

SmartChoices

Summary: Parent Research & Outreach with the 2009-10 SmartChoices Initiative

The Cities, Suburbs, and Schools Project at Trinity College
Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now
Achieve Hartford!

June 29, 2009

Initiative

- For public school choice in the Greater Hartford region to work, parents will need the tools and support to make the right choice for their child.
- The SmartChoices initiative connects a digital guide to schools in the Hartford region with workshops and on the ground support to make the most of these tools.

Goals

- 1) **Expand access** to SmartChoices through hands-on parent workshops that emphasize informed decision-making about public school choices. Reach 250 parents at the workshop and increase the total number of website users to 3,200.
- 2) **Enhance website usability** with sorting and tracking functions, and update school data and attendance zone boundaries for 2009-10.
- 3) **Conduct community research** with Hartford parents to determine if and how SmartChoices influences their public school choice preferences and actions, and make recommendations for improving how school choices are presented and supported.

Project Partners

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- Ronald Jarrett, Vice President of Strategic Partnerships, ConnCAN, ron.jarrett@conncan.org (860-727-9977 x16)
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Results in Pilot Year (2008-09)

In Fall 2008, the Cities, Suburbs, and Schools Project at Trinity and ConnCAN partnered to fill the information gap that was undercutting the promise of school choice in the Greater Hartford region. The result of the partnership was SmartChoices, an interactive website designed to help parents in the Greater Hartford region sort through their public school choices: <http://smartchoices.trincoll.edu>.

By simply typing a home address and child's grade into the search box, SmartChoices automatically maps all of the public schools for which a parent's child is eligible, listing schools by name, distance, and racial balance and test score growth data. The website also provides links to each school's website and how to enroll or apply, for over 200 schools in the City of Hartford and 18 nearby suburban districts.

We believe SmartChoices to be the nation's first website that provides address-specific public choice eligibility and comparative school data, packaged together in an interactive, parent-friendly, bilingual format. (See appendix for comparisons.) Locally, we designed it to cut through the maze of district and interdistrict options arising from two sources: the Hartford Public Schools' "all-choice" initiative and the court-approved Sheff vs. O'Neill regional school desegregation remedy. SmartChoices brings together the most comprehensive information – from school themes to transportation to performance measures – into a one-stop shopping website.

After an intensive four-month design and production schedule, SmartChoices publicly launched on January 5, 2009, with coverage by the *Hartford Courant* and other media outlets. Parents who attended Hartford's two major school choice fairs were guided through the website by Trinity students and ConnCAN staff with laptop computers. During the six-week period prior to the choice application deadline of February 17, over 1,600 users logged onto SmartChoices to search for schools. (See appendix for user statistics.)

Goals for Year 2 (2009-10)

For 2009-10, our newly expanded partnership (with Achieve Hartford) seeks to accomplish three more goals:

- 1) **Expand access** to SmartChoices through hands-on parent workshops that emphasize informed decision-making about public school choices.
- 2) **Enhance website usability** with sorting and tracking functions, and update school data and attendance zone boundaries for 2009-10.
- 3) **Conduct community research** with Hartford parents to determine if and how SmartChoices influences their public school choice preferences and actions, and make recommendations for improving how school choices are presented and supported.

We believe that our Trinity-ConnCAN-Achieve Hartford partnership is best positioned to provide direct services to Hartford parents who now face important choices about which schools their children will attend. By creating better parental access, search tools, and research-based knowledge about how information shapes the decision-making process, we can improve educational opportunities for Hartford-area families and the school systems serving them.

Project Specifics

1) Expand access to SmartChoices with hands-on Hartford parent workshops

By itself, a website cannot improve urban public education. But when placed in the hands of parents, with support from experienced guides, SmartChoices becomes a powerful tool for navigating through a complex set of public school choices. Last year, a typical Hartford parent was eligible to choose between 25 to 35 public schools and programs (depending on the child's grade level), offered by multiple providers. But SmartChoices was the *only* source for families to view a comprehensive list of their options, personalized by their home address, with comparative school data.

America still faces a "digital divide," based largely on socioeconomic and generation. From our experiences with Hartford parents who tested SmartChoices in 2008-09, we discovered a wide range of computer literacy, ranging from parents who had never before touched a computer, to others who gave detailed feedback about improving the web interface. Furthermore, we found that many parents needed assistance in distinguishing between different types of public schools (such as district vs. interdistrict; neighborhood, magnet, charter, etc.), or interpreting school test results.

