

The Rise of “Shopping for Schools” in Suburbia

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Introduction

This paper seeks to advance an historical argument about the role that public schools and private homes played in the expansion of the suburban United States. During the latter half of the twentieth century, middle-class Americans increasingly engaged in the practice of “shopping for schools,” meaning that they intentionally bought homes to gain access to what they perceived as the best schools. “Shopping for schools” brought together different interest groups -- homebuyers, realtors, and government -- and tied the private real estate market more closely to the politics of public education. The practice became more widespread during the latter half of the twentieth century, when the accumulation of educational credentials for middle-class children became a more reliable route toward socioeconomic mobility in the human capital labor market. Finally, “shopping for schools” played a major role in the transformation of physical space and legal boundaries, solidifying what we today recognize as suburbia.

Why does this argument matter? How might it change our existing historical interpretations? Indeed, previous historians (such as David Labaree in *The Making of an American High School*) have traced the origins of an academic credentials market for elite public high schools back to the late nineteenth century, and others (such as Lizabeth Cohen in *A Consumer's Republic*) have richly documented the mass consumer culture expansion of the post-World War II era.¹ But this argument demonstrates how the public schools market experienced its most significant growth at the same time as the private housing market, and therefore challenges our conventional understanding of U.S. suburban history.²

The most influential book in this field, Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier*, argued that post-war mass suburbanization was caused by “two necessary conditions. . . the suburban ideal and population growth -- and two fundamental causes -- racial prejudice and cheap housing.” Jackson only briefly discusses schooling in a few

¹ David F. Labaree, *The Making of an American High School: The Credentials Market and the Central High School of Philadelphia, 1838-1939* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

² For an expanded version of the historiographical argument in the next three paragraphs, see Jack Dougherty, “Bridging the Gap Between Urban, Suburban, and Educational History,” in *Rethinking the History of American Education*, ed. William J. Reese, and John L. Rury (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

paragraphs, separate from the book's central narrative. In the wake of the 1954 *Brown* school desegregation case, he claims that, "millions of families moved out of the city 'for the kids' and especially for the educational and social superiority of smaller and more homogenous suburban school systems."³ Indeed, white flight to suburban schools did occur, but not according to the compressed chronology that Jackson offers here. During the late 1940s and 1950s, schooling had not yet become a primary motivation for suburban migration. Based on David Tyack's *The One Best System*, we know that most urban districts were still recognized as the nation's prized exemplars of public education in this era, with physical facilities and services that typically surpassed what less-densely populated areas could offer. Sociological studies of suburbia, such as Herbert Gans' *The Levittowners*, based on a real estate development outside of Philadelphia in 1958, reported that less than 1 percent of residents cited schooling as a reason for leaving their previous residence or selecting this new community. Yet these families cared a great deal about the quality of public education. Gans devoted an entire chapter to the intense conflicts he observed between Levittown's rural school superintendent (who provided a traditional, basic education) versus the newly-arrived middle-class suburbanites (who demanded a more challenging and expensive curriculum to prepare their children for prestigious colleges and universities).⁴

Schooling does not fit neatly into Jackson's suburbanization thesis because its role reverses during the late twentieth century. Although typical suburban schools did not attract families during the 1940s and 1950s, they eventually became an extremely strong magnet in the 1970s and 1980s. During this later period, more families left cities expressly to enroll their children in suburban schools, despite the fact that suburban housing costs were no longer as affordable as they had been a few decades earlier. Suburban schools flipped, from a negligible factor to an extremely influential motivator, halfway through the "Great White Migration" of the late twentieth century. In addition, school finance battles became more contentious in many state legislatures and courts as dollar costs for increasingly competitive schools rose sharply, and districts were torn between offering what newer residents demanded versus what older residents had settled for in their day.

While many educational historians agree on the importance of twentieth-century metropolitan spatial change, few have persuasively demonstrated evidence on the role that schooling has played. For example, Ira Katznelson and Margaret Weir's *Schooling for All* boldly claims that "the possibilities of genuinely common, cross-class, cross-ethnic schooling eroded" when metropolitan areas grew during the twentieth century, because work and residence became more spatially separated, and upper and lower social classes lived further apart from one another. Previously, they assert, most children lived in the same urban school district, where struggles over governance, resources, and curriculum took place in one local political forum. When suburbanization divided the population into isolated school districts, this local forum evaporated. As a result, when increasing numbers of working- and middle-class Americans in the post-war era became able "to purchase particular kinds of public schools by purchasing specific kinds of residence areas protected by defensive zoning,"

