

NOVEMBER 2017

Defining the Path Toward a “Model for Excellence” for All Hartford Children

Findings and implications from a comprehensive study of school and system conditions in Hartford Public Schools

Context for this study

Earlier this year, new Hartford Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez launched an effort to fundamentally examine and re-develop critical aspects of how HPS educates its students. This effort has incorporated [deep engagement and input](#) from a wide range of people and groups who have a stake in the future of the district, including parents, students, educators, board members and other city and community leaders.

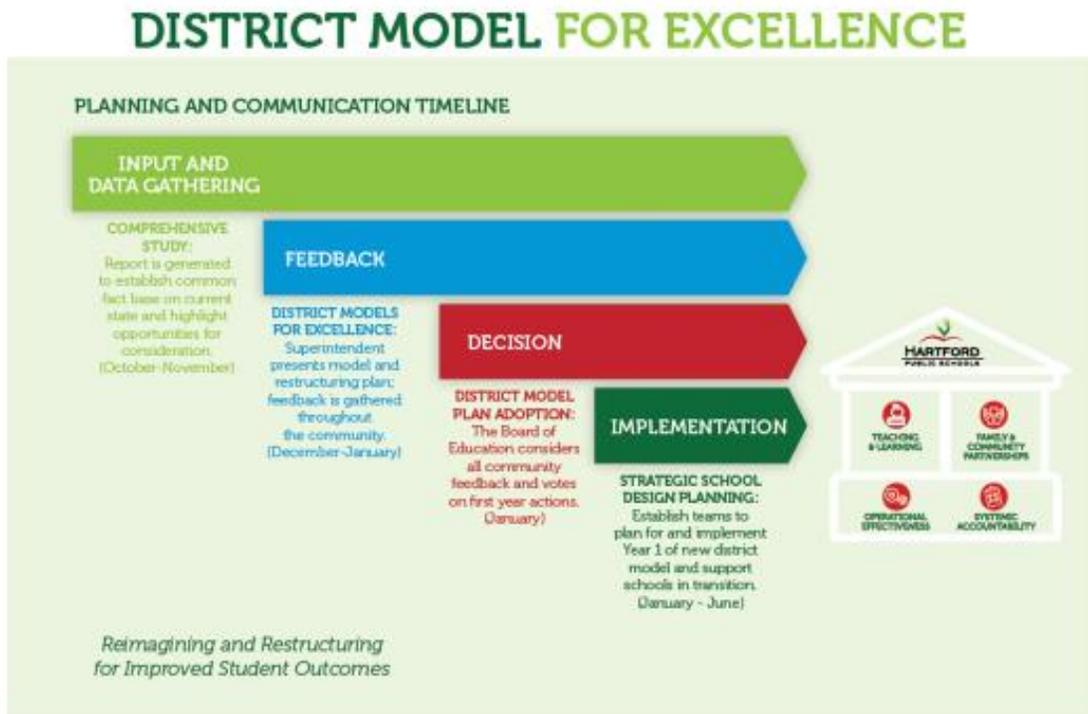
The Hartford community embarked upon this process in the context of significant challenges to its education system. Some of these challenges are not unique to Hartford, such as intensive and concentrated student need, declining enrollment and increasing financial pressures. Other issues are specific to the Hartford context, including unintended consequences of the magnet schools model created in the wake of *Sheff v. O’Neill* and the recent report from the state’s Office of the Child Advocate regarding the district’s previous lack of compliance with mandatory reporting requirements for child safety. The OCA findings, as well as broader reflections on system-level strengths and needs, contributed to the inclusion of a new focus on *Operational Effectiveness* in HPS’ [ambitious new strategic operating plan](#).

The district’s focus on *Operational Effectiveness* creates a unique platform upon which to clearly define standards and models for excellent effective school-based practice, as well as the enabling conditions that schools need to successfully reach those standards. It is through these Models for Excellence that Dr. Torres-Rodriguez will articulate a new vision for the district, with the guidance and support of leaders from throughout the Hartford community.

This report represents the culmination of the first of four phases in the development and implementation of a new District Model for Excellence for Hartford Public Schools. It draws upon both data-driven analysis of the current situation in Hartford as well as input from parents, educators and community leaders, and is designed to provide a foundation for future consideration of specific paths HPS could follow in its pursuit of a stronger, more effective system in which all students have an opportunity to excel.

As Dr. Torres-Rodriguez wrote in her [letter to the Hartford Public Schools community](#), “When we have completed this process together, we will hold in our hands a stronger, more equitable school district designed to serve all students well – a plan built by the entire community for the entire community.”

Figure 1. District Planning Process for Developing and Implementing a New Model for Excellence



Community Aspirations for Hartford Students and Schools

Over the past several months, stakeholders across Hartford have shared their hopes and aspiration for Hartford students and the schools they attend. Board members reflected both their own perspectives and those of families in their communities in stating that “I want my kids to do better than I did – in school and in their quality of life. ... Our children should have the ability to make choices.”

These aspirations are of course not unique to Hartford – they reflect the dreams of parents everywhere. But they have specific implications in Hartford that together form the foundation for the emerging District Model for Excellence.

Rigorous, high-quality instruction sits at the center of this vision. “We want our students to experience high expectations and cultural competence from all of their educators,” said one board member. Therefore, according to an HPS principal, “Everything we do should promote consistent, high-quality instruction.” This means that “staffing and other central office decisions must always put students’ needs first.”

Schools must also ensure equitable opportunity for all students, regardless of background or need. In addition to ensuring that “all students have equitable access to high-quality curriculum,” parents observed that schools should “understand individual student needs and differences and respond to these in an appropriate manner.” Board members stated that “All students, including students with disabilities and gifted students, should have access to the same types of opportunities, programs, and resources.”

Equity is a goal not only in access to rigor and resources but also in the quality of school facilities where students and educators spend their days. “Each child should have access to a safe and updated building in which to learn,” said one Hartford teacher, “with access to an outdoor environment that engages them with nature and provides physical exercise.”

Equity also means ensuring that all students “have access to caring and educated staff as well as resources to meet their individual needs and talents... A great school is made of up of committed teachers and staff whose commitment is honored and valued by the school and the district. The teachers are able to truly use their craft to best meet the needs of each individual child.”

An emphasis on social-emotional as well as academic development figured prominently in input shared over the past several months. Ideally, according to one parent, “value is placed on developing the whole child, not just subjects that are measured through standardized testing.”

Crucially, constituents also recognize that efforts to support students within and beyond the classroom must be deeply integrated. “Schools should be places that bring the community together,” said one board member. Another offered that “each school must be an asset and stabilizing force in every Hartford child’s neighborhood.”

Summing up the perspectives of many constituents, parents observed that “A great school, first and foremost, has a great culture. It is a place where all feel welcome and valued, where students look forward to attending day in and day out. Its foundation is great relationships between staff-staff/administration, student-student, staff-student, and staff-parents/community.”