Rather than waiting for parents to show up at school choice fairs in January, we propose to bring SmartChoices directly to Hartford neighborhoods through at least 10 hands-on parent workshops in October and November. We will organize these evening sessions in Hartford elementary schools, in cooperation with school-based parent leadership councils, and provide light refreshments to make it easier for working families to attend. Rather than lecturing at parents, we will introduce them to the SmartChoices website and provide hands-on access in the school's library or computer lab, or laptops on loan from Trinity. Parents will explore their families' public school choices while learning basic concepts and having specific questions answered by experienced ConnCAN staff and Trinity students (in English, Spanish, and Bosnian).

2) Enhance the SmartChoices user interface and update school data for 2009-10

In Fall 2008, our team created SmartChoices according to leading Web 2.0 design principles. It exists on a three-tier server architecture, which integrates the web server (search page & interactive Google map) with the application and database servers. Asynchronous requests are what permit the user to initiate a search and view the results without having to reload the page, as in a traditional form-based website. The overall design provides a much friendlier user interface, which we plan to disseminate to other public school choice providers in cities across the nation.

For 2009-10, we plan to add two additional features: sorting functions (to offer parents the ability to rank schools by data categories, such as distance and test scores), and behind-the-scenes tracking functions (to collect more user clicks on how parents interact with the website). Furthermore, we wish to expand our school attendance zone boundary geography to include other Hartford-area districts and also update our database of 200 schools with new student demographic and test score data.

3) Conduct community research with Hartford parents on influence of SmartChoices

The parent workshops offer a valuable opportunity to conduct research with Hartford's communities, using quantitative and qualitative methods, and make recommendations for improving how school choices are presented and supported. This research will seek to answer the following questions:

- a) How does SmartChoices influence workshop participants' school preferences?*
- b) How do different categories of data influence parents' choice preferences?*
- c) How do parents incorporate SmartChoices data into their existing definitions of school quality?*
- d) Do parent workshop participants' new preferences translate into applications?*

The results from this research will be summarized in a report with recommendations for districts, nonprofit providers and foundations seeking to support school choice as an education reform strategy.

a) How does SmartChoices influence workshop participants' school preferences?

In a related study of public school choice in Charlotte-Mecklenberg, North Carolina, Hastings and Weinstein (2008) found that low-income parents who received school data (such as a paper listing of schools ranked by test score) were more likely to choose higher-performing schools than a control group (which received an alphabetical listing, without test data). Our first step is to test this finding with a different format. Our workshops will be located across 10 different elementary school neighborhoods, with an estimated attendance of at least 25 people each, for an anticipated data sample of approximately 250 parents of elementary school-age children. Although the workshops are open to all, the parents who show up are largely self-selected. However, by comparing their school preferences before and after the SmartChoices workshop, we can determine its level of influence on this sample.

At the beginning of each workshop, parents will be asked to identify their top school choices for one child in their family. Next, each participant will be seated at a computer and introduced to the SmartChoices website, with guidance on how to enter their home address and student's grade, plus an overview of the data headings. Time will be provided for parents to explore their options, ask clarifying questions, and print out the page. Afterwards, each will be asked a second time to identify their top school choices, and to report relevant background data (level of education, income, age, race, computer experience, and any prior use of the website). When analyzing this portion of the data, we will measure variation between pre- and post-workshop

preferences (particularly for higher-performing and more distantly located schools), and whether it is associated with any of the parental background variables.

b) How do different categories of data influence parents' choice preferences?

Hastings and Weinstein (2008) also conducted a field experiment on how parents responded to two versions of choice data (schools ranked by average test score, and by odds of lottery admission), but found no significant differences between the two. Our study will go one further by making use of the website's ability to automatically sort school data into four different formats, selected at random by the computer for parent workshop participants:

- 1) alphabetical sort (by name of school)
- 2) distance sort (by proximity to home address, in miles)
- 3) traditional test scores (average percent of students at or above CMT goal)
- 4) value-added test scores (average grade cohort gain on CMT over one year)

We are particularly interested in how viewing schools sorted by distance affects parents' choice preferences, because Hastings & Weinstein (2008) recognize that it plays a major role, but had no feasible way to isolate it using mass-produced paper forms. By contrast, the SmartChoices website uses Google Maps to automatically calculate and display the distance between each individual's home address and all eligible schools.