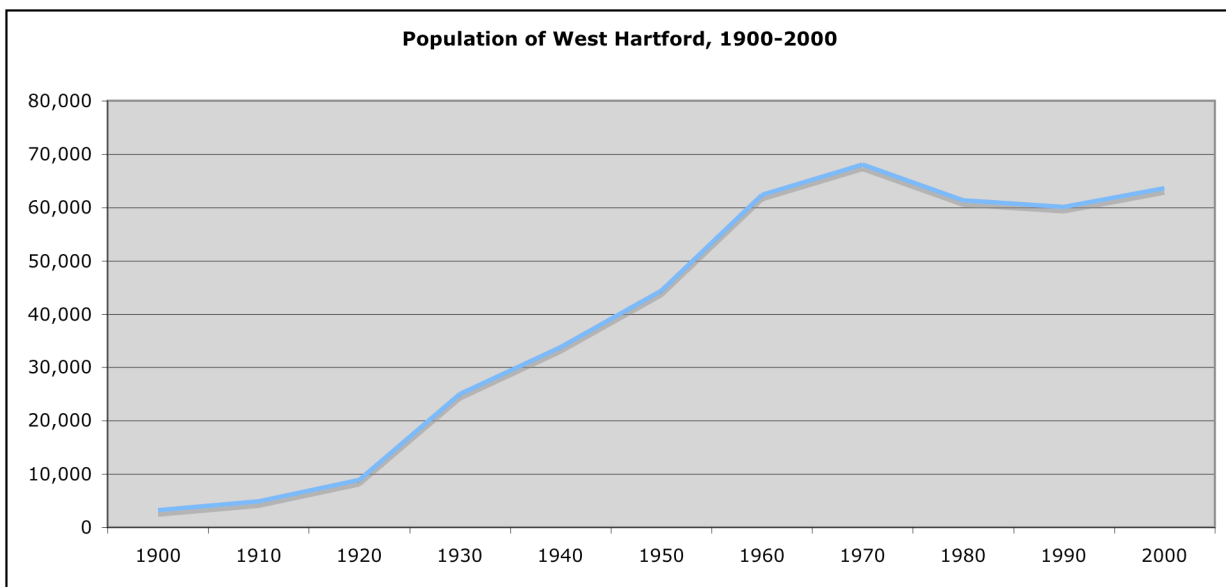
³ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 289-90.

⁴ David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1967), pp. 31-41, 86-103.

Katznelson and Weir claim, “housing and schooling markets have displaced educational politics as key forums of decision making.”⁵ Although their argument is compelling, their case study of Chicago and San Francisco provided no direct evidence in support of this thesis about private real estate markets and public school politics. Furthermore, its nostalgic view of the early twentieth century overlooks fierce neighborhood divisions inside cities, and rural-urban conflicts over school funding in state legislatures. Given this limitation, we need richer histories of cities, suburbs, and schooling, to fulfill what Kim Tolley has described as a need for more historical scholarship on “education markets and the social contexts that have shaped them.”⁶

A Suburban Case Study: West Hartford, 1920s-2005

To support this historical argument, this paper draws evidence from West Hartford, Connecticut, a suburban municipality adjacent to the capital city that experienced tremendous growth in its population and property tax base during the twentieth century. West Hartford began the century as a predominantly rural town with a working-to-middle class population of over 3,000 residents in 1900, and eventually transformed into the region’s largest suburb with predominantly middle-to-upper class population of over 60,000 in 2000.



The conventional wisdom among West Hartford’s political leadership is that the town’s key to prosperity has been the reputation of its public school system, which in recent years has been ranked near the top by national newsmagazines. But this study goes back in time, to show that West Hartford public schools were not always prized, but gradually built their reputation with the growth of the private real estate market. The paper is divided into three chronological sections. Part one examines how during the 1920s, West Hartford experienced suburban growth, yet the relatively mediocre

⁵ Ira Katznelson, and Margaret Weir, *Schooling for All: Class, Race, and the Decline of the Democratic Ideal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985/1988), p. 27, 215.

⁶ Kimberley Tolley, "Learning in a Consumers' Republic [Review Essay]," *History of Education Quarterly* 46, no. 2, (2006): 274-88.

quality of education served more as a deterrent than a magnet. Part two looks at how “shopping for schools” gradually took hold in the 1950s and ‘60s when real estate agents began “selling” access to selected public schools in advertisements as a key component of the homebuyers’ purchase. Part three focuses on the 1980s to the present, as both the “shopping” and “selling” of schools have become more tightly linked to test scores, due to the politics of school accountability and the expansion of the internet.

[Sidenote: My larger book project also focuses on two other suburbs -- Avon and Bloomfield -- whose public schools and private housing markets followed very different trajectories than did West Hartford over time.]

Part I: Schools as a Weak Magnet in Pre-War Suburbia

In the early 1920s, West Hartford experienced its first phase of massive suburban growth, with a residential housing boom that was the envy of most other municipalities across Connecticut. More one- and two-family building permits were issued in West Hartford in 1922 than in any other city or town in the entire state. Moreover, the total number of building permits (308) was greater than the previous two years combined.⁷ Located adjacent to the thriving capital city of Hartford, the headquarters of the insurance and banking industry between New York City and Boston, West Hartford seemed primed to become the leading destination for new suburban dwellers.