Drawing heavily on this input, HPS leadership has established that the District Model for Excellence will help create a *network* of excellent schools that:

1. Provides high-quality educational experiences and opportunities for every student.
2. Ensures the necessary resources, including people, time, and funding, are allocated responsibly, equitably, and sustainably.
3. Is strategically designed to maximize available opportunities;
4. Prepares students for post-secondary success;
5. Serves students, families, and communities well; and
6. Benefits from the engagement of families, the community, and partners.

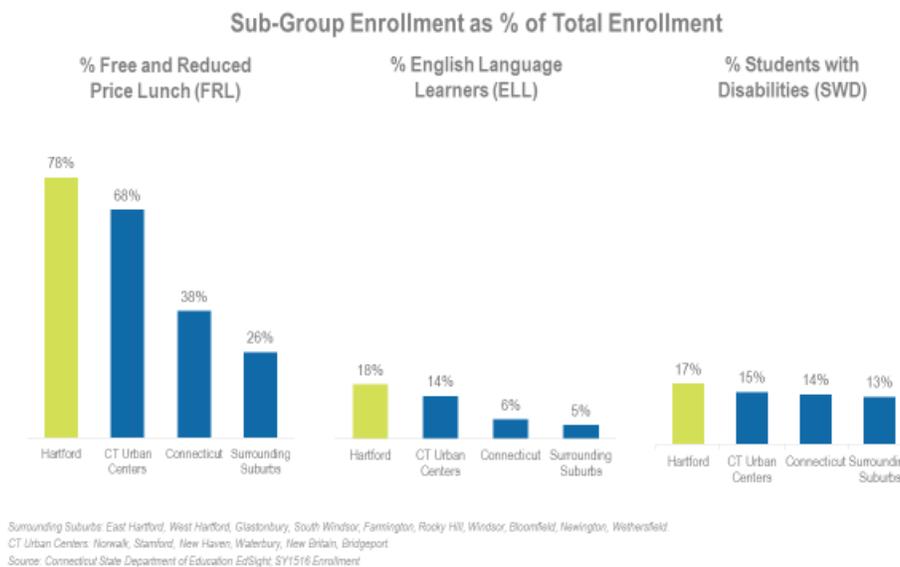
Defining the Starting Place for System Transformation

HPS faces unique and mounting challenges that are crucial to understanding the current state and defining a path forward with the potential to benefit all students and families in the system.

Deep student needs and performance challenges

Compared with other districts in the state of Connecticut, Hartford Public Schools has the second highest rate of poverty, as measured by the proportion of students receiving federal free or reduced lunch benefits,¹ and the highest proportion English Language Learners.

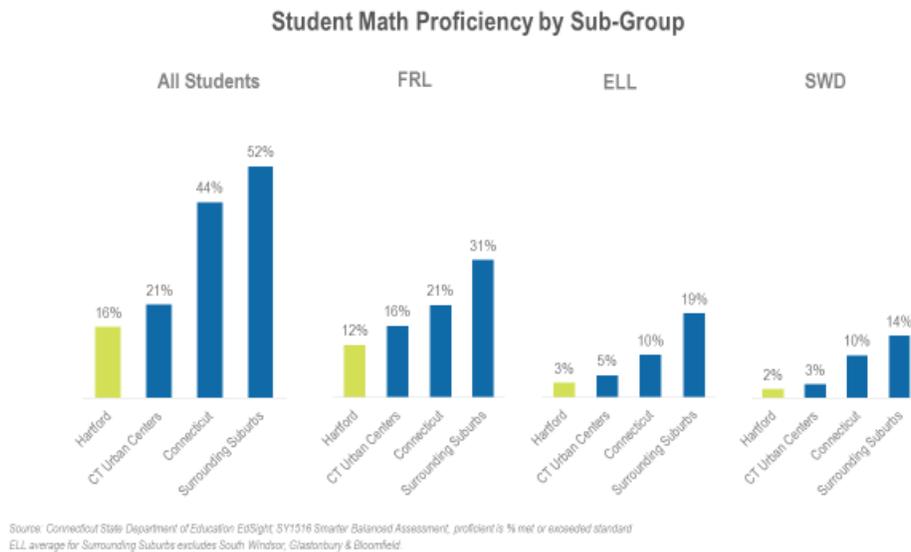
Figure 2. Student Need in Hartford and Other Connecticut Districts



While the needs of its students undoubtedly affect academic performance, HPS also faces significant student achievement challenges both across and within student sub-groups. For example, the percent of students who received free or reduced lunch benefits who also Met or Exceeded Expectations in Math lag the state average by nine percentage points; for English Language Learners, the gap is seven percentage points. Both gaps are wider than most other high-poverty urban centers in CT.

¹ FRL statistics are from 2014-15, the most recent year in which this data was collected.

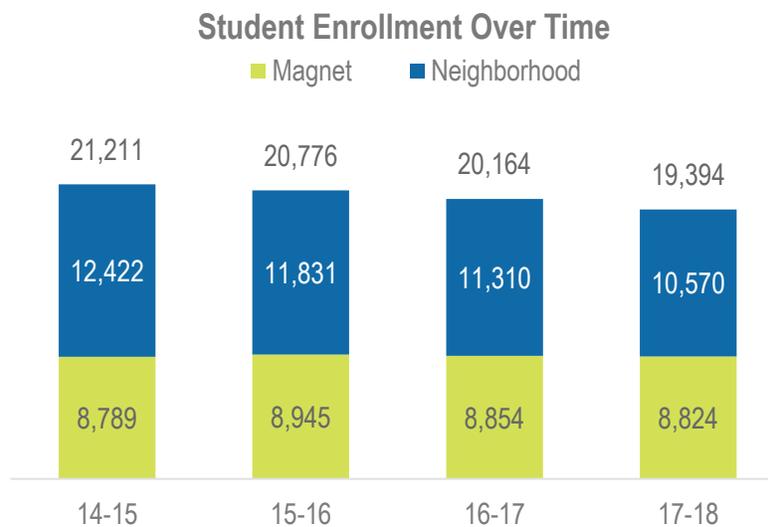
Figure 3. Student Proficiency in Hartford and Other Connecticut Districts



