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Marc Porter Magee, ConnCAN, Education Committee Hearing, February 23, 2009

My name is Marc Porter Magee. I am the Chief Operating Officer for the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now. Through public communication, research and policy work, community outreach and legislative advocacy, ConnCAN is working to help close Connecticut's two achievement gaps—between the rich and poor students in our state and between all of our students and their peers around the world.

I am testifying today in support of **House Bill No. 6491: An Act Concerning Longitudinal Studies of Student Achievement**. ConnCAN is asking the Connecticut General Assembly to 'Mind the Gaps' in public education this legislative session, and one of the three ways you can do that is by enacting this no cost bill to bring greater transparency to our schools.

The bill will promote greater transparency in Connecticut schools by requiring that the Connecticut State Department of Education allow nonprofits and universities to use the longitudinal student achievement data that the state is already collecting, at no additional cost to the state.

In 2007, the legislature allocated \$6.4 million to create unique student identifiers for every student in the state and link them to test scores, but the State Department of Education has not publicly released this data. The linked data sits idle, and the promise of unique student identifiers remains unfulfilled: parents, nonprofits, and universities still do not have access to data about growth in student achievement. Because SDE does not release growth data, it is difficult to fully determine a school's effects on student improvement

One important way this data could be used by nonprofits and universities is to provide parents with information about academic improvement in their children's schools in order to make informed choices.

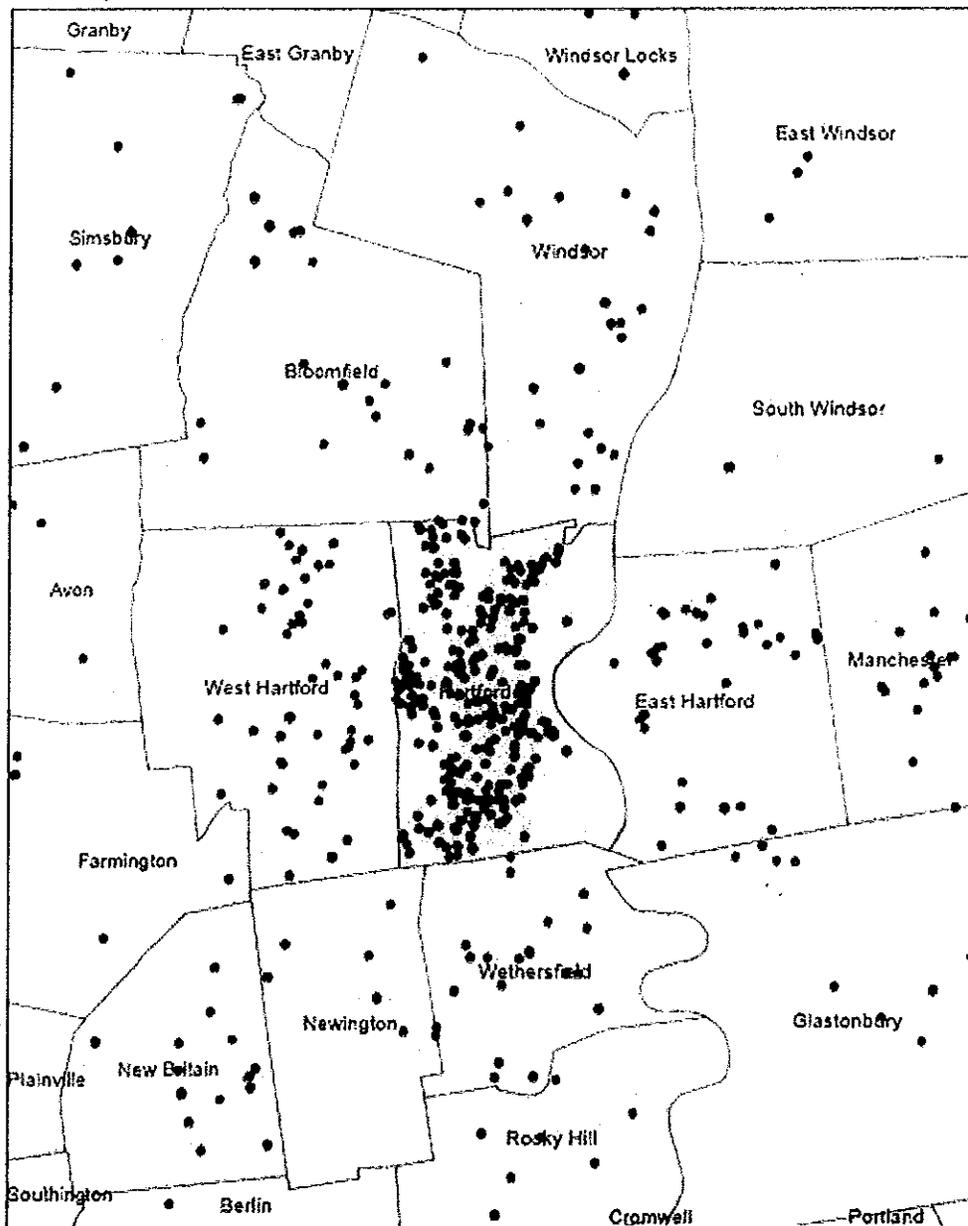
The SmartChoices website (<http://smartchoices.trincoll.edu>), developed jointly by ConnCAN and The Cities, Suburbs, and Schools Project at Trinity College, provides just one example of how this data might be used in the service of parental choice. It is the tip of the iceberg in terms of the innovative tools that could be made available if HB 6491 becomes law.

