

West Hartford Public School District

Agenda Item: Open Choice Program in West Hartford Public Schools

Meeting Date: February 17, 2016

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Through: Tom Moore, Superintendent

Background:

The Open Choice program is an interdistrict, public school program intended to improve academic achievement, reduce ethnic, social and economic isolation, and provide a choice of educational programs for public school students in the Hartford region.

The Open Choice program began in the 1966-67 school year under the original name of Project Concern. Students who lived in the Hartford school district applied to and were selected to attend schools in the five original suburban school districts – Farmington, Manchester, Simsbury, South Windsor and West Hartford. A 1989 Sheff vs. O’Neill lawsuit was filed by parents on behalf of their children which resulted in a Connecticut Supreme Court case. The suit charged that Connecticut's system of separate city and suburban school districts led to racially segregated schools and a violation of children's rights to an equal educational opportunity. The expansion of the Open Choice program over the past two decades is an integral part of the state’s efforts to promote equity in educational opportunities and build upon successes achieved in schools integrated by race and socioeconomic status.

Today, 2300 students attend public schools in 27 suburban school districts through the Open Choice program in the Hartford Region. West Hartford is the top district choice for Hartford region families. During the 2015-2016 school year, 166 slots were filled from a lottery pool of 1,155 applicants requesting West Hartford as their placement preference.

Supporting Diversity and Inclusion

The benefits of integrated education for West Hartford students and students who join the district as part of the Open Choice program are documented through research on integration and our experience over the past 50 years. In an April 2015 report on the history of CT school integration The Civil Rights Project at UCLA, co-director and researcher Gary Orfield highlighted the impact of integrated school settings. Benefits include heightened ability to communicate and make friends across racial lines, reduction in stereotypes, and increased academic achievement for minority students, with “no corresponding detrimental impact for white students.” (Orfield, G. 2015

“Connecticut School Integration: Moving Forward as the Northeast Retreats.” University of California, Los Angeles: The Civil Rights Project, p. 39-40)

WHPS has observed and experienced a positive impact on our district and community as a result of our participation in the Open Choice program. Students of different racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds bring different points of view that provide opportunities for robust dialogue and debate. In the classroom, athletic field, on the performance stage and in the community, the interactions and relationships between students and families across backgrounds have promoted understanding of racial and cultural differences that exist among us. Integrated diverse school experiences foster critical thinking skills that are increasingly important in our society.

WHPS continues to examine and organize its systems, practices, and policies to promote awareness, inclusion and equity that foster academic and social success. Strategies that exemplify our commitment to supporting Open Choice students and families include:

- Support to Kindergarten and Grade 1-2 transition
- Engagement in a needs-assessment with stakeholders across the district
- Identification of the research and best practices on family engagement and sharing/dialogue with our leadership team to inform school and district planning and implementation of those best practices

Enrollment

West Hartford enrolled 79 students in its first year with Project Concern. Enrollment grew steadily from that initial year to a peak of 384 students in 1973-74. After 1973-74 total enrollment in the Open Choice program declined pretty steadily to a nadir of 18 students in the 2000-01 school year. Open Choice enrollments fell as West Hartford enrollments fell and as elementary and then middle schools were closed in the 1980's. In the 1990's as elementary enrollments grew, there were acute space shortages in the system and new elementary schools were built and others expanded. New Open Choice enrollments essentially fell to zero from 1992-93 through 2000-01.

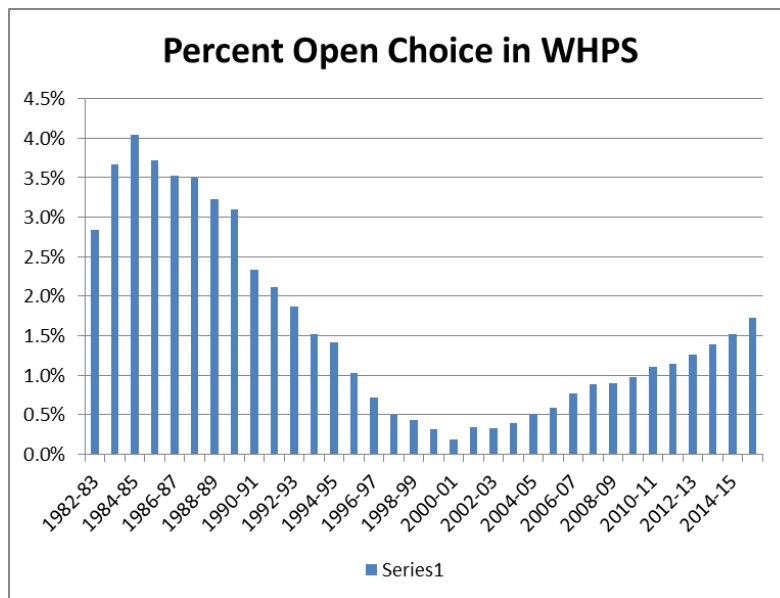
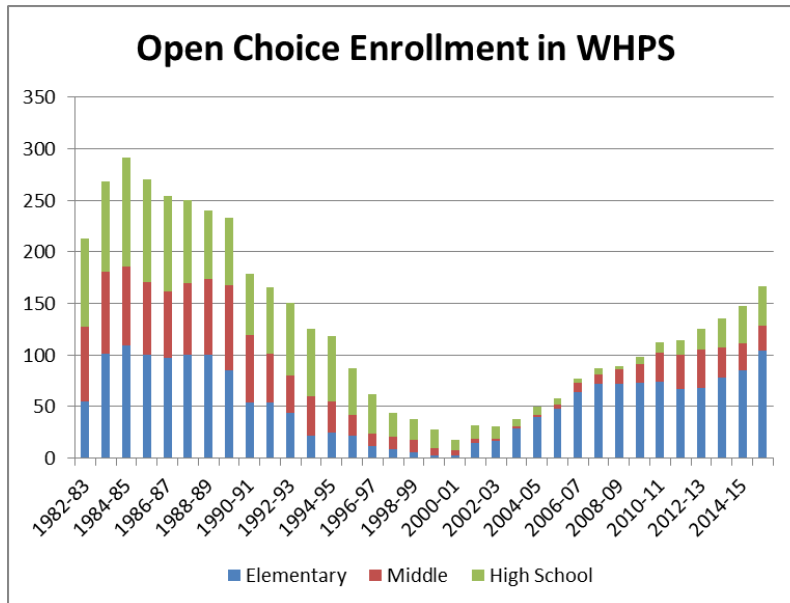
Beginning in 2001-02, West Hartford reaffirmed its participation in the Open Choice program with 15 new admissions in grades K-2. Since then, West Hartford has admitted between 5 and 26 net new Open Choice students each year. All new Open Choice students have enrolled in grades K through 2 at six elementary schools – Aiken, Braeburn, Bugbee, Duffy, Morley, Norfeldt. We do not place Open Choice students at the other five elementary schools.