Declining enrollment

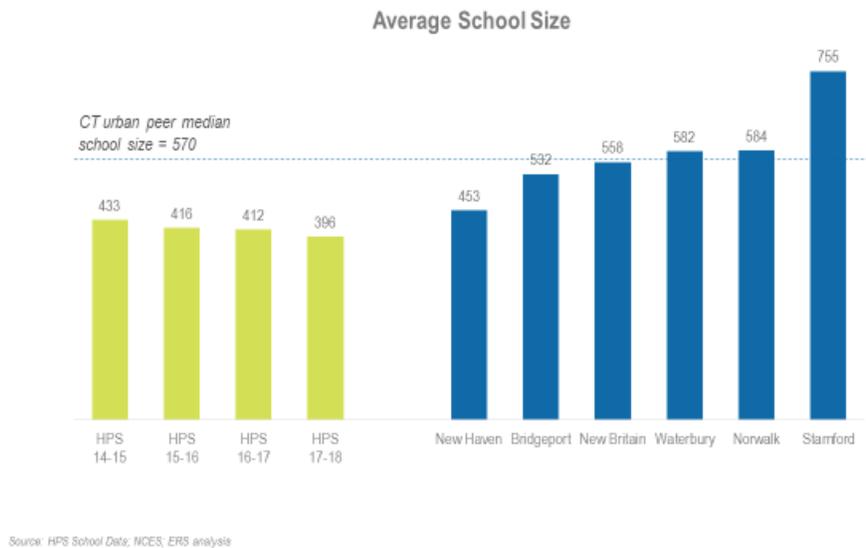
Like many American urban school districts, Hartford Public Schools is experiencing a significant decline in student enrollment. Specifically, from 2014-15 to this year, HPS enrollment has declined by nearly 2,000 students, or 8.5% of total enrollment. Compounding the challenge, the enrollment decline has occurred in neighborhood schools, while magnet school enrollment has remained steady.

Figure 4. Hartford Public Schools Enrollment, 2014-15 to 2017-18



As a result of this decline in enrollment, the average size of HPS schools – already lower than its closest in-state peer districts – has also declined, creating instructional, operational and financial challenges for educators and students.

Figure 5. Average School Size in Hartford and Other Connecticut Districts



Unintended consequences of Magnet Schools

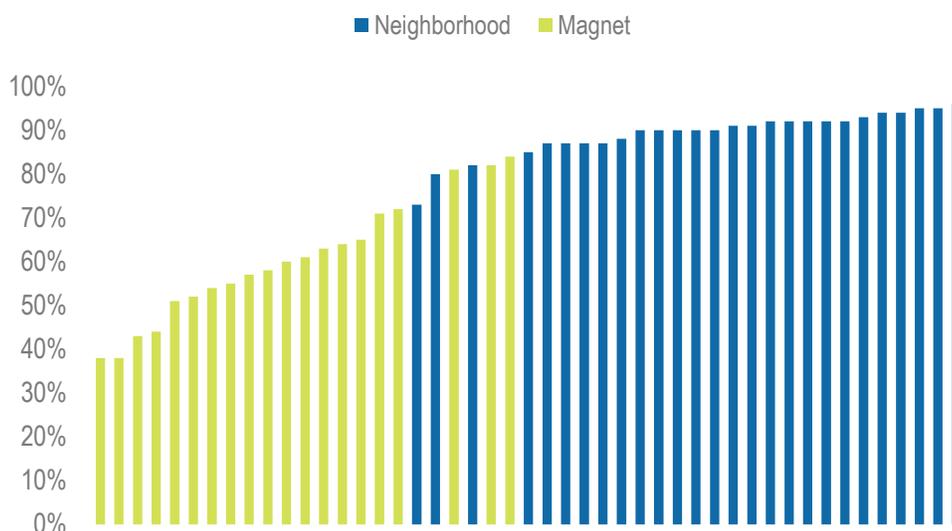
With a student population that is 53% Hispanic and 31% African-American, Hartford Public Schools stands in stark contrast to the state as whole and surrounding districts. These racial disparities were the focus of the landmark *Sheff v. O’Neill* court ruling that, in 1996, required the state of Connecticut take steps to desegregate Hartford Public Schools.

In response to *Sheff*, the state introduced Magnet Schools to reduce racial isolation of Hartford students. In these schools, at least 25% of all students must be “reduced isolation” students, i.e. Caucasian or Asian. To meet this target, HPS works to ensure that at least half of students in each Magnet school comes from the surrounding communities, with the other half coming from within the City of Hartford. To help attract suburban students, the state provides Magnet schools with increased funding to support state-of-the-art facilities and specialized programs.

While Magnet schools provide seats to thousands of Hartford residents, their rise has led to a several unintended consequences.

- *Concentration of student needs.* Across multiple measures, neighborhood schools serve students with greater needs than magnet schools. Specifically, in 2014-15 (the last year for which this data is available), all but three neighborhood schools enrolled a population where at least 85% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch benefits; in contrast, no magnet schools enrolled a student population with this level of need.

Figure 6. Proportion of students qualifying for federal free or reduced lunch benefits in each HPS school, 2014-15



A number of studies have found that such pronounced *concentration* of poverty can have a powerful adverse effect on student learning.² This effect is mirrored in HPS. In the seven HPS elementary and K-8 schools where fewer than 60% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch benefits, 18% of students who *do* qualify for federal FRL benefits demonstrated proficiency in math.³ In contrast, in the six HPS elementary and K-8 schools where at least 85% of students qualify for federal FRL benefits, only 8% of students who did not qualify (i.e. less needy students) demonstrated proficiency in math.⁴

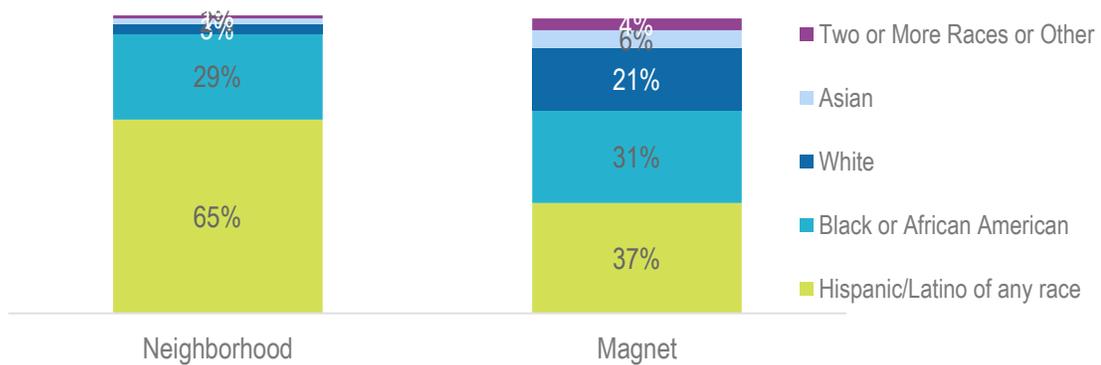
- *Concentration of students by race and ethnicity.* While magnet schools by law enroll a more diverse student population, Hartford’s neighborhood schools serve an overwhelmingly black and Latino population. Specifically, 65% of neighborhood school students are Hispanic, vs. 37% of magnet school students; conversely, 27% of magnet school students identify as Asian-American or White, vs. 4% in Hartford’s neighborhood schools.

² Borman, Geoffrey and Dowling, Maritza (2010). Schools and Inequality: A Multilevel Analysis of Coleman’s Equality of Educational Opportunity Data. Teachers College Record 1201, 1201-1246.

