup> Other Avon residents also express their happiness with the schools in the 1950s and 60s,

---

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Peter Murray by Grace Madison of the Avon Historical Society, November 1975.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Eileen Case by Grace Madison of the Avon Historical Society, September 1975.

<sup>21</sup> Avon town report, 1938.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Ron Armstrong by Jacqueline Katz, July 2004.

even though they are not being as enthusiastic. “Yes. When we first came out it was very small but of course it built up by the time our third child got into the high school it was pretty modern. Yes and my kids today will tell you they got a good education in Avon.”<sup>23</sup>

These kinds of reports and interviews show how people in Avon were happy with the schools as far back as the 1930s.

In contrast, other documents, as well other oral history interviews show some people believed the schools in Avon were outdated and rural. One West Hartford resident says about schools in Avon during the 1950s and 1960s, “I thought they were, (pause), almost rural in nature. Surprisingly not up to date, not looking to the future, not doing things that I would have expected. Particularly with the resources they had.”<sup>24</sup> A town annual report from 1944 says, “No mention has been made of our depreciated school plants, worn out equipment, or plans for replacing obsolete structures with new buildings to meet new needs. These and many more pressing problems indicate that peace will mean, for education, a long period of intense activity and will demand the highest type of leadership.”<sup>25</sup>

Later town reports during the 1950s mention how the school was not equipped to handle all its students. A 1951 “Report of Supervisor” states, “Increasing elementary school enrollments and rapidly mounting high school attendance still are out chief concern. The elementary problem has been solved, at least for the coming year...”<sup>26</sup> Avon during the 1950s was using a neighboring suburbs high school and paying tuition for students who graduated from Avon middle schools to attend high school in Canton.

---

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Miriam Ritter by Jacqueline Katz, July 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Jack Darcy by Jacqueline Katz, July 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Avon town report, 1944.

<sup>26</sup> “Report of Supervisors”, Avon Board of Education, FJ Penley 1951.

However, by the 1950s this plan was no longer going to work. There was a lack of resources for the already present student body and they had to build their own high school.

Avon Board of Education minutes also show problems with the transportation of students. There was “general bus overcrowding” and some parents wanted their students to have bus transportation and were denied.<sup>27</sup> Also there were apparently problems with the administration during the mid 1950s. The minutes mention that the students were not as disciplined as they should be and that parents did not like the administrator.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Board of Education reports and their minutes reveal problems in the school system that are not evident in other town documents.

However, these problems were not mentioned in any of the interviews with residents of Avon who were living in the town during the 1950s. People were satisfied with the schools and they did not express any discouragement with the lack of resources in the schools. So while some Avon oral history interviews are not as enthusiastic as others, they are more indifferent to the condition of the schools and do not mention any negative issues. So although they do not agree with the Pine Grove School interviews, they do not declare that the schools in Avon had any significant problems. Thus there is an obvious contrast of the perceptions of Avon schools during the 1930s through 1960s but the differences are not between residents of Avon but between the oral history interviews from Avon and other historical documents.

The interviews from the town of Avon had a general consensus that the schools have been good and that they have been satisfied with them. Oral history interviews from

---

<sup>27</sup> Board of Education Minutes, Feb 6<sup>th</sup> 1952 and September 10<sup>th</sup> 1952.

<sup>28</sup> Board of Education Minutes, February 27<sup>th</sup> 1956.

other towns were not as impressed by the Avon schools over the years but their interviews never criticized the schools in a negative way like other documentary sources. The other documentary evidence is more critical of schools in very overt ways. These examples show the two main points of my thesis. First, the documentary sources by towns and newspaper articles, the non oral history pieces are more critical of schools. The oral history interviews have a more positive view of schools and even when people are not impressed with schools in another town, they never overtly discuss the problems or too harshly criticize the schools.