Furthermore, we also are highly interested in comparing the influence of traditional versus value-added achievement data. Currently, SmartChoices displays both the traditional average school test score (provided by the Connecticut Department of Education) as well as a value-added approximation (calculated by ConnCAN from the best available public data to show grade-level cohort performance gains over one year in each school). We hope to create a better value-added assessment, pending final approval of the "data transparency" bill (Senate Bill 1014), which would make existing student-level data available to researchers and non-profit organizations. In either case, SmartChoices will continue to display both types of achievement data. Most conventional school rating websites do not include any value-added measures, and fail to help users distinguish between a school's average score versus its effectiveness in raising student's scores over time, apart from students' prior scores and demographics (Lubienski 2008). In states where value-added data is available, researchers using indirect methods have questioned whether parents factor it into their decision-making process (Brasington and Haurin 2006). Our quantitative analysis will measure whether workshop participants' choice preferences were associated with any of the randomly assigned data sorting methods: distance, traditional scores, or value-added scores.

c) How do parents incorporate SmartChoices data into their existing definitions of school quality?

During a small-scale pilot study of SmartChoices in Fall 2008, we heard several Hartford parents describe how surprised they were to learn how far behind their local schools stood relative to others in the metropolitan region. Although tables of school data have been publicly available for several years, SmartChoices offered many parents -- both urban and suburban -- with their first

opportunity to view schools in comparison to others, on one dynamic web page, in “easy-to-scan” pie and bar charts.

Our workshop format offers a valuable opportunity to use qualitative methods to better understand how Hartford parents make sense of quantitative data about schools. When each parent finishes their computer search and provides their second-round of school preferences, our Trinity student researchers will ask three open-ended interview questions:

- 1) What do you look for when deciding what’s a “good” school for your child?
- 2) What went through your mind while looking at all of this school information?
- 3) Did this website change your view about which schools are better than others?

These questions are revised from our first interview guide (in English and Spanish) from the Fall 2008 pilot study. Responses will be thematically analyzed for how parents define a “good” school in their own words, and whether they reference data from our website, or their own knowledge of teachers and curriculum, familiarity with specific neighborhoods (Bell 2007), or perceptions of a school’s social status (Holme 2002). All of these themes arose in the pilot study, and we can make richer claims with a larger sample.

d) Do parent workshop participants’ new preferences translate into applications?

To test whether parent preferences formed in a September-October workshop continue forward into applications submitted in January-February, we need to connect the two processes. As part of the exit interview, when parents are completing background questions, we will request that they give us permission to obtain copies of any application forms that they complete with the Regional School Choice Office, the Hartford Public Schools, and other providers. The final portion of our quantitative analysis will measure change between the workshop preferences and the actual school applications, and any association with parental background variables.

For all research involving human participants, Trinity College requires investigators to meet ethical standards for informed consent and confidentiality in a proposal to its Institutional Review Board. The IRB granted a one-year approval to our project in January 2009, and we anticipate resubmitting an updated application.

Key Project Personnel

Trinity Team

- **Jack Dougherty, Associate Professor of Educational Studies, Trinity College**
- Jean-Pierre Haeberly, Director of Academic Computing, Trinity College
- David Tatem, Instructional Technologist, Academic Computing, Trinity College
- Diane Zannoni, G. Fox and Company Professor of Economics, Trinity College
- Jesse Wanzer, Class of 2008, Trinity College
- Trinity student researchers from the Cities, Suburbs, and Schools Project

ConnCAN Team

- **Ronald Jarrett, VP of Strategic Partnerships, ConnCAN**

- Lourdes Fonseca, Community Relations Associate, ConnCAN
- Tori Truscheit, Research and Policy Manager, ConnCAN
- Karen Rutzick, Communications Manager, ConnCAN

Achieve Hartford!

James Starr, Executive Director, Achieve Hartford

Project Timetable

June 2009

- Design enhanced SmartChoices website, with sorting and tracking functions and improved user interface, and random-sorting function for research purposes
- Plan new school data needs and availability of sources for 2009-10
- Obtain and digitize school boundary zone maps for new areas
- Select and schedule Hartford elementary school neighborhoods for parent workshops

September-October-November 2009

- Convert new school data into graphic charts and upload into database server
- Implement new version of SmartChoices on-line
- Identify and train Trinity student for parent workshops
- Advertise and conduct at least 10 parent workshops in selected neighborhoods
- Quantitative and qualitative data collection via workshops

November 2009

- Publicize launch of new version of SmartChoices
- Quantitative analysis of data for research questions and transcribe qualitative interview data

December 2009-February 2010

- SmartChoices public demonstrations at school choice fairs

March 2010

- Generate overall user statistics report on SmartChoices 2009-10
- Collect and analyze quantitative data from choice applications
- Write report on findings and recommendations from research

Spring 2010

- Present findings to local stakeholders and at national-level conference

Works cited:

Bell, Courtney. 2007. Space and Place: Urban Parents' Geographical Preferences for Schools. *The Urban Review* 39, no. 4: 375-404.