³ ES/K8 Schools below 60% FRL: Montessori Magnet at Fisher, STEM Magnet at Annie Fisher, Betances Early Reading Lab Magnet, Montessori Magnet and Moylan, Breakthrough Magnet School, Breakthrough II Magnet School, & Webster MicroSociety Magnet

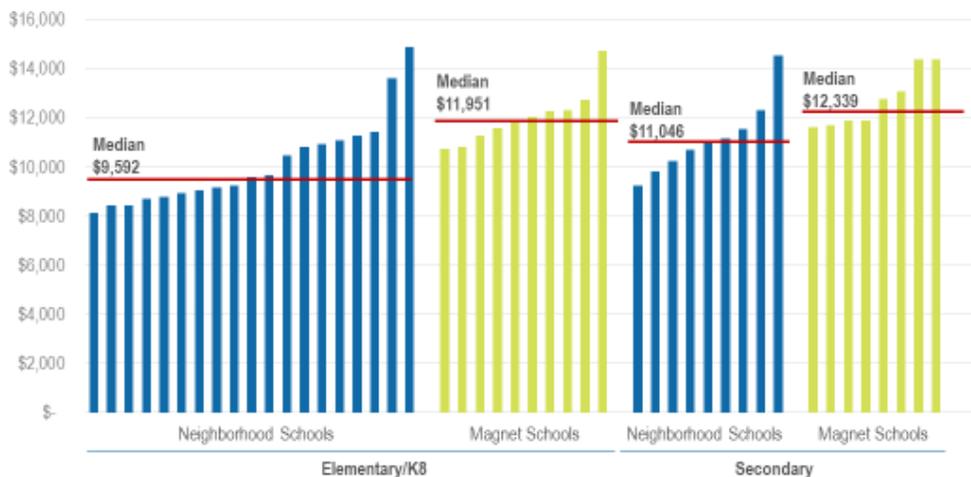
⁴ ES/K8 Schools above 85% FRL: Burr School, Simpson-Waverly School, Burns Latino Studies Academy, Milner School, Global Communications Academy, Sand School

Figure 7. Racial/ethnic composition of Hartford Public Schools student body



- Disparities in funding and facilities quality.* Both capital investments and operating expenditures in Hartford Magnet schools outpace those in Neighborhood schools. The average age of Magnet Schools is 9 years vs. 19 years in neighborhood schools, reflecting the disproportionate capital investment in magnet schools relative to neighborhood schools. Additionally, after controlling for student needs, magnet schools are typically higher funded on a per-pupil basis than neighborhood schools.

Figure 8. Need-adjusted Per-Pupil Expenditures, by school



Source: ERS Analysis of School Expenditures

Note: Dollar per weighted pupil is calculated as dollars adjusted for students who are low-income (designated by FRL), ELL, or who receive special education services

These unintended consequences have fueled debate about the effect of Hartford’s Magnet program on the families of Hartford. Some view Hartford’s Magnet program as an exemplar model of desegregation that can be shared and replicated nationally, while others view it as a violation of Civil Rights that deprives African American and Hispanic students of high-quality education solely because of their race. Locally, this debate has created a divide among education reformers and the Hartford community.

Guiding Principles for the District Model for Excellence

At the culmination of HPS’ community input process, one universal aspiration became clear: The District Planning Process must ensure that *every* student attends a great school, regardless of the neighborhood they live in.

To guide its comprehensive study, HPS distilled this aspiration into four principles that could inform Models for Excellence for the entire system of schools:

- **Great Teaching and Learning in Every School:** All schools will have the resources, staff and district support they need to invest in the essentials of great Teaching and Learning, including standards-aligned, culturally responsive curricula and instruction
- **Safe and Equitable Access to Great Schools and Pathways:** All students will have safe, convenient and equitable access to great schools and pathways in their own community, regardless of the neighborhood they are from
- **Expanded Family and Community Partnerships:** HPS will leverage the entire Hartford community in a coherent effort to drive student success through learning-focused partnerships that support the whole child
- **Fiscal Sustainability:** HPS’ network of schools will be structurally and financially sustainable in the near- and long-term

To provide greater strategic focus and guidance to the District Planning Process, ERS conducted an analysis of current system conditions and practices relative to each guiding principle above. The analysis drew on quantitative data (i.e. financial, enrollment, choice, school) as well as qualitative data from staff interviews, surveys and focus groups. The remainder of this paper highlights findings associated with each of these guiding principles, as well as broader implications for the District Planning Process.

Great Teaching and Learning

At the core of HPS’ *Great Teaching and Learning* principle is a commitment to ensure the fundamentals of high-quality, standards-aligned instruction are present in every classroom in the district. While the community articulated a wide range of priorities for classroom instruction, five elements emerged as uniquely aligned with strategic best practice:

- Great teachers with opportunities to lead, collaborate and grow
- A continuum of personalized instruction and enrichment for each student
- Empowering curriculum, instruction and assessments
- Culturally-responsive teaching that incorporates a whole student approach (culture, climate, social-emotional learning)
- Strong adult culture and welcoming school environments

Findings

1. **While HPS has made progress in introducing rigorous curricula aligned with Common Core State Standards, school leaders report inconsistent systems and practices for high-quality professional learning to support improvements in instruction.** In 2013, HPS began the critical process of transitioning its schools to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The Common Core standards promote several important shifts in teaching and learning, including higher expectations for students and an emphasis on greater depth of understanding and application of knowledge. The standards also create a tool for establishing common expectations for student learning across schools.

However, adopting Common Core standards is not a simple task and effective implementation requires a strong backbone of professional learning. A recent ERS study of professional learning strategies in high-growth systems identified three crucial enabling conditions for supporting high-quality “connected professional learning” that helps teachers improve the quality of instruction in a Common Core world.⁵ These include:

- **Rigorous, comprehensive curricula and assessments:** System leaders provide school leaders and teachers with rigorous and coherent curricula, instructional resources and assessments aligned to College- and Career-Ready Standards, such as CCSS;
- **Content-focused expert-led collaboration in schools:** Teachers are organized into teams, led by content experts, that have adequate time, support and culture of learning to collaborate effectively on instruction;
- **Frequent, growth-oriented feedback:** Teacher leaders and other content experts provide frequent, growth-oriented feedback to teachers that is designed to improve instructional practice.

To understand the extent to which these conditions are present in HPS schools, ERS conducted a survey of school leaders across the district. While responses among principals varied, as a group HPS principals observed that:

- Efforts to build common, standards-aligned curricula are still emerging in the district, with several content areas and grades, including Math and secondary grades, not yet fully covered;
- Schools lack access to common, standards-aligned formative assessments or timely data reports that help them inform their classroom practice;
- There are not enough instructional experts in schools to plan, perform classroom observations, provide feedback to teachers *and* lead teacher collaboration time;
- Schools do not schedule sufficient time, generally observed to be at least 90 minutes per week, for teachers to collaborate around shared content;
- Insufficient teacher time outside of the school year begins to learn new standards and integrate into instructional planning.