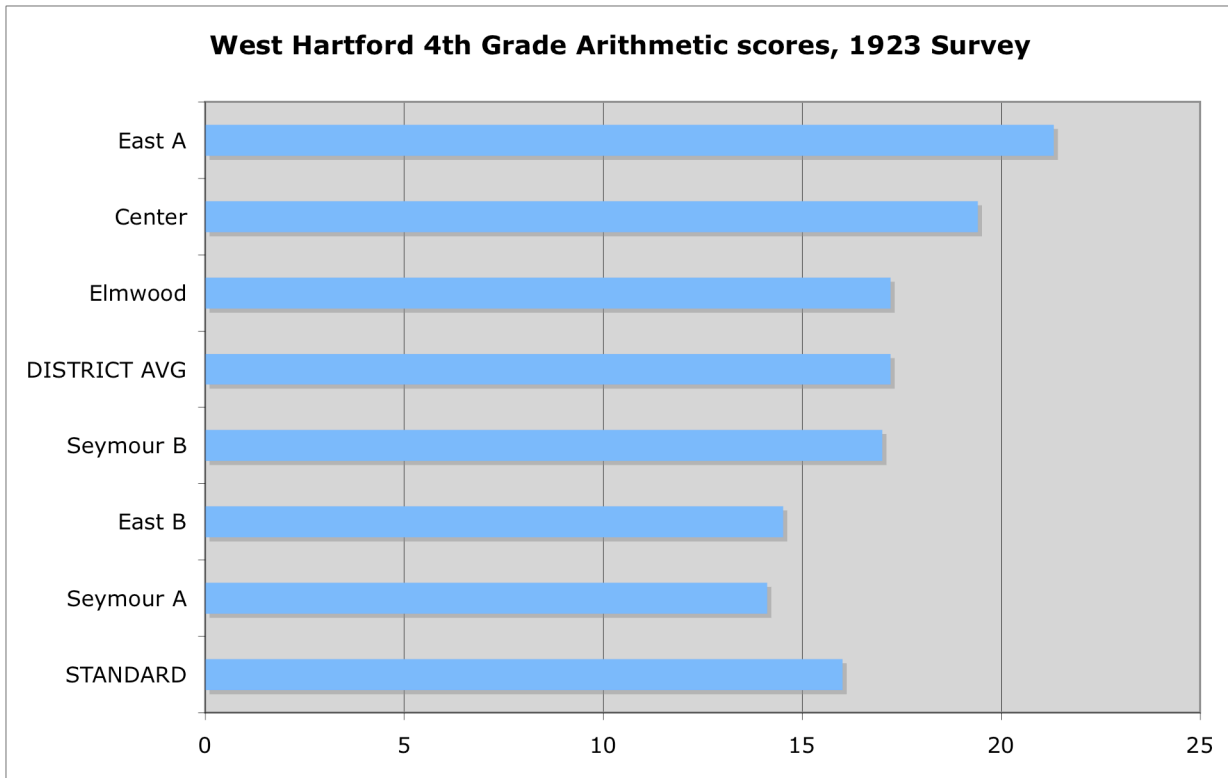
But a sober report, conducted by the State Department of Education at the request of local school superintendent Lloyd Bugbee, concluded that West Hartford’s public school system was mediocre in several respects and did not live up to the town’s potential. The fundamental problem was unmanaged growth. The steep increase in residential building and population growth created severely overcrowded schools, with an administrative system more suitable for a rural community than a rapidly expanding suburban district. At the high school, state officials judged the current building -- which lacked a library, auditorium, and gymnasium -- to be “unsatisfactory from practically every standpoint.” They also noted that only a small percentage of West Hartford’s high school graduates entered colleges requiring admissions examinations (2 percent), compared to higher rates in the state overall (5.5 percent) or New England (4 percent).⁸

In West Hartford’s elementary level, 3 out of 7 schools enrolled so many pupils that they operated on half-day sessions -- illegally -- because classes only met for three hours, not fulfilling the state minimum requirement of four hours of instruction per day. On standardized tests, West Hartford elementary students performance was not impressive. For example, on the 4th grade arithmetic exam, the district averaged a score of 17, just 8 percent above the “standard” score of 16. “There seems no good reason for the West Hartford schools to be satisfied with merely achieving standard results,” wrote the authors of the survey. “Their system is potentially above the average.” Furthermore, the report ventured, “We judge from the nature of the community that superior schools are the desire of the people.”⁹ Given the sharp increase in new homes being built, the suburb enjoyed a larger property tax base and could afford to spend more on its school facilities. But only if it exercised the political will to do so.