Secondly, the greatest contrast between all the evidence is with the archival documents and the oral history interviews. The oral history interviews tend to group with each other in their opinions and even though in this case, there were oral history interviews that critiqued the Avon school system, the greatest variation was still with the documentary evidence. The latter evidenced described Avon schools in a very negative way while people from the time describe the schools as being at good schools or at least not being as negative about the condition of Avon schools. This shows that there is a lesser degree of contrast between the Avon oral histories and the other oral histories than with the documentary source. Thus, while a majority of people in the Greater Hartford area may perceive that Avon schools have always been the better schools in the area, documentary evidence contradicts with this idea. These variations could exist for several reasons. Most likely, people who had school age children would tend to associate with each other. They knew each other through their children and believed certain things about their schools because of the experiences that their children had. From this, general opinions were formed that were based on what was actually happening in the schools.

The newspapers did not have such first hand information and therefore tend to be more critical. Also, it is very possible that the people who are paying for the schools and are supposed to be benefiting from them do not want to believe that their schools are bad. They may not want to believe certain information in the newspaper since then it would be their tax money is going to waste. However, these different perceptions and the variations are limited to the 1940s and 1950s. In later periods in the town of Avon, such discrepancies shift.

By the 1960s and 1970s there is a merging between documentary sources such as Board of Education reports and minutes and oral history interviews. The oral history interviews still agree with each other the most, but they also are more consistent with archival sources during this time period. In these cases, they both express positive views on the Avon school system although there are still variations.

Beginning in 1960, the town of Avon reports from the Board of Education and Town begins to display immense pride in their schools and discuss the ways that their schools are improving. A 1960 Avon Board of Education report states,

The major emphasis this year has been to better identify and understand the needs of each child and to refine the curriculum so as to meet those discovered needs more effectively. A vastly improved testing and counseling program has furnished much valuable data about the children attending the schools...in conjunction with this curriculum study the Board of Education has taken an imaginative step. It has approved the appointment of a team of three teachers to

do research on this techniques, materials and equipment necessary for the instruction of the gifted child in an elementary school classroom.<sup>29</sup>

In 1962, a booklet issued by the Avon Board of Education explains the high standards it holds the students to, especially regarding languages. “At Avon High School students are encouraged to study one language for a minimum of four years, and if they possess the academic aptitude, they are urged to carry two languages for the four-year period.”<sup>30</sup> By 1963 the schools had an AP biology class and added another math course. In addition to the strengths in the curriculum, early 1960s reports mention to high quality of teachers. Another school board report discusses the different ways that the Avon teachers are good teachers. It mentions how many teachers have masters degrees, this year, in 1963, 22 teachers currently have them while 8 are receiving their degrees by June. Also, it stresses how the “teachers are constantly adding to their knowledge and keeping up with modern trends.”<sup>31</sup>

During the mid 1960s, Avon reports listed many more things they were proud of in their school system. Barely any problems are listed. In 1965 they had added Chinese and Japanese to the language department and were able to send students to study abroad during their time in high school. At the same time, calculus as an AP subject was introduced into the curriculum as well as a course in matrix algebra.<sup>32</sup> They also introduced art and expanded the physical education program.<sup>33</sup> In all these ways the Avon school system was expanding and providing a broader education for its students through an expanding curriculum. Their students were graduating and attending high

---

<sup>29</sup> Avon Board of Education report, John E Deady, p 30-31 1960.

<sup>30</sup> Avon Board of Education booklet. *Education in Avon Moves Ahead*. circa 1992.

<sup>31</sup> Avon Board of Education report, no author, Summer 1963.

<sup>32</sup> Avon Board of Education report, Francis Driscoll, pg 39-43.

<sup>33</sup> Board of Education report, no author, Fall 1964 Volume 2, number 1.

education; 87% of the graduating class in 1966.<sup>34</sup> All these praises that the school system reports on show how proud the school district was of their school system. The documents released by the school board showed all these positive aspects of the school system. This is to be expected since a school system wants to make a good impression on other towns and for the residents. But these reports are extremely optimistic and the school system seems to be going to enormous lengths to make their school system special and up-to-date.