⁵ Miles, Karen Hawley et al. Education Resource Strategies (2017). Igniting the Learning Engine: How school systems accelerate teacher effectiveness and student growth through Connected Professional Learning.

Without these structures in place, teachers may struggle to understand, master and adopt standards-aligned instruction into their classrooms.

- 2. The prevalence of small grade sizes in schools constrain strategic staffing and grouping options.** At the center of HPS’ District Planning Process lies an important question about the number and grade configuration of its schools. As compared with national benchmarks, HPS operates 34% more schools relative to its overall enrollment, partially due to an increase in Magnet Schools and decrease in enrollment over the past decade. Because most schools are organized to serve grades PK through 8, there is also a greater prevalence of schools with small grade sizes (defined by ERS as fewer than 75 students per grade) than we see elsewhere.

While small grade sizes offer some benefits, such as smaller class sizes and the potential for a more tightknit school community, they also lead to fewer teachers per grade, which can impose significant constraints on school designs. These include:

- *Teacher Collaboration:* Schools may struggle to create meaningful opportunities for collaboration or mentorship for new teachers.
- *Content Expertise:* Middle school teachers must manage three or more “preps” without a shared content peer. In the context of new standards, this puts demand on teachers to develop deep content expertise across multiple subjects.
- *Flexible Grouping:* Limited grade-level staffing may limit flexibility to create small group sizes for personalized instruction.
- *Enrollment Fluctuations:* School staffing needs can vary significantly from year to year with small enrollment shifts. For example, a school with fourth grade enrollment dropping from 50 students to 32 students can only maintain a manageable class size by investing in class sizes of 16 or adopting a multi-grade classroom model.

- 3. High turnover and a late hiring process make it difficult to build a pipeline of strong teacher candidates.** As in other urban districts around the country, HPS faces significant challenges with teacher turnover, which leads to a large proportion of teachers in the earliest years of their career; in HPS, nearly 18% of teachers have less than three years of teaching experience.

HPS’ talent development challenges are exacerbated by the fact that only 27% of Hartford’s teacher vacancies are filled three months prior to the beginning of the school year. This makes it more difficult to capture the highest-potential applicants, who typically receive and accept offers earlier in the year. One study of district hiring found that most teacher applicants who withdraw from a hiring process – applicants with higher undergraduate GPAs and more completed education coursework than the teachers who remain in the pool – cite hiring timeline as a factor in their decision.⁶

⁶ Levin, Jessica and Quinn, Meredith. The New Teacher Project (2003). Missed Opportunities: How we Keep High Quality Teachers Out of Urban Classrooms.

Safe and Equitable Access to Great Schools

Past efforts to reconfigure HPS’ network of schools have focused narrowly on facilities quality and utilization, which led to politically untenable and ill-advised recommendations about school closure. In the aftermath of these thwarted efforts, HPS leadership has redoubled its commitment to safe and equitable access to schools in every neighborhood. This commitment suggests four design priorities:

- High-quality seats available and accessible to all students, especially those in underserved neighborhoods
- Subset of strongly differentiated, cross-neighborhood programs
- A logical and compatible progression of programs and grade configurations
- Safe transportation of students, regardless of school attended and neighborhood

Findings

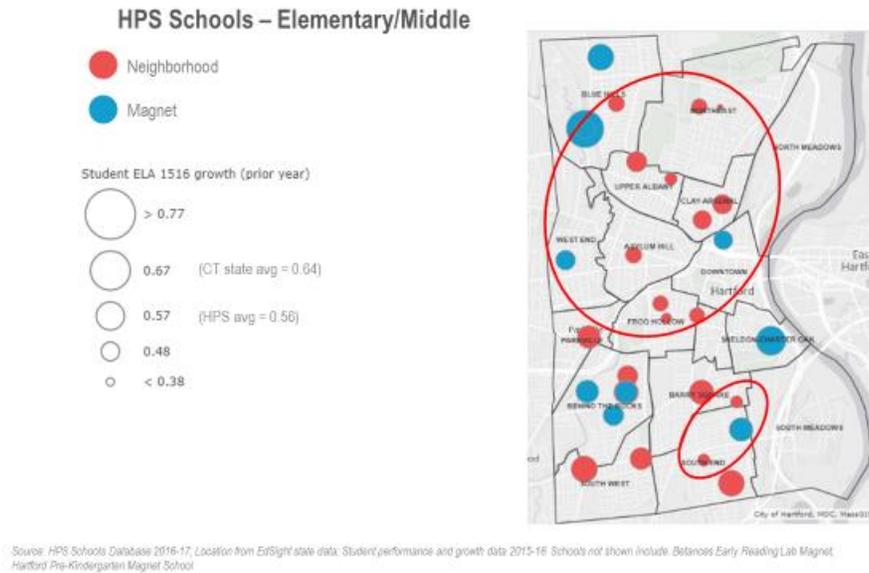
1. **Many neighborhoods in Hartford lack access to seats in higher growth elementary and K-8 schools.** Across Hartford, the number of schools generating high levels of student growth is limited⁷. Only two of HPS elementary/K-8 schools generate a level of growth that is comparable to the state’s average, and both of these are magnet schools.⁸ This finding implies a *districtwide* barrier to student access, for which systematic improvement of instructional quality is the only solution.

However, there are some neighborhoods where access to *higher* growth seats is particularly limited. An analysis of seat availability across the district reveals that some neighborhoods (i.e. Frog Hollow, Northeast, Asylum Hill, South Green and Sheldon-Charter Oaks) do not offer any seats in schools with above average growth. In other neighborhoods (i.e. Blue Hills, West End, and Sheldon-Charter Oak), there are seats available in higher growth schools, but only in Magnet schools – and in some cases many of these seats may be filled by students who are bussed from outside the school’s neighborhood.

⁷ Student growth is measured as the percentage of students reaching state-established performance targets, which are adjusted for incoming student proficiency

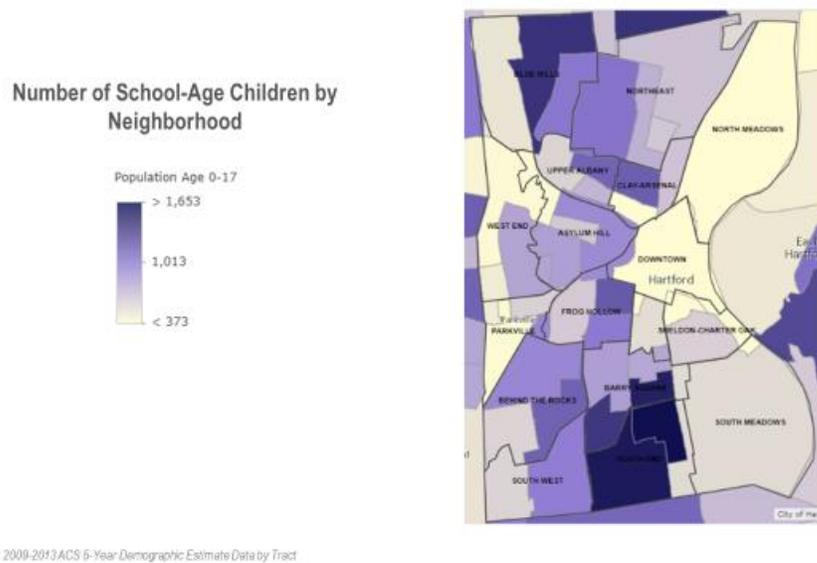
⁸ STEM Magnet at Annie Fisher (77% ELA Growth) and Kinsella Magnet School of Performing Arts (66% ELA Growth) compared to the CT average of 64%.