Brasington, David M., and Donald R. Haurin. 2006. Educational Outcomes and House Values: A Test of the Value Added Approach. *Journal of Regional Science* 46, no. 2: 245-268.

Buckley, Jack, and Mark Schneider. 2007. *Charter schools: hope or hype*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hastings, Justine S., and Jeffrey M. Weinstein. 2008. Information, School Choice, and Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two Experiments. *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, no. 4: 1373-1414.

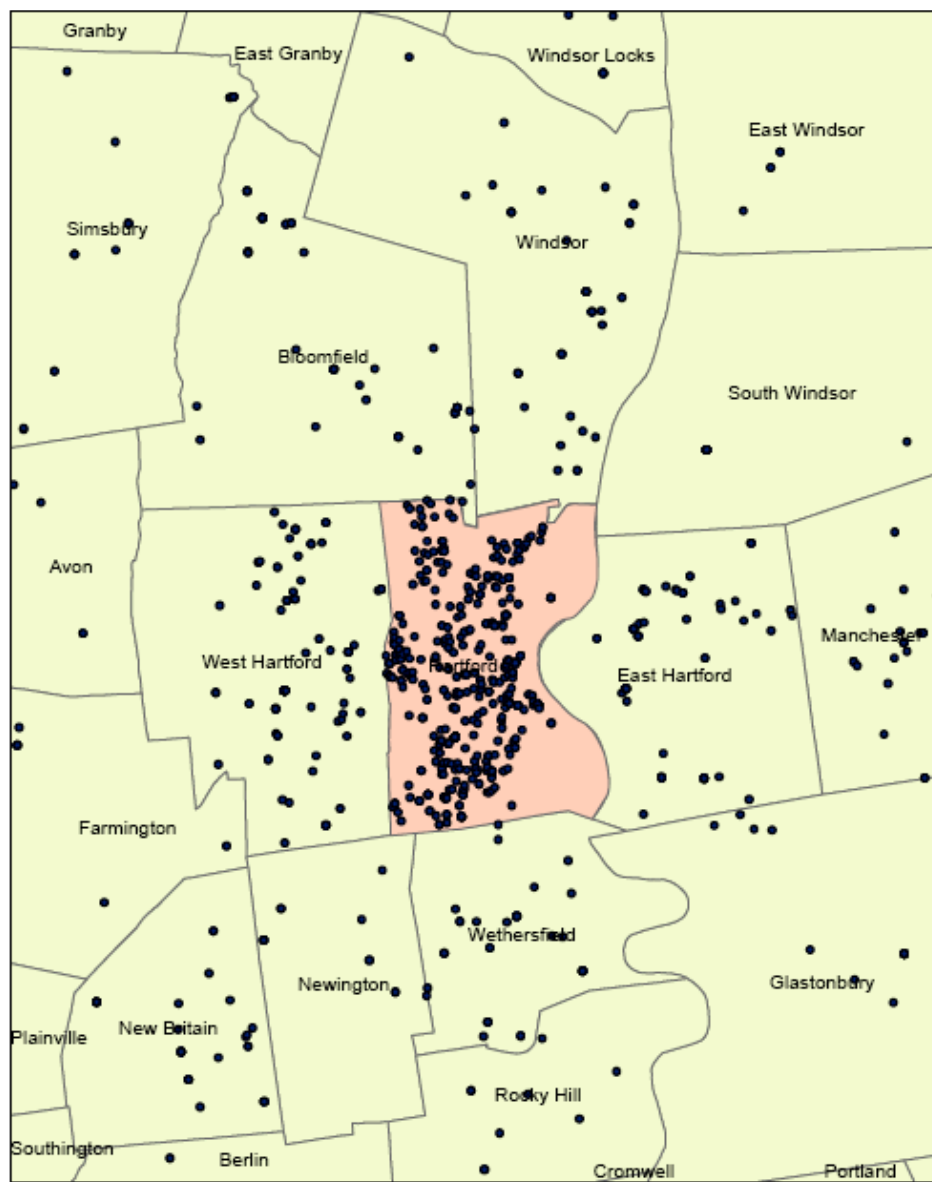
Holme, Jennifer Jellison. 2002. Buying Homes, Buying Schools: School Choice in the Social Construction of School Quality. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72, 177-205.