⁷ Connecticut State Board of Education, *A Survey of the Schools of West Hartford* (Hartford: Author, 1923), p. 103.

⁸ *A Survey of the Schools of West Hartford*, pp. 76, 87.

⁹ *A Survey of the Schools of West Hartford*, p. 103, 72, 69, 30.



West Hartford schools had potential, but were not yet the magnet that would eventually attract residents from the adjacent central city. In the early 1920s, schools were not a motivation to move from Hartford to West Hartford. Other “pull factors” may have been influential -- such as affordable housing costs or the dream of suburban ownership. But not public education. To the contrary, Hartford’s school system was still widely recognized as the best in the region. Fourteen years after this 1923 report, another prominent survey (headed by George Strayer of Teachers College) declared that “Hartford is to be commended for maintaining the ‘gold standard’ of its college preparatory students,” and noted that “The reputation of the secondary schools of Hartford. . . is widely and favorably known through eastern collegiate circles.”¹⁰

Furthermore, the elementary school achievement results above also illustrate that there was no clear relationship between test scores and neighborhoods in West Hartford at this time. Schools operating double sessions (marked by session A & B in the chart) enrolled students from the same neighborhood, yet scored above and below the district average. Based on this data, there does not appear to have been a clear advantage to living on one West Hartford neighborhood (and attending its designated elementary school) over any other neighborhood.

¹⁰ Columbia University. Teachers College. Institute of Educational Research. Division of Field Studies, *The Hartford Public Schools in 1936-37: A Comprehensive Report of the Survey of the Public Schools of Hartford, Connecticut* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1937), pamphlet XI, p. 13.

Part II: The Rise of Selling Private Homes with Public Schools

During the 1950s, West Hartford experienced a second suburban boom, the combination of growth in both the residential and commercial sectors. But town leaders continued to question whether the town had kept pace with the quality of education. Bice Clemow, publisher of the *West Hartford News* weekly paper, wrote a series of articles based a series of questions appearing in a 1950s issue of *Life* magazine, titled “How Good is Your School?”¹¹ Although West Hartford now counted 13 school buildings, Clemow continued to find evidence of unsatisfactory quality. “If we lived in a milltown, where the income level was modest, it would not be startling to find that we could not afford the best in public education,” he wrote. “To document that we have grade B- secondary education available in West Hartford is a shock of another order.”¹²

As school enrollments continued to grow during the 1950s, town officials eventually agreed to fund new school buildings to address overcrowding. But another controversy arose in 1954, when parents objected to proposed attendance zones boundary changes, particularly a plan to move sixth grade students from overcrowded elementary schools to the Talcott Junior High School, located on the town’s south side. At a board of education meeting, one of the parents reportedly said, “that whenever real estate men sell property, they tell their clients that they (purchasers) are in the Sedgwick, Webster Hill, or Bugbee areas.” All three schools were located on the western side of town, where new construction was most prevalent. Superintendent Thorne blamed real estate agents for creating what the press labeled as “social class consciousness” among West Hartford residents. “Doesn’t it boil down to some people thinking there is more prestige to going to one school than another?”, he asked.¹³

Superintendent Thorne’s public criticism of real estate agents did not dampen their marketing tactics. Over the next decade, agents stepped up their practice of “selling” access to selected West Hartford public schools as part of the private real estate transaction. My colleagues and I examined home advertisements in the *Hartford Courant* newspaper from 1930 to 1990, counting up ads by type and location on the first Sunday edition in May, the prime season for real estate sales. While the total number of home ads increases during the post-World War II era for all suburban towns, West Hartford earned the distinction of having the greatest number that mentioned a specific school in the text of the ad. In the peak year of 1965, 38 out of 100 West Hartford ads (or 38 percent) named a specific school.¹⁴