Figure 9. HPS Elementary, K-8 and Middle Schools by ELA Growth



Many of these same neighborhoods face significant enrollment and utilization challenges. Particularly in North Hartford, where there are a considerable number of schools with building utilization rates below 70%. However, an analysis of city populations finds that these neighborhoods are also home to significant numbers of school-aged children (e.g. Northeast Hartford is home to over 3,000 school-aged children).

Figure 10. School-Age Children in Hartford, by Neighborhood



The inconsistency between school enrollment and student populations suggests a pattern of student mobility out of home neighborhoods in North Hartford where access to higher growth seats is most limited. Mobility of this type favors students with greater vehicle access.

2. **Students in North Hartford lack safe and convenient access to a neighborhood high school.**

The vast majority of HPS students in grades 9 through 12 attend school at either Bulkeley High School or Hartford Public High School (HPHS). Within HPHS, students have access to three specialty programs: Engineering and Green Technology, Law and Government, and Nursing Academy. Because both Bulkeley and HPHS are located in the southern half of the City, students in North Hartford – a high-population and high-need portion of the City – must wake up earlier and travel further to attend school.

Figure 11. HPS Neighborhood High Schools, by Location and Enrollment



Source: HPS Schools Database 2016-17; Location from EdSight state data

3. **State Magnet policies and transportation zones limit school choice for many Hartford students.** While students in Hartford can apply to enroll in any of the district’s schools, family choice is limited by three barriers:

- *State Magnet Policies:* Specialized programs in Hartford are offered in district-run Magnet schools, for which there are rigid state admission policies. Magnet schools, which are required to enroll at least 25% “reduced isolation” students, may draw 50% or more of their students from outside of Hartford. This combination forces HPS to cast a wide net when

attracting suburban applicants, for which the likelihood of Magnet admission is nearly two times greater than for Hartford-residing applicants. Where HPS cannot fill required seats with suburban students, these seats remain vacant.

- *Late Enrollment:* In the 2015-16 school year, of 3,777 students who were new to the district, 887, or 23.5%, entered after October 1. Because this is the deadline for admission into Magnet Schools, these 887 students – who are more likely to be English Language Learners – were limited to neighborhood schools that had sufficient space to accommodate them, regardless of the school’s proximity to the student’s residence.
- *Transportation Zones:* While Hartford students can choose to enroll in a neighborhood school outside of their transportation zone, the district will not provide the student with transportation. As a result, families without vehicle access or facing scheduling conflicts may struggle to find safe transport for their student to and from school.

Because of these barriers, neighborhood schools remain the schools of first resort for many families in Hartford, thus emphasizing the need for an equitable distribution of program quality across zones and communities.

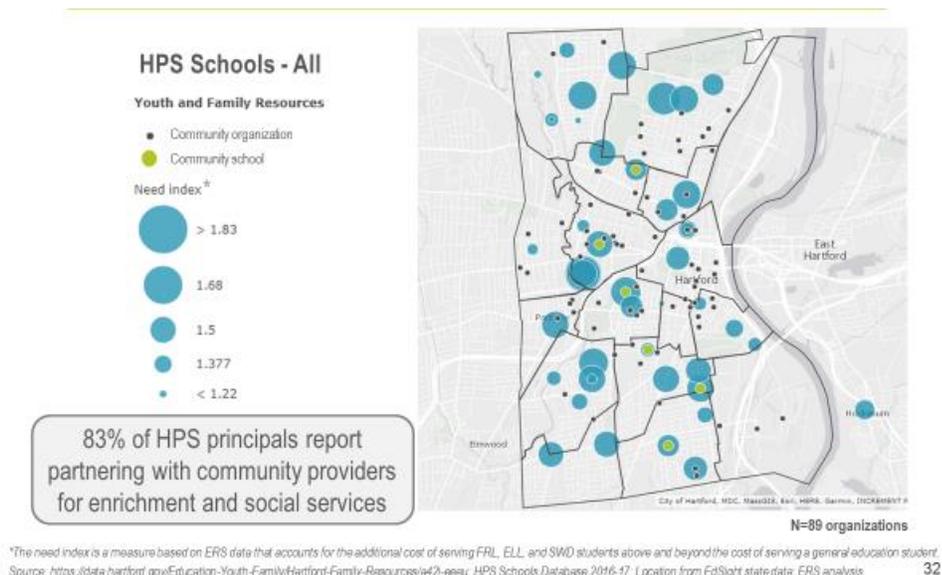
Expanded Family and Community Partnerships

Central to HPS’ theory of action for system redesign is a firm belief in the power of the community to drive change for students. Strong family and community partnerships serve as the backbone for the Strategic Operating plan and must be integrated into the DNA of schools across the district. Conversations across the community surfaced a strong desire for deep family engagement and communication in all aspects of the education system, along with integration of high-quality, learning-focused community partnerships within school communities.

Finding

While school leaders in HPS have already established partnerships with Hartford’s robust network of youth- and family organizations, the district has not yet established central systems to ensure these partnerships are effective. Eighty-three percent of HPS principals report partnering with community providers for enrichment and social services for their students, drawing on more than 70 community organizations focused on youth and families in the City. HPS’ Community School model is designed to more fully leverage the potential of school-community partnerships to support student growth.

Figure 12. HPS Schools and Neighboring Community Organizations



At the same time, interviews with district staff suggest that crucial enabling conditions may not be in place to ensure these partnerships meet the needs and priorities of the district, particularly when it comes to amplifying efforts to drive academic growth among Hartford students. These conditions include:

- Partners are chosen from a centrally managed short-list of high-quality and cost-effective organizations
- Partnership goals and performance measures align with specific school goals
- Partner staff is included in faculty team-building and training to build an aligned and connected school community
- Regular meetings with partners occur to monitor service delivery and solve problems to ensure goals are being met
- Other potential partner organizations are considered to ensure school is getting the maximum value and quality

Creating these enabling conditions requires a combination of central systems, as well as deep support for school leaders as they organize their people, time and money around a coherent school vision.