SmartChoices is an interactive website designed to help parents in the Greater Hartford region decide which public school they would like their child to attend. By simply typing their address and child's grade into the search box, SmartChoices automatically maps all of the public schools for which their child is eligible, listing them by name, distance, and racial balance and test score 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 suburbs.

SmartChoices is the first website to cut through the maze of public school choices arising from two sources: the court-approved Sheff v. O'Neill regional school desegregation remedy and the Hartford Public Schools' "all-choice" initiative. By navigating through the factors influencing

Parents deserve transparency about academic improvement in their children's schools in order to make informed choices. H.B. 6491 will make it possible to provide parents with a much more accurate picture by allowing organizations like ConnCAN and Trinity College to obtain the data needed to provide this critical public service and I urge members of the committee to support its passage.

### SmartChoices user statistics, by search address, from Jan 5 - Feb 13, 2009



Data: SmartChoices user statistics  
Map: by Jack Dougherty, Cities, Suburbs & Schools project at Trinity College. February 13, 2009

See more at <http://smartchoices.trincoll.edu>



## 2009 LEGISLATIVE BRIEF

### Data & Transparency

*An innovative, no-cost approach to using state education data well.*

- When harnessed properly by educators, data is one of the most powerful tools to increase student achievement: with accurate information, educators can diagnose student achievement, provide corrective support and set goals for future learning.
- Policymakers and researchers need accurate information about school performance in order to direct public funding to maximum effect.
- Parents deserve transparency about academic improvement in their children's schools in order to make informed choices.

#### The Problem

- In 2007 the legislature allocated \$6 million to create unique student identifiers for every student in the state and link them to test scores, but the State Department of Education has not publicly released this data.
- The linked data sits idle, and the promise of unique student identifiers remains unfulfilled: parents, nonprofits, and universities still do not have access to data about growth in student achievement.
- Because SDE does not release growth data, it is difficult to fully determine a school's effects on student improvement.
- Because they do not make use of this linked data, Connecticut's high school graduation rates are unreliable, as state officials themselves acknowledge.

#### The Solution

- The State Department of Education should release the linked data to nonprofit partners and universities (shielded to protect individual student privacy), and these partners can then use their own resources to make the information accessible to the public.
- SDE's Strategic School Profiles, currently available online, should include aggregated individual level student achievement gains.
- Instead of letting important information about Connecticut schools sit idle, SDE should be required to make it available to researchers, at no extra cost to the department.
- Providing universities and nonprofit organizations with the linked data would open up a universe of possible studies.
  - Researchers could study the direct effects of various reading programs on student achievement.
  - Accurate high school graduation rates would be easier to measure.
  - Longitudinal studies of student performance from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade could shed light on intervention programs, curriculum changes, and teacher quality.
- Projects like Trinity College and ConnCAN's SmartChoices website (<http://smartchoices.trincoll.edu/>) can make accurate school performance data accessible to parents.