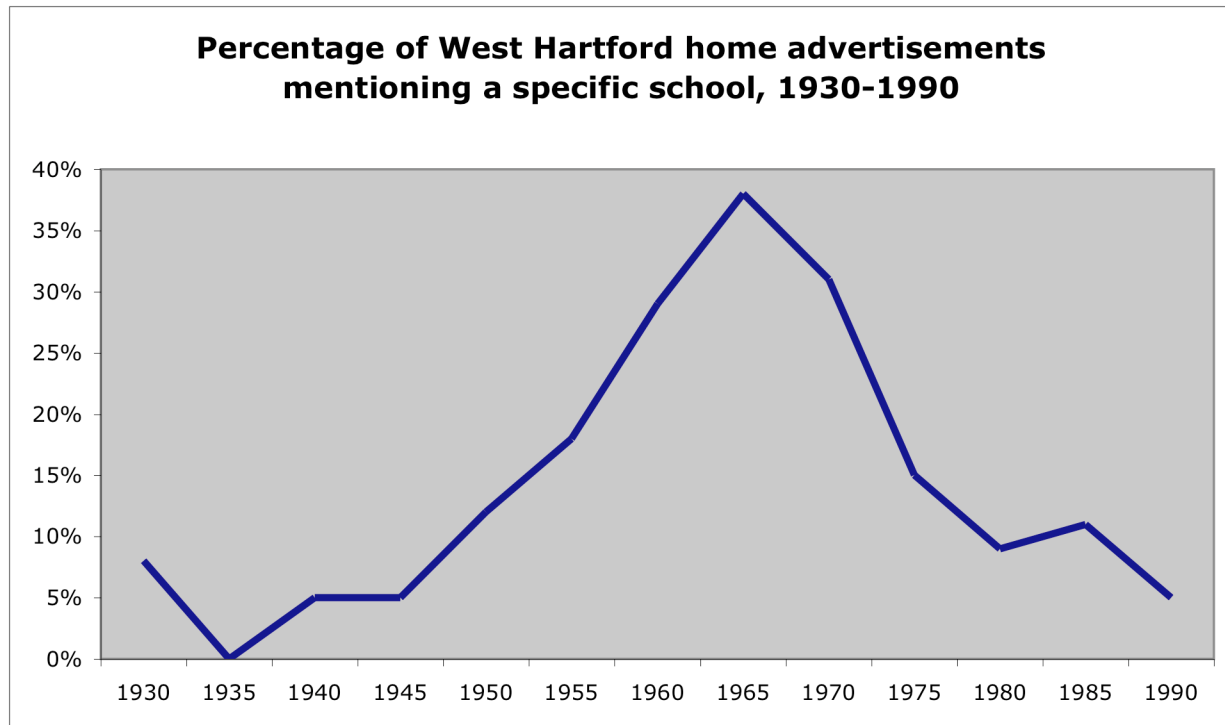
¹¹ “How Good is Your School?” *Life* 16 October 1950, pp. 54-55; Bice Clemow, “A Layman Looks at Schools in West Hartford,” reprinted from *West Hartford News*, 25 January to 15 February, 1951.

¹² “Three Junior Highs Make Modest Showing” [editorial], 9 November 1950, *West Hartford News*, p. 4.

¹³ “New School Lines Offered by Thorne,” 8 April 1954 *Hartford Times*.

¹⁴ Advertising research methods partly drawn from Diana Pearce, “Breaking Down Barriers: New Evidence on the Impact of Metropolitan School Desegregation on Housing Patterns” (Unpublished report, Center for National Policy Review, Law School, Catholic University, Washington, D.C, 1980). Data collection by Trinity College student researchers Kelli Perkins, Cintli Sanchez, and Christina Ramsay.

Graphic: Private home ads naming specific schools, 1 May 1960, Hartford Courant



Part III: The Rise of Shopping for School Test Scores

From the 1980s to the present, the process of “shopping for schools” in suburbs like West Hartford became more commonplace, though took on a different form. Rather than directly advertising access to specific public schools in local newspaper, realtors and homebuyers began to communicate through the legally sanctioned vocabulary of statewide standardized test scores. Of course, testing itself was not new. Generations of students had endured standardized assessments since the Progressive era. But after 1980s, state and federal politics of school accountability heightened public awareness and access to school-level test scores. Private real estate interests embraced the testing movement as an acceptable means of communicating with consumers about the quality of one neighborhood school over another. It was perfectly legal for realtors to

disseminate objective school test score data, because that's exactly what the state government was doing.

During the early 1970s in suburbs like West Hartford, school test scores were not as readily available as they are today. In response to a local parent's inquiry about access to test scores in 1973, the West Hartford Board of Education unanimously reaffirmed its policy of "not releasing school scores on a town-wide basis." Instead, the district provided data quietly, to individual parents who inquired directly with the superintendent's office.¹⁵ But even for consumers who took the initiative and successfully obtained local test score results, the data were not comparable with other districts that used other testing formats until the following decade. In 1985, Connecticut established the state's first standardized exam, the Connecticut Mastery Test, for 4th, 6th, and 8th grade students. Nevertheless, it lacked a uniform reporting system to disseminate results in the public domain for seven more years. Students took tests, but the politics of public school accountability had not yet taken hold.