Fiscal Sustainability

While the aim of the District Planning Process is to improve school *quality* districtwide, the models adopted must be implemented in a fiscally sustainable way. To that end, the district has identified three critical elements of fiscal sustainability:

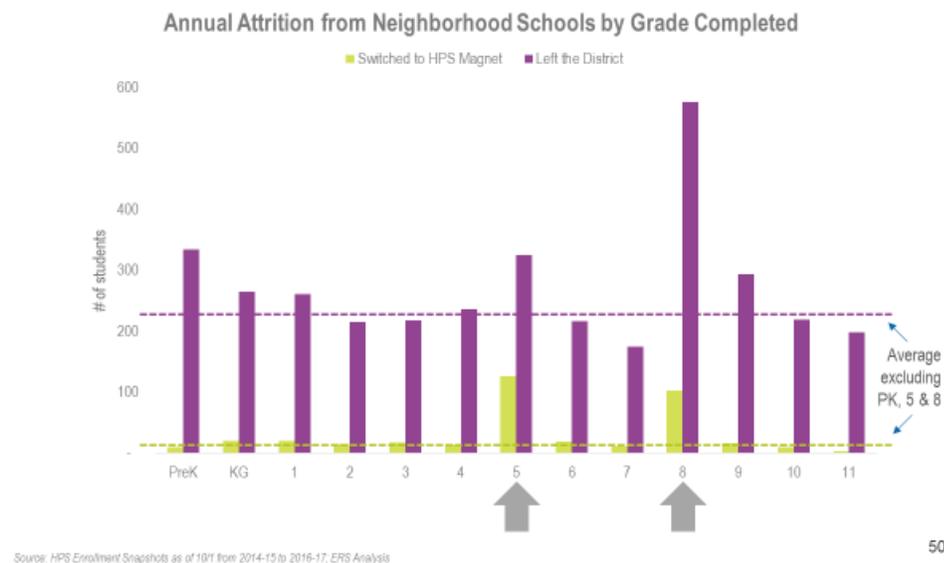
- Stable and/or growing student enrollment across all HPS schools
- Process to adjust cost structures proportionally with revenue and enrollment change
- Resources reallocated towards areas of investment with the highest impact on student outcomes

Findings

1. Enrollment decline in neighborhood schools puts downward pressure on funding and upward pressure on the cost to operate those schools. Over the past four years, enrollment in neighborhood schools has declined by 15%, while magnet school enrollment has remained stable. Because state and federal revenue are based on student enrollment, this decrease has led to a 9% decline in district operating expenditures since SY14-15, not including tuition for students attending school outside of the district.

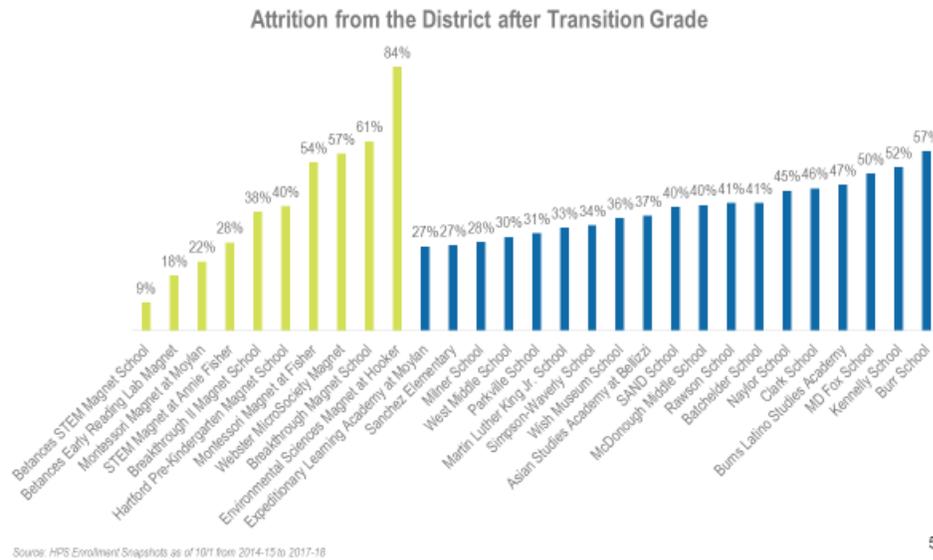
Analysis of student enrollment patterns finds that student attrition rates are significant across all grade levels, but most significant in the transitions following Pre-K, 5th grade and 8th grade. It is during these transition years that students are most likely to select an option outside of the district, or to enroll in a Magnet school.

Figure 13. Attrition from HPS Neighborhood Schools, 2014-15 to 2016-17



While no single neighborhood school is exempt from significant transition-grade attrition rates, some schools experience much higher rates of students leaving the district. The root cause of relatively high attrition rates at some schools is difficult to discern from this data alone and should not be considered a single-school issue. However, differences in attrition across schools may illustrate a greater need for family outreach and targeted retention efforts.

Figure 14. District Attrition after Transition Grades, by School

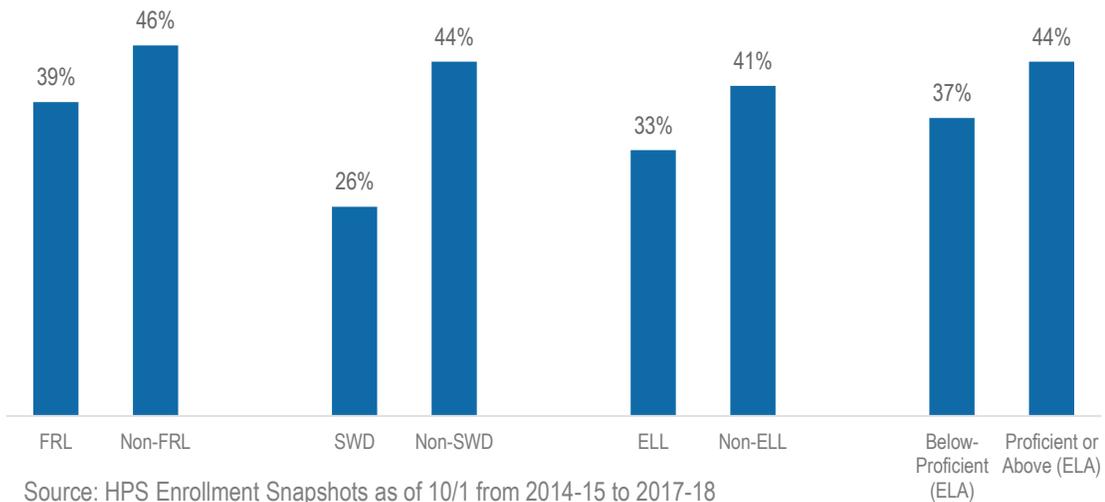


Source: HPS Enrollment Snapshots as of 10/1 from 2014-15 to 2017-18

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Transition-year attrition rates from HPS schools also vary by the needs and performance levels of students. HPS students who qualify for federal free or reduced lunch benefits, are English Language Learners or identified as having disabilities exit the district at rates lower than their less needy peers. Conversely, students who demonstrate proficiency in ELA or math are more likely to leave the district than their peers who do not demonstrate proficiency.