Lubienski, Christopher. 2008. The Politics of Parental Choice: Theory and Evidence on Quality Information. In *School choice policies and outcomes : empirical and philosophical perspectives*, eds. Walter Feinberg, and Christopher Lubienski, Albany: SUNY Press

Appendix A: Results from 6-Week Pilot, January-February 2009

TOTAL searches: 1,597

- City of Hartford: 588
 - Hartford zone 1: 95
 - Hartford zone 2: 88
 - Hartford zone 3: 199
 - Hartford zone 4: 206
- Suburbs in coverage area 482
- No address/outside area 527



Appendix B: Comparing SmartChoices with Other Models

Although there are numerous school search sites on the web, we have not found any that match SmartChoices and its address-specific listing of all public schools for which a family is eligible to apply, with easy-to-read comparative data to distinguish between them:

<http://smartchoices.trincoll.edu>

A DIGITAL GUIDE TO
Public School Choice
IN THE GREATER HARTFORD REGION

SmartChoices

HOME
ABOUT THIS WEBSITE
CONTACT US

SEARCH FOR SCHOOLS
Map Satellite Hybrid

Student's home address:

Student's grade next Fall:

Show me public schools:
 District schools
 Interdistrict schools

SEARCH

30 schools found.

School & Management <small>(click for website)</small>	Address (next school year) <small>(click to zoom)</small>	Distance	Grades	More Info	Racial Balance	Test Scores
America's Choice at SAND (Hartford Public Schools)	1750 Main St Hartford, CT	2.3 miles	PreK to 7	Apply to HPS Choice	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> Asian & Nat Am <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic <input type="checkbox"/> Black </div> <div> <p>2007</p> </div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div> <p>Percent At or Above Goal</p> <p>2007</p> <p>2008</p> <p>Avg</p> </div> <div> <p>17</p> <p>15</p> <p>-2</p> </div> </div>

The closest model we have found is the DC Public Schools Interactive Profiles Map (a redesigned version of DCSchoolsearch.com, described by Buckley and Schneider 2007). Although the new DC site features an address-specific interface, it does not identify eligible schools beyond the attendance boundary (such as charter schools), nor does it allow users to compare test score data between schools: <http://dcAtlas.dcgis.dc.gov/schoolprofile/>

DCPS School Profiles

Welcome to the District of Columbia Public Schools Map Site

This interactive site provides comprehensive information about DCPS schools and programs including contact information, DC-CAS scores, special programs offered, demographic information and much more. We welcome your feedback and questions.

1. Select School Category:
All Schools

2. Select Target School:
Select a school from this list

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All Schools

2. Select Target School:
Select a school from this list

Find your in boundary schools by typing in an address and selecting an address match.

1. Type an address:
Address Matches will appear here

Source: 2008-2009 DCPS

DCPS School Profiles

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All Schools

2. Select Target School:
Select a school from this list

Find your in boundary schools by typing in an address and selecting an address match.

1. Type an address:
2600 6th

2. Select an address match:
2600 6TH STREET NW


Source: 2008-2009 DCPS

Several real estate websites offer links to “View School Information” for a specific address, but these searches are based solely on proximity, not actual school eligibility due to neighborhood

attendance zones or public school choice guidelines. For example, see link to school information via the “Neighborhood Navigator on the CTReal.com: <http://www.ctreal.com/>

neighborhood navigator

Community Information School Information

 School Information Results (FAQ) [Revise Search](#)

Address: 300 Summit St, Hartford, CT, 06106

Select a school from the following list. Schools are grouped by school type.

The schools in this list are selected by their proximity to the search address. Proximity does not guarantee enrollment eligibility. Please contact a local Realtor or the school directly for more information on enrollment requirements.

* If there are more than 5 schools of any type within a close proximity, click on the "See Full List" link to see additional schools of that type near the search address.

Public Elementary (more than 25 schools)					See Full List
School	District	Grades	Place	Distance	
MCDONOUGH ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	HARTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT	Pre-K - 6th	HARTFORD	0.3 miles	
MOYLAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	HARTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT	Pre-K - 6th	HARTFORD	0.32 miles	
MONTESSORI MAGNET SCHOOL	HARTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT	Pre-K - 3rd	HARTFORD	0.33 miles	
M HOOKER ENVIRON STUDIES SCHOOL	HARTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT	Pre-K - 8th	HARTFORD	0.62 miles	
M D FOX ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	HARTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT	Pre-K - 5th	HARTFORD	0.65 miles	

Furthermore, several national sites allow users to compare individual school data, but only if users already know the names of schools for which they are eligible. For example, see School Matters: <http://www.schoolmatters.com>

SchoolMatters
A Service of Standard & Poor's

Home Find a School Compare Schools

Compare Schools

Compare Up To 3 Different Schools:

School 1:

School 2:

School 3:

State:

(Schools need to be in the same state. [Here's why.](#))