Oral history interviews express the same positive sentiment about the schools but they are not bragging as much as the documentary sources. Interviews with residents of Avon who sent their children to Avon schools recall a good education but not as enthusiastically as the oral history interviews with teachers and administrators from Avon. One Avon resident when asked if she liked the schools replied, “Oh yes, very much. You hear people complain about them but I always say, our girls got into good colleges and succeeded. How else can you judge a high school in [inaudible]. I mean if they didn’t have good training and background from there then I don’t think they would have succeeded as quickly in college if they hadn’t had that.”<sup>35</sup> Another resident praises the curriculum of the school and the ability of the school to adjust to the growing population. “She had wonderful teachers, just the basic reasons that [inaudible] in school. Their curriculum was better...a very good music department...so that’s about all I can tell you about the school system, the space has been adequate. They keep adding on, building the schools, you know to accommodate the influx of new people in town.”<sup>36</sup> In the way that the Board of Education was responding to the increasing population,

---

<sup>34</sup> Board of Education report, no author, Spring 1966, Volume 2, number 3.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Gladys August by Jacqueline Katz, July 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Sue Macy by Jacqueline Katz, July 2004

residents also recognized this in the 1960s but as illustrated earlier in the paper residents who talk about schools in the 1950s do not express the same feelings.

Other oral history interviews with educators in the Avon school system also express the same pride and satisfaction with the school system. In these cases, most of these people believe the success of the schools in Avon occurred during the end of the 1960s and then continued up to the present. A former superintendent, when he first began working in Avon in 1968 remember the schools being mediocre and not being able to attract parents into Avon by using the schools.<sup>37</sup> An assistant superintendent, who worked with the previously mentioned superintendent declares about the Avon school system, “I think it was always a very steady, steady outstanding school in a lighthouse community, I really do, from the very beginning...there was always a consistency of the Board of Education, primarily, and the community, especially a community to have a very high quality performing school district.”<sup>38</sup> This kind of pride in the school system from educators in Avon is present in all of the interviews and illustrates a consistency between the oral history interviews. This particular group of educators shared the same enthusiastic views of Avon and while the interviews with residents of Avon do not express such enthusiasm, they are definitely proud of the schools. This is in contrast to interviews with residents who were describing the schools in the 1940s and 1950s. The oral history interviews when describing the schools in Avon during the 1960s and 1970s group together in voicing satisfaction with the schools.

During the late 1960s it seems that Avon’s reputation to having a high quality school district was growing, perhaps due to the increasing number of people who were

---

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Herb Pandiscio by Jacqueline Katz, July 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Justino Penna by Jacqueline Katz, August 2004.

happy with the school district including the Board of Education. So while previously residents did not believe schools were a reason for choosing to move to Avon, when oral history discuss the role of development One resident, who moved to Avon in 1968 says, "...the school system...was probably a, the number one reason of choosing the town back then. We had just had our first child and we knew that that...[was important]."<sup>39</sup>

In the end, it is clear that there is less variation between these documents and the interviews than before. It is possible that with the school system expanding the curriculum and spending so much money on the schools that it would only be normal that the taxpayers, in this case, parents, would expect their school to perform better and to offer the best programs. Also, since Avon was on the cutting edge of curriculum design, they were probably seen as being very advanced in their school system. This would naturally lead to more positive views of the school system by more people because they were seen as being a leader in the way they were running their schools because of the curriculum. It makes sense that there would be less variation when one realizes the money that was spent on these programs and how the more challenged curriculum gives the impression that the schools are of high quality

Thus, evidence indicates that there are more variations between the oral history interviews and other documentary sources than within the interviews themselves especially when a single town's interviews are looked at. While there are many ways to look at these variations, this research does not seek to determine why these variations exist or what are the consequences of these variations. This paper looks to point out those variations and force people to think about their own perceptions about schools in

---

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Cindy Hopper by Jacqueline Katz, July 2004.

the Greater Hartford area and how they came to those perceptions and whether they are based on the complete evidence available. People can look at their own perceptions and maybe make more informed ones since they have more evidence to look at. In the future, if people consider all the evidence available when considering what a ‘good’ school is then maybe the impressions they have will not be based solely on newspapers but on everything and have a well-informed perception of schools.