In the meantime, private real estate interests stepped in to feed the data-hungry market of prospective homebuyers. One of the pioneers was Neil Rosen, a former schoolteacher who in 1989 created the National School Reporting Services, Inc., based in Greenwich, Connecticut. Since school quality and real estate values were directly linked, he reasoned, prospective homebuyers needed reliable information to make worthwhile investments, and real estate agents were the crucial link. Four years later, Rosen and his staff of twenty researchers collected and sold packaged data about school performance, curriculum, and extracurricular activities to about 5,000 real estate agents along the East Coast. Suburban real estate firms subscribed to Rosen's service for \$395 annually, with agents in each office paying an additional \$75 per year for unlimited individualized schools reports. Margaret O'Keefe, one of the 24 agents at West Hartford's TR Preston Realtors firm who subscribed to the service, marveled at its convenience. "I've used it with several out-of-town buyers," she explained, "and even with people who don't have children, or have preschool children."¹⁶

But a second, more important reason why realtors paid for the National School Reporting Services was to give homebuyers information about neighborhood schools while avoiding accusations of racial steering. "For real estate agents, the service is a boon," Rosen told a local reporter, "allowing them to get around ticklish federal restrictions on what agents can tell clients about local school systems." Lynda Wilson, the President of the Greater Hartford Association of Realtors, agreed. "Agents get so many questions from buyers about schools, and they are very conscious and concerns about giving out misleading information," she explained. "They are afraid if they give wrong information, they can be accused of steering," a charge that federal officials had investigated in suburban Hartford in previous years. Margaret O'Keefe, who had previously served as PTO president of two West Hartford schools, understood new federal restrictions to mean that she could share objective education data with clients, but not her own subjective opinions about the quality of individual schools. "You're treading on very dangerous ground," she observed, "unless you have facts."¹⁷

Connecticut's state government soon acted to catch up with the real estate industry. In 1990, the state legislature passed a bill that required each school and district

¹⁵ West Hartford Board of Education minutes, 19 Sept 1973, p. 4255.

¹⁶ William Hathaway, "How Are the Schools? Now It's Easy to Find Out," *Hartford Courant* 26 Sept 1993, p. J1.

¹⁷ William Hathaway, "How Are the Schools?"

to submit “strategic profiles” with data about resources and school performance in a uniform format, beginning in 1992. State Senator Kevin Sullivan, the former mayor of West Hartford, helped author the bill and promoted its principle: “to give parents and the community a better sense of what the needs are [and of] how a school is doing.” But the potential for direct school-to-school comparisons made several local educators uneasy. The Connecticut State Department of Education’s chief of research, Douglas Rindone, predicted that “PTOs are going to be interested in [these school reports], real estate agents are going to be interested in them, the press is going to be interested in them.” Linda Cullen, an agent with Century 21 Bushnell Realty in the nearby suburb of Wethersfield, agreed. “We will definitely be using it,” she confirmed. “I have gone to boards of education before, and I’ve been surprised they have so little information.”¹⁸

Although Connecticut’s “strategic school profiles” first became available in 1992, they did not immediately achieve wide circulation. While hundreds of Connecticut real estate agents read and distributed Rosen’s privately-issued school reports, the typical home buyer still had to request the government-authorized public school profile from local school superintendents, who “usually charge nominal fees” for photocopying, noted one journalist.¹⁹ But increasing politics of school accountability, media interest, and the internet boom of the late 1990s all set changes into motion. The State Department of Education began publishing strategic school profiles on its website in 1998, the same year that the *Hartford Courant* daily newspaper began running a front-page “reader’s guide” to

interpret reports.²⁰ They began to “crack open the files once reserved only for education bureaucrats and boards of education,” penned journalist Rick Green.²¹ In the years prior to 2000, most people who saw Connecticut school test score data were local readers of the *Hartford Courant*,

Connecticut Mastery Test results

■ The following gives a five-year look at West Hartford district results on the Connecticut Mastery Test. The numbers reflect the percent of students districtwide who met state goals in each subject area.

Grade 4					
SUBJECT	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Reading	60	61	66	71	76
Writing	39	55	51	72	74
Math	65	68	61	78	85

Grade 6					
SUBJECT	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Reading	74	72	67	73	75
Writing	46	44	59	59	71
Math	59	60	57	70	70

Grade 8					
SUBJECT	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Reading	78	73	73	76	79
Writing	63	56	68	65	74
Math	66	59	58	68	69

■ The following gives school-by-school results on the 1998 Connecticut Mastery Test, given statewide each fall to fourth-, sixth- and eighth-graders. The results reflect the percent of students at each school who met state goals on the exam.

SCHOOL	READING	WRITING	MATH
Aiken	91%	78%	97%
Braeburn	78%	62%	81%
Bugbee	89%	84%	93%
Charter Oak	52%	54%	66%
Duffy	86%	86%	94%
Morley	74%	76%	75%
Norfeldt	82%	82%	89%
Smith	59%	67%	71%
Webster Hill	82%	82%	92%
Whiting Lane	75%	68%	82%
Wolcott	68%	68%	87%
King Philip, grade 6	77%	68%	75%
Sedgwick, grade 6	73%	73%	64%
King Philip, grade 8	83%	75%	77%
Sedgwick, grade 8	76%	74%	63%

¹⁸ Robert Frahm, “Will report cards make grade? School self-evaluations have some educators uneasy.” *Hartford Courant*, 6 October 1992. pg. A.1

¹⁹ William Hathaway, “How Are the Schools?”