Once Open Choice students are admitted to West Hartford Public Schools, they may remain in WHPS through high school graduation. The Open Choice students follow the same middle school and high school paths as their classmates in their elementary schools. The Open Choice students are included in the Bristow lottery.

Financial Impact of the Open Choice Program

The district receives significant financial support from the state for the Open Choice program. As total enrollment of Open Choice students is less than 2% of total student population, we receive a state grant of \$3,000 per student. West Hartford also receives an additional \$4,500 per student for

all Choice students enrolled in a full-day K Program. In total West Hartford received \$539,000 in funding for Open Choice students in 2014-15. This funding was used to offset most of our Interdistrict magnet tuition expense which was \$729,000.



Supplemental Open Choice Grants

The CT State Department of Education provides supplemental grant funding to Open Choice school districts to ensure that Open Choice students have positive school experiences, academic success, and social success. These grants allow school districts to implement strategies to improve school climate and student academic achievement for all students.

An *Open Choice Academic, Student and Social Support Grant*, for which the district is eligible through an yearly application process, is based on Open Choice enrollment. The \$103,700 grant for 2015-2106 school year supports the following:

- **Math intervention tutors** and math instructional materials at our Open Choice elementary schools. Currently, 182 students (8%) in those elementary schools receive math intervention services 3-4x per week. Of these students, 28 are Open Choice students, representing 29% of K-5 Open Choice students.
- **Transportation services** for Open Choice families to attend school conferences and events
- **Family Engagement Consultant** to conduct comprehensive assessment of Open Choice in West Hartford. Under the supervision of the Director of Diversity Advancement and Director of Elementary Education over the past year, the consultant has engaged stakeholders, including Open Choice families, students, school staff, and CREC staff, in feedback sessions and surveys.

For the past three years, West Hartford also applied for an available \$5,000 *Targeted Professional Development: School Climate & Culturally Responsive Educational Programming Grant*. Open Choice elementary schools funded school-based workshops and book clubs (i.e.g, culturally relevant pedagogy, academic vocabulary). This year, the professional development funds supported curriculum development and professional learning for the King Philip Middle School Morning Advisory program.. The updated Morning Advisory curriculum has resulted in greater coherence of goals/activities among teams and a significant decline in office disciplinary referrals.

Status of Current Needs Assessment

For the past nine months, we have engaged in a needs assessment to better understand how our school system supports Open Choice families, children and educators and prioritize use of available grant funding. Parents and staff have had the opportunity to share their experiences, concerns, recommendations and questions regarding Open Choice in West Hartford through parent meetings, phone conversations, and one-to-one meetings.

Some of the initial findings from parent sessions include:

- Academic success when individual relationships are formed with teachers.
- Challenges with transportation and sense of alienation by West Hartford student/families.
- Recommendations for creating connections between Hartford families, Hartford and West Hartford families; and teacher in-service training about racism and bias.

Findings from teacher/staff sessions include:

- Observation of academic improvement throughout a calendar year and benefits of two-way communication with parents.
- Challenges with timely access to student information in the beginning of school year; need for increased support services to address behavior and breakfast/lunch concerns, and need for improvement of CREC transportation services.
- Recommendations for increased communications from Open Choice staff and assignment of incoming K-2 students to schools attended by sibling(s) when lottery seats available.

A comprehensive needs assessment report, including findings from stakeholder feedback, recommendations, and priority action steps will be completed by the end of the school year and shared with district and school leadership, CREC staff, and CT State Department of Education Regional Choice Office staff.