### *West Hartford*

Another strong example of the contrast between oral histories and other historical documents concerning changing school quality is in the suburb of West Hartford. Overall, West Hartford residents, former residents, as well as current teachers and students recall a consistent high quality of West Hartford schools despite other documents. One current resident says, “I guess the schools too have always had a terrific reputation. They still maintain through all the drama that has gone on, they are still terrific.”<sup>40</sup> A former administrator explains, “I think the West Hartford schools have a long standing tradition of excellence and I think conditions vary due to changing times so things have not remained static, they’ve been ever changing but I think standards consistently been very high and I think that’s one of the unique features of living in West Hartford. And it was what attracts families with school age children.”<sup>41</sup> For all but one of the West Hartford interviews, over twenty interviews total, West Hartford schools are always viewed in a positive light and viewed as being consistently some of the best schools in the Greater Hartford area. People from other towns also have the same opinion that West Hartford residents have. An Avon educational administrator states,

---

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Renee McCue by West Hartford Historical Society, 2003.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Robert Dunn by Jacqueline Katz, July 2004.

“West Hartford has always maintained a high quality school district that they, all of my experience with them has been the same. They’ve been able to capture that, retain that.”<sup>42</sup> Someone who grew up in Hartford and now resides in New Britain says, “In my mind, West Hartford has some very traditional schools and they have schools that they can, they have different programs going on. Growing up West Hartford had an excellent reputation...”<sup>43</sup> Thus, on the same note that all the West Hartford residents believe that their schools have always been very good schools, other residents of the Greater Hartford area that agree.

However other evidence shows fluctuation in the West Hartford schools and not the strong consistency that many people believe. One documentary source reflects a different view of West Hartford. During the 1950s Time magazine printed a questionnaire about how to rate the public schools. A resident who was the editor of The West Hartford news, filled out the form and printed an article that rated the West Hartford schools and found many problems. In the article she claims, “Workshops in the junior high are adequate, it seems, to the superficial eye, but teaching of biology, chemistry, physics and, in the low grades, general science, is seriously handicapped for lack of modern laboratories. In a scientific age, we are not measuring up at least in facilities.”<sup>44</sup> As well as criticizing the schools and curriculum she mentions the problems with the staff, something that did not come up in a single interview from West Hartford. “We only have to blame ourselves that they have set up a mutual protective association which almost guarantees the teacher his job. These guarantees encourage mediocrity.

---

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Justino Penna by Jacqueline Katz, August 2004.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Christine Colgan by Jacqueline Katz, August 2004.

<sup>44</sup> ‘A Layman’s Look at schools...Part 1’

They weaken incentive.”<sup>45</sup> This evidence describes a lack of quality in West Hartford schools that during the 1950s.

Moreover, newspaper like the Hartford Courant, show the fluctuation of quality in the West Hartford school system, although at times they have been very good.

Newspapers printed articles about financial problems causing school quality to decline in some schools. One 1955 article, based on a recent Board of Education meeting, describes the way the decrease in school funding will affect their school. “...a reduction in the number of teachers, elimination of special teachers requested because of the addition of new schools...reduction of allotment for textbooks, postponement of the purchase of new equipment and school furniture...postponement of building repairs and alterations...”<sup>46</sup>

While lack of money does not necessarily reflect a lesser quality of a school district, in this case, the decreasing of funding leads to certain issues that one cannot think would cause the school quality to decline. Materials are needed to keep schools up-to-date and to challenging and safe for students. Whatever the result of the decrease in funds was, this article is showing that the schools were not always as good as many people believe.

A decrease in teachers, textbooks and school repairs is certainly not an indication of a high quality school. Also, another 1955 article discusses budget cuts proposed by the school board that would decrease the amount of “new classroom equipment, including maps and globes, files, shop equipment, projectors, paper cutters, duplicators and typewriters.”<sup>47</sup> This is another example of the decrease in the amount of resources the school has. Again, this does not necessary reflect school quality but it does show how the schools have not been as good as many people would believe since the lack of funding

---

<sup>45</sup> ‘A Layman’s Look at schools...Part 2’

<sup>46</sup> “W. Hartford School Board Sees Education ‘Impaired.’” West Hartford News 1955.

<sup>47</sup> “Cut in Maintenance Costs Proposed by School Board” West Hartford News, 1955.

can certainly affect teachers and the school in a negative way. Overall, newspapers have found varying degrees of quality in the West Hartford schools in contrast to interviews where almost all residents remember nothing but the best quality in West Hartford schools as far back as the 1950s.