²⁰ Rick Green, “Gauging the Hope for the Future School: Profiles are Not All Downbeat,” *Hartford Courant* 25 December 1998, p. A1.

²¹ Rick Green, “Schools Scoop: Annual Report Cards Paint Particulars in Voluminous Detail,” *Hartford Courant*, 14 December 1999, p. A3

where tables appeared once a year, in print. But after 2000, more people began viewing test data on increasingly popular and pervasive Internet websites, operated by governmental and non-governmental sources. Prospective homebuyers living anywhere in the world could easily and instantly search for data, whenever they desired. Comparing school test scores became part of the national public policy discourse, encouraged by the federal “No Child Left Behind Act” of 2001 and the wide popularity of websites such as GreatSchools.Net, SchoolMatch.com, and others.²²

(Above) CMT Results as Reported Annually in the Local Newspaper, 1999

Source: *Hartford Courant*, January 6, 1999, [West Hartford edition], p. B1.

(Below) CMT Results Available Continuously on Governmental (CMTReports.com) and Non-Governmental (GreatSchools.net) Websites, 2007

State by District/School Interactive Report, Grade 4

http://www.cmtreports.com/CMTCode/Report.aspx?data=F07D8E0A0

State by District/School Interactive Report

Grade 4

Get Text | Back | Main | Help

Students Selected: All

Group	Year	Mathematics	Reading	Writing
		Total Mathematics % At/Above Goal Level	Total Reading % At/Above Goal Level	Total Writing % At/Above Goal Level
West Hartford	2006	68.9	71.5	68.6
Aiken Sch	2006	67.2	78.7	77.0
Braesburn Sch	2006	76.9	84.6	84.6
Bugbee Sch	2006	91.4	92.9	87.1
Charter Oak Sch	2006	40.0	44.4	45.5
Duffy Sch	2006	66.7	73.1	59.0
Morley Sch	2006	80.7	82.5	86.0
Norfeldt Sch	2006	80.3	74.3	76.1
Smith Sch	2006	50.8	42.6	44.3
Webster Hill Sch	2006	64.1	71.8	66.7
Whiting Lane Sch	2006	70.2	66.0	68.1
Wolcott Sch	2006	67.4	69.5	62.1

Results are not presented for groups fewer than 20.
Click here to view the Score Range.
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Elementary schools in West Hartford School District

1-11 of 11 elementary schools within the West Hartford School District, sorted by school name. [Advanced compare >](#)

1-10 11-11

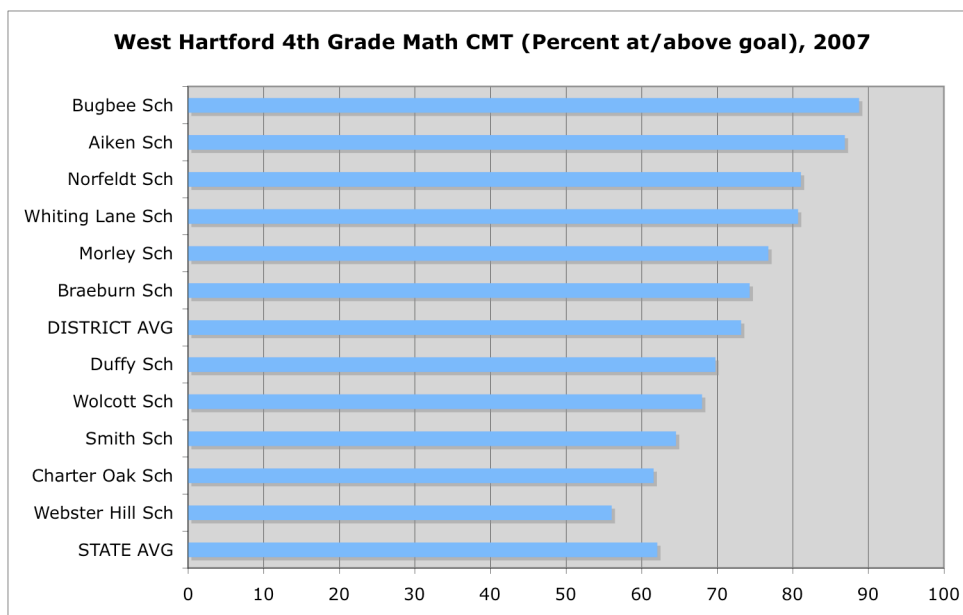
School name	CMT grade 4 math (2004-2005)	CMT grade 4 reading (2004-2005)	CMT grade 4 writing (2004-2005)
Aiken School	66%	81%	66%
Braesburn School	99%	92%	97%
Bugbee School	93%	90%	91%
Charter Oak School	90%	78%	100%
Duffy School	91%	82%	89%
Morley School	93%	88%	88%
Norfeldt School	94%	87%	90%
Smith School	85%	56%	85%
Webster Hill School	94%	78%	87%
Whiting Lane School	79%	72%	79%
Wolcott School	94%	89%	95%

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²² Sarah Max, “School: What Is it Good For?” *CNN/Money* 27 August 2004 <http://money.cnn.com/2004/08/27/real_estate/buying_selling/schools>

Eighty years after the 1923 survey, current school achievement data paints a different picture of West Hartford. Although it is not possible to make direct comparisons over time, average elementary test scores appear to be higher, now 18 percent above the state average (compared to 8 percent above the “standard” in 1923, when no state average was available).