Figure 15. District Attrition Rates after Transition Grades, by Student Group



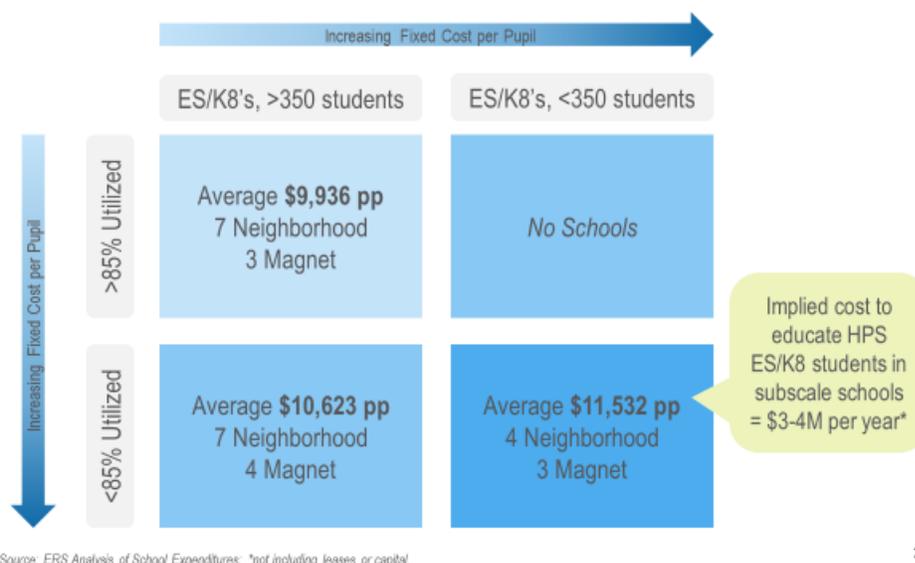
Source: HPS Enrollment Snapshots as of 10/1 from 2014-15 to 2017-18

- Small and underutilized schools bear higher costs that divert resources away from the core business of instruction.** Partially driven by the last four years of enrollment decline, the average school size in HPS is 28% smaller than urban peer districts in Connecticut.

While small schools are often considered a more personalized setting for learning, they also come with significant fixed costs. That is, as the enrollment of school decreases, the fixed costs of that schools (i.e. facilities and maintenance, school principal, etc.) are spread over fewer students, thereby requiring a greater per-pupil investment. These higher fixed costs also emerge in schools with lower rates of building utilization. With fewer students but similar staffing levels, smaller schools also require higher per-pupil investments in teaching and other staff.

Consistent with trends found in districts across the country, ERS analysis shows that schools in HPS with fewer than 350 students and utilization below 85% spend about 16% more per-pupil on average than larger schools with higher utilization. This equates to \$3-4M in annual spending to support smaller, under-utilized schools – resources that HPS could conceivably direct to higher-value investments.

Figure 16. Per-Pupil Costs in Hartford ES/K8 Schools, by Enrollment and Building Utilization



Strategic Implications

With the analysis from this study as a foundation for planning, the Hartford community must now collectively chart a clear course towards a redesigned school system. Doing so will require HPS to go beyond the analysis presented above and craft coherent strategy that reflects the priorities and identity of the Hartford community.

To this end, ERS posits the following implications to help guide the district’s strategic planning:

- **To promote equity of access and outcomes, school re-design efforts and investments should focus on currently under-served communities.** Many of these communities are in the northern half of the City, where access to seats in high-performing neighborhood schools is most limited.
- **The district should intentionally and strategically design schools to incorporate the structures we see in high-performing schools around the country.** These include enabling

meaningful opportunities for teacher collaboration, leadership and instructional improvement, and personalizing time and attention for the highest-need students.

- **To limit fixed costs and further support strategic school design, the network should ensure all schools operate at scale.** This implies working towards an ES-MS-HS structure where programmatic decisions support it,⁹ with clear and logical pathways that facilitate collaboration among school leaders to share resources and help stem enrollment losses in transition years.
- **To help achieve fiscal sustainability and Models for Excellence in schools, the district should consolidate its most under-enrolled and/or under-utilized schools.** This consolidation should be designed to create schools that are best equipped to realize the community’s goals around equity and high-quality instruction.
- **Developing and sustaining Models for Excellence will require aggressive system-level support for continuous school-based instructional improvements.** This includes a focus on faithful implementation of rigorous curricula at all levels; roll-out of high-quality “connected professional learning” practices that are tightly linked to new curricula; developing novice teachers through aggressive coaching and support models; and strategic partnership with community organizations to provide additional academic support in targeted subjects, maximize school-level flexibility and enrich the student experience.
- **HPS human capital policies should evolve to help Hartford schools attract, develop and retain high-potential educators.** To accomplish this goal, HPS should accelerate the hiring process for teachers; use teachers’ strengths and interests to inform assignment to schools and leadership roles; and work with labor partners to shift resources towards strategies that differentiate based on increased contribution (e.g. instructional leadership, school-based coaching).
- **District and city leaders may also want to evaluate transportation and choice/student assignment policies to address inequities in access to high-quality seats.** Additionally, as the population continues to shift, solutions that are informed by regional need and resource use, essentially building on existing cross-district enrollment patterns such as inter-district magnet schools, may be more appropriate for students both in Hartford and surrounding communities.

⁹ Shifting from a K-8 model to an ES/MS model does not imply that middle schools are objectively better environments for student growth than K-8 schools. Research on the value of middle schools vs. K-8s for middle-grades students is mixed, and both models offer significant benefits; for example, a K-8 model may be preferable to maintain a programmatic focus through elementary and middle grades, such as a bilingual immersion model. The implication described here is a recognition that a K-8 model both costs more than an ES-MS model and limits opportunities for actions that are most likely to be drivers of instructional improvement in Hartford. Leaders in many districts decide that K-8s are the right model for their students and make intentional and deliberate investments to support this model.

About ERS

ERS is a non-profit organization dedicated to transforming how urban school systems organize resources—people, time, and money—so that every school succeeds for every student.

Since 2004, we have worked hand-in-hand with the leaders of over 30 school systems and several states on topics such as funding equity, budget development, central office support, teacher compensation and career path, and strategic school design. We also share research and practical tools based on our extensive dataset, and we collaborate with others to create the conditions for change in education.

In all of our work, we focus on the larger picture—how resources work together to create high-performing systems. Our non-profit status enables a different kind of partnership with districts and states: one where we participate in the transformation struggle, create insights together, and share lessons with others.

We believe that for *every* school to succeed for *every* student, schools must look very different from today. School and district leaders must identify the resource shifts required to protect the most important instructional investments that support student outcome goals while ensuring fiscal sustainability. Most schools will only get there if school systems leverage data to understand resource use and redesign their central office to provide schools with what they need to succeed.

For more about Education Resource Strategies, please visit www.erstrategies.org.

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