These variations can be explained in several ways. The parents that had children in the school system, as well as the administrators, may have not felt that the decrease in money negatively affected the school. They may have felt that they were able to exist without the money and the schools did not decrease in quality. Therefore, they would not reflect any sentiments of disappointment in the schools because they did not feel the school quality decreased. If the budget cuts did not affect the schools in a negative way, then their interviews would not show this. Another explanation could be that since West Hartford residents tend to view their schools in such a positive light, they do not remember the times when they were not as well off. Certainly now many people would agree that West Hartford schools are of high quality. Oftentimes it is easy to forget about negative aspects of one's school system especially if one is interviewed in a period of growth and success. This can be especially true when someone has worked in the school system that may also only remember the good times and prefer not to think of the times where the schools may have failed. Schools failing can lead to feelings of blame for anyone involved in the school system. It would be hard to admit for most people that they worked in a school or sent their children to a school that was not the best.

In addition to the contrast with other historical documents, interviews conducted with people who reside outside of West Hartford show evidence of time periods where West Hartford schools were lacking. One Avon resident says, "Oh, they were top notch

but I think they're not probably as good as they used to with, the Elmwood section I guess has more difficult children."<sup>48</sup> A former Avon superintendent remembers fluctuation in the quality of schools in West Hartford. “

Yes, they were good schools. Although I think there was a period of decline somewhere, maybe in the late 70s, early 80s, when Avon in particular was drawing a significant number of parents out of West Hartford because our schools by that time had gained a reputation for excellence and I think West Hartford sort of lagged behind at that time. I think they, under the current superintendent they certainly have bounced back.<sup>49</sup>

These types of statements show some perceptions of West Hartford schools that are not as consistent as West Hartford resident's statements about quality in their schools. These people recognize fluctuation in the quality over time.

Interestingly, people from other towns also discuss the difference in quality among different schools in West Hartford. One Hartford resident says, “West Hartford has a large investment in building good school projects. Depending today though, and that's just my opinion, that the Southern sector of West Hartford school system is not as good as the Northern sector of the West Hartford school system...I do believe the northern sectors school systems are a lot better than the southern section school system.”<sup>50</sup> An Avon resident states, “Well we've had relatives go through the West Hartford schools and I remember relatives moving from one area of town to the other so that the kids would get into the better high school, you know that sort of thing.”<sup>51</sup> These

---

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Gladys August by Jacqueline Katz, July 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Herb Pandiscio by Jacqueline Katz, July 2004.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Keith Tinker by Jacqueline Katz, July 2004.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Jennie Boswell by Jacqueline Katz, July 2004.

oral histories show a difference in the quality between schools in the town of West Hartford, not just the quality of schools over time although that is also illustrated through oral histories. The oral history interviews reflect the fact that people who are not living in a town, especially a town where there is a lot of town pride as there is in West Hartford, are more likely to discuss the varying school quality of West Hartford schools. They can discuss the discrepancies in the schools in town or change in quality over time because they are not maybe embarrassed by the discrepancy in the schools or since they have no town pride, they have no qualms with discussing the way the schools have failed.

Not one West Hartford resident makes a claim that some schools are better than others. Overall, most West Hartford residents believe that schools in West Hartford have been consistently good over time, while other documents and people claim that there have been periods of decline and lack of quality for West Hartford schools. In this case, there is much variation between the oral histories but the strongest contrast is still with the oral histories against the other documentary sources like the critical newspaper articles. These articles are specific and are quick to criticize the schools in contrast to the oral history interviews which do not necessarily judge the schools, but rather just mention the rising and falling of the school quality within West Hartford. Also, there are no interviews where a lack of school quality is mentioned, just problems. Interviews criticizing West Hartford were fairly general in their criticism and thus the oral histories still contrasted the most with documentary sources.

### *Hartford*

Hartford also has similar variations regarding school quality over time. Hartford was once considered to be a major city in America. The reason why it is so interesting to

focus on schools in Hartford is because of the incredible shift that occurred. As discussed in Avon and West Hartford, perceptions of school quality vary, but on the whole, they are seen as high quality school districts that have risen in quality over time. In Hartford, a school system that once dominated the academic culture and was considered to be one of the best places to send your children seems to have become a city with terrible schools. While there is little doubt that such a shift did occur, surprisingly, through oral histories the decline of school quality and when it happened is not as clear-cut. Some oral history interviews show that although the school quality appears to have declined, as seen through newspaper articles and the general popular opinion, they believe the quality has not fallen so drastically and in some cases, risen or stayed the same.