But a more striking contrast between the West Hartford of 1923 versus today is that public elementary school test scores now are significantly and positively correlated with the market prices of private homes. By comparison, there was no clear evidence of any spatial relationship between test scores and neighborhoods eighty years ago.

My colleagues and I used computer mapping and econometric methods to measure the relationship between West Hartford elementary school test scores and single-family home prices, while controlling for house characteristics and neighborhood effects.²³ We concentrated on a ten year period (1996-2005) of relatively stable school test score measures and attendance boundaries. Earlier, in September 1995, West Hartford implemented a major (and highly controversial) school redistricting plan that shifted attendance boundaries and affected approximately one-quarter of the student population. Yet during the decade that followed, West Hartford’s school attendance boundaries remained virtually unchanged.²⁴ Although West Hartford students could

²³ Dougherty, Jack, and Jeffrey Harrelson, Laura Maloney, Drew Murphy, Russell Smith, Michael Snow, Diane Zannoni. "School Choice in Suburbia: Public School Testing and Private Real Estate Markets [1996-2005]." Conference paper delivered at the American Educational Research Association, 2007. Available on the Cities, Suburbs, and Schools research project website: <<http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/educ/css>>

²⁴ A minor redistricting in fall 2000 affected approximately 50 students across three elementary schools (Aiken, Bugbee, and Whiting Lane). Also, in 2005 a new middle school was opened, though it used randomized lottery admissions rather than a neighborhood attendance area, so boundaries for all schools remained intact.

apply to enroll in three intra-district magnet schools or nearly twenty inter-district magnets schools during the period under study, approximately 5 percent or less actually did so.²⁵ Magnet school applications are subject to a random lottery, while neighborhood school attendance is guaranteed. As a result, school attendance boundaries determine the enrollment for a vast majority of West Hartford's public school students, and homeowners perceive a very strong link between their private property and their designated public elementary school.

Overall, in our quantitative study, we found that for homes located in geographically similar neighborhoods and very close to school attendance boundaries, a 12 percentage point increase (or one standard deviation) in the number of fourth-graders meeting the state achievement test goal is associated with a 2.81% (or \$5,065 increase) in the price of an average home, in year 2000 dollars. For historians, the more interesting finding comes from our time period analysis. We compared the pre-2000 versus the post-2000 periods to investigate whether the statistical relationship between schools and homes changed during the expansion of the Internet and the politics of school accountability. In West Hartford, we found that the test-price relationship became stronger from the first half of our time period (1996-2000, a 1.2% price gain) to the second half (2001-2005, a 4.2% price gain), again expressed in year 2000 dollars. This quantitative result matches the historical evidence of increasing awareness and access to public school test score data in the private real estate market of metropolitan Hartford at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Do West Hartford homebuyers look at test scores when considering their purchases? Not necessarily. My colleagues and I conducted a qualitative study, based on 89 interviews with recent homebuyers across the suburb, which found that only 35 percent (of those with children or expecting children) reported using test scores or conducting similar research on school data.²⁶ By contrast, 50 percent of homebuyers stated that they relied on social networks (friends, family, co-workers) for information about school quality. As we discovered through in-depth interviews, knowledge obtained from social networks is shaped largely by one's social class, and sometimes contradicted by test score data. As a result, the qualitative finding does not necessarily conflict with our quantitative model. Using the vocabulary of Malcolm Gladwell, as long as a sufficient number of "market mavens" and "connectors" spread the word about school quality to their broader social networks, then most consumers may still act on test score data, though indirectly.²⁷ In fact, it is possible that the expansion of the Internet may amplify the roles played by key individuals (such as real estate agents) in this social networking process.

²⁵ For example, only 162 elementary students enrolled in intra-district magnets (according to 2004-05 Strategic School Profile), and 77 enrolled in inter-districts magnets (according to 2006-07 CT State Department of Education data), out of approximately 5,000 total elementary students.

²⁶ Christina Ramsay, Cintli Sanchez, Jesse Wanzer, and the Ed 308 seminar, "Shopping for Homes and Schools: A Qualitative Study of West Hartford, Connecticut." Cities, Suburbs, and Schools Research Project report, Trinity College, December 2006. <<http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/educ/css>>

²⁷ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000).