During the 1940s and 1950s, oral history interviews show Hartford schools perceived as being high in quality. One real estate agent who grew up in Hartford remembers, “Well, when I went to school, I would say Weaver was one of the better schools in the Hartford area.”<sup>52</sup> Another real estate agent that grew up in Hartford during the 1940s and 1950s remembers, “Schools were much better in that teachers were more involved in students. If the student wasn’t doing well, the teachers would call the parents. And it wasn’t at the end of the year, it was during the time.”<sup>53</sup> A West Hartford educator who moved into the area in 1960 states that when he first came, the schools, “They were good, it’s incredible how that changed. Weaver and Hartford Public particularly, well even Bulkeley, the three Hartford High Schools were highly thought

---

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Keith Tinker by Jacqueline Katz, July 2004

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Ron Amrstrong by Jacqueline Katz July 2004

of.”<sup>54</sup> These oral histories show that people do remember Hartford schools being of high quality during the 1940s and 1950s.

Only several years after, newspaper accounts from the 1960s and 1970s show Hartford beginning to fall in quality. First, in 1963, an article discusses the overcrowding in schools and the debate over whether to build a fourth high school in Hartford. Other problems appear in this article such as segregation in Hartford and the slow construction at Hartford High hurting students academically because of lack of facilities and classrooms.<sup>55</sup> By 1965, the famous Harvard report discussed problems that existed in Hartford schools and in Hartford as a city. An article summarized the report where again segregation in the schools is one of the greater problems.<sup>56</sup> This report offered advice to Hartford into how to help their schools but through the Hartford report, public opinion, with help from the newspapers, started to believe that Hartford began having problems in their schools as early as 1963. Newspaper articles from the 1970s reflect a greater dip in the quality of Hartford schools. Problems with the administration and the control over schools began as local boards were appointed for the city schools.<sup>57</sup> Soon there were academic problems with students in the schools. Weaver High reported, “We’re teaching children who aren’t reading well...there is not way they can sit in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade classroom when they can’t read 10<sup>th</sup> grade.”<sup>58</sup> During the 1980s the safety of the school was called into question more and students in Hartford schools were gaining reputations of being bad kids.<sup>59</sup> The schools are also under funded at this time and the lack of money is

---

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Jack Darcy by Jacqueline Katz July 2004

<sup>55</sup> “Talk of Fourth High School Electrifies Board Session”, Hartford Courant, 1963.

<sup>56</sup> “Harvard Report: A First Step” The Hartford Times, September 29<sup>th</sup> 1965.

<sup>57</sup> “3 Boards for City Schools” Hartford Times 1970.

<sup>58</sup> “Street’s Quitting Displays Weaver High’s Dilemmas” Hartford Courant March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1974.

<sup>59</sup> “With Bulkeley in Session, Neighbors Cringe” Hartford Courant 1981.

leading to inequalities with segregation and for minorities. “Among the most alarming findings in the CCLU study are the significantly higher teacher-student ratios in the city’s predominantly minority schools. One teacher handles an average of 29.3 pupils for the largely black schools, compared to one teacher for every 24.3 students elsewhere.”<sup>60</sup>

Hartford officials pleaded for help for more state aid in order to increase teacher resources so that these inequalities could be fixed. For as early as 1963, the decline of Hartford schools became a major story for the newspapers.

Some oral histories also agree with the newspapers in their account of Hartford Public Schools. The same real estate agent who recognized the quality of schools in Hartford when he was younger remembers a decline during the 1960s and 1970s.

But I do believe that the public schools in Hartford, or any other urban center has an added problem... (the kids) they become very disruptive in the school system and add to the problems of the teaching system and I have spoken with some teachers that will say to me that , ‘I spend more or my time displacing than I spend time teaching.’ Therefore what happens in the public school in the urban centers is that a child that’s there to learn has a difficult time learning because they have to reach out for the teacher for guidance and also try to resist, defend themselves against the disruptive kids that are around then.<sup>61</sup>

The other real estate agent lists other issues in the Hartford Public Schools although when he attended them they were great. “I can tell you that the quality of schools have fallen, [in order to say] the kids coming out and the language on the street that can’t get a job and many of them can’t get the job because they don’t have the skills.” Another real

---

<sup>60</sup> “Hartford’s Imbalance Schools” Hartford Courant 1982.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Keith Tinker by Jacqueline Katz, July 2004

estate agent, who has lived in the Hartford area since 1959, when asked if school quality in Hartford has risen, fallen or stayed the same replies, “Fallen, It’s just a more, much more difficult. The problem is the social needs of the kids, not teachers, not the curriculum. You’ve got to get them up to a stage where they want to learn and they’re there to learn and the parents are supporting them but in many cases the parents aren’t, they can’t, they’re not even prepared themselves so that’s the difference.”<sup>62</sup> An assistant superintendent from a neighboring suburb states, “They had real good leadership in Hartford schools, the superintendent and the Board of Education. Since that, and that was back in ’67, ’70 but since that time there’s been a constant erosion of the quality and the leadership in Hartford schools.” These oral histories are showing a decline in the Hartford schools beginning in the 1960s.

However, variations do exist between the oral histories. Although newspapers and other interviews show decline beginning by the mid 1960s, several residents do not believe it began until later, if it began at all. One West Hartford educator believes the decline did not begin until the early 80s.<sup>63</sup> Another educator who has worked in Hartford and West Hartford and lived in the area since 1950, when asked if school quality has risen, fallen or stayed the same in Hartford says, “I think that they’ve stayed the same, I don’t think the quality of the schools has fallen. I think that the student population changed so rapidly over a 10-year period of time.” This educator, who started teaching in Hartford in the late 70s, reveals throughout his interview, the positive qualities of the Hartford Public Schools and the difficulty, but not necessarily failure in adjusting to the growing and changing student population. A West Hartford resident who had lived in

---

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Judith Lawes by Jacqueline Katz June 2004

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Robert McKee by Jacqueline Katz July 2004

Hartford when they first moved into the area in 1967 remembers, “When I came to this area, I think they were, had a pretty good reputation. Like a lot of urban school systems for a long time, they had outstanding schools. I mean Hartford Public was, I think it’s the oldest public high school in the United States. Had a great reputation, as really almost a prep school.”<sup>64</sup> This resident states that Weaver High had begun declining by the 1960s but does not mention the other schools and if he was here in 1967 and they were good, then most likely he would not say that the decline began until at least 1970. A few other oral history interviews voiced similar views on the quality of Hartford schools. These interviews show people who either believe the decline did not begin when the newspapers began reporting on it or who do not believe there has been a decline at all.

The variations between documentary sources and oral histories regarding school quality in Hartford are the opposite of the variations in Avon. In Avon, perceptions of schools during the 1940s and 50s varied more and then became more consistent during the 1960s and 70s. In Hartford, during the 1950s there is less variation and people are in agreement of the high quality of Hartford Public Schools. By the 1960s, 70s and 80s, documentary sources and people’s perceptions diverge and are much more varied. Perhaps this reflects a trend that when a school system is ‘good’, people tend to agree more and perceive it to be good. When the school system is not at its prime people disagree more with their perceptions of the school even though this would be a time where the school would need the most unified support.

Although there is much variation between the oral histories during the later period, overall, people still seem to have similar perceptions and those perceptions

---

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Dennis Carrithers by Jacqueline Katz July 2004

contrast more to the documentary sources than with each other. People may believe the decline started later but all but a two believe that it eventually happened. In this way the oral history interviews are in sync with the newspapers. However, the perceptions by people are far less critical than the newspaper articles and fail to mention many of the same issues. In the interviews, people tend to voice similar concerns with the Hartford school system such as concerns over teacher quality and number and a how the social problems in the city of Hartford has a negative effect on the school system.

### **Variations Discussion**

#### ***Nostalgia and Historical Memory***

When looking at all these different interviews, the views have been overall very positive. Some interview demonstrate intense nostalgia for the “good old days” and discuss the schools more positively than documents from the time period. This is to be expected since it is hard to people to put themselves back in the past and remember everything that happened at the time that was important. They may not feel the issue is important now that they are older and can reflect on it. Residents of Avon may remember good schools when looking back at schools from 1975. However, these people may have also resented the higher taxes and the growing reputation and believe that they got a good education in a one-room schoolhouse even if documents show that it was sub par. Educators from Avon and later residents can see how the school system has improved but students who went to the Pine Grove School may only recollect a good education and not see how poor it was compared to now because they have no experiences with the schools or they truly believe that their schools were the best. Even residents from the 1950s and 1960s who did not have any direct contact with the school

realized that the school system when they moved there was not as good in quality as it is now. They do not have such nostalgia, mostly because they do not feel connected to the older schools, especially the Pine Grove School since they and their children did not attend it.

However, the point is that the oral history interviews, while the variations are interesting, sometimes the variations exist only because of nostalgia and people's individual values. People may be misremembering and the newspapers may really reflect what was happening at the time. On the same note, the media cannot always be trusted to provide an accurate picture. Thus, looking at these two sources together it helps to form a more complete historical picture which even then may not be accurate. People remember their lives in certain ways and when looking back 50 years ago, it may be difficult to remember what they thought and what was important to them. People are going to look at their lives in a more positive light and thus, remember schools in better ways.

### *So what?*

These variations of the quality of public schools over time help to clarify the way that people view schools and show that it is wrong to judge a school as 'bad' or 'good' simply based on a newspaper or a certain test. There is no "one" way to view schools and while newspapers may seem to represent the truth, the other opinions out there, especially the more informed ones, help to show that schools may not be as bad or good as people think. In school systems, there needs to be support from the community. When that support is lost, it is hard to gain back. However, if people learn that to truly decide the quality of a school they need to read more than just the newspaper and believe

in the majority opinion then schools can start receive that support. In today's world, schools are judged on standardized test scores, not how students, teachers or parents feel about the schools. Newspapers print up articles as soon as scores are released putting down schools that have failed instead of showing the schools that passed. However, it does not feel that the discrepancies that were seen in this study would be duplicated now. During the end of the interviews many people, when asked about public scores said they relied on test scores and newspapers to make their judgments. In a time when people should consider other issues in schooling, not just standardized tests, they are not. In today's educational world, people need to take a step back and realize perceptions do vary and even if one general perception is voicing negative information, to make a fair judgment one must consider other opinions and challenge popular opinion now knowing that their opinion is important.

**City Suburb II Oral History Project-Interview Guide**

**Before interview:**

- Call to arrange time and place for 30-minute interview
- Bring tape recorder/cassette, camera, guide, two consent forms, and metro Hartford map

**Beginning the interview:**

- Explain purpose: *We are interviewing residents of Avon who have lived in the town during the 1940s, 50s, 60s, or 70s, to learn more about their experiences and/memories.*
- Explain consent form and ask participant to sign TWO copies (keep one, return one)

**Interview questions:**

**A) Background Questions:**

- 1) Please tell me where you have lived in the Greater Hartford area at different points in time. [Use map as guide, and try to confirm street addresses and years/decades when possible]
- 2) Why did you reside in this suburb (Avon/Bloomfield)? Were there any alternatives?
- 3) What kind of work did you and/or your family members do?

**B) School Related questions:**

- 1) You said that you had children, where did they attend school?
- 2) Please tell me more about the schools in your town when your children first attended them.
  - a. What did you like/dislike about them?
  - b. Do you believe the quality of the schools in your town has risen, fallen or stayed the same? How so? Why?
- 3) Please tell me what you know about Hartford Public schools.
  - a. Do you believe the quality of Hartford Public Schools has risen, fallen or stayed the same since you've lived in the metropolitan area? How so? Why?
- 4) What impressions do you have about schools in nearby towns?
  - a. Windsor?
  - b. Bloomfield?
  - c. Avon?
  - d. West Hartford?

**C) Other questions:**

- 1) What has changed in your suburb since you have been here? (What has remained the same?)
- 2) What do you think has changed in Hartford over the years? (What has remained same?)
- 3) Why do you think Hartford has changed?