

FROM THE FRONT

“To Ammu, her twins seemed like a pair of small bewildered frogs engrossed in each other’s company, lolloping arm in arm down a highway full of hurtling traffic...”

ARUNDHATI ROY THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

Behind marketing efforts, a ’90s desegregation policy

SCHOOLS FROM PAGE 1

**The school choice solution**

New Haven Public Schools’ push to build magnet schools in the late 1990s and 2000s was fueled in large part by a landmark state Supreme Court case on school integration.

In 1996, the Connecticut Supreme Court ruled in *Sheff v. O’Neill* that “racial and ethnic isolation” in Hartford-area schools constituted a form of illegal segregation under the state constitution, violating students’ right to “equal educational opportunity.” Black and Latino students were concentrated in Hartford public schools, while the surrounding districts were overwhelmingly white. The court ordered the state legislature to intervene.

The next year, legislators in the General Assembly responded with several remedies. One involved the development of magnet schools in urban centers that would attract students from across town lines with special programs.

Ed Linehan, who supervised New Haven’s magnet schools during their development in the 1990s and 2000s, said the preexisting public schools in cities like New Haven and Hartford had historically seen lower scores on state performance exams, deterring families who could afford to live elsewhere.

“How are you going to convince a family in Woodbridge or Guilford or North Branford or North Haven to have their kids get on the bus and go to school in New Haven, in lower-performing school districts?” Linehan asked in a phone interview. “The state, understanding that challenge, said, ‘Well, they’re not applying to a school district, they’re applying to a school. And so that school has to have a specialized offering, and it has to have a clear benefit for why a family would consider it.’”

The 1997 legislation created an avenue for school districts to be fully

Roughly 29 percent of Ross Woodward’s students come from out of the city. The student population is 51.9 percent Latino, 32.4 percent Black and just 7.6 percent white, meaning that it fails to meet the state’s “reduced isolation standard” of 25 percent of students not identifying as Black or Latino.

When interdistrict magnet schools in New Haven don’t meet the state’s diversity mandates, they are required to submit a “compliance plan” outlining how the school has sought to recruit the target students and how they can better hone their strategy, according to Middleton, the district’s school choice director. He described the documents as “exhaustive,” spanning 50 pages and requiring two or three months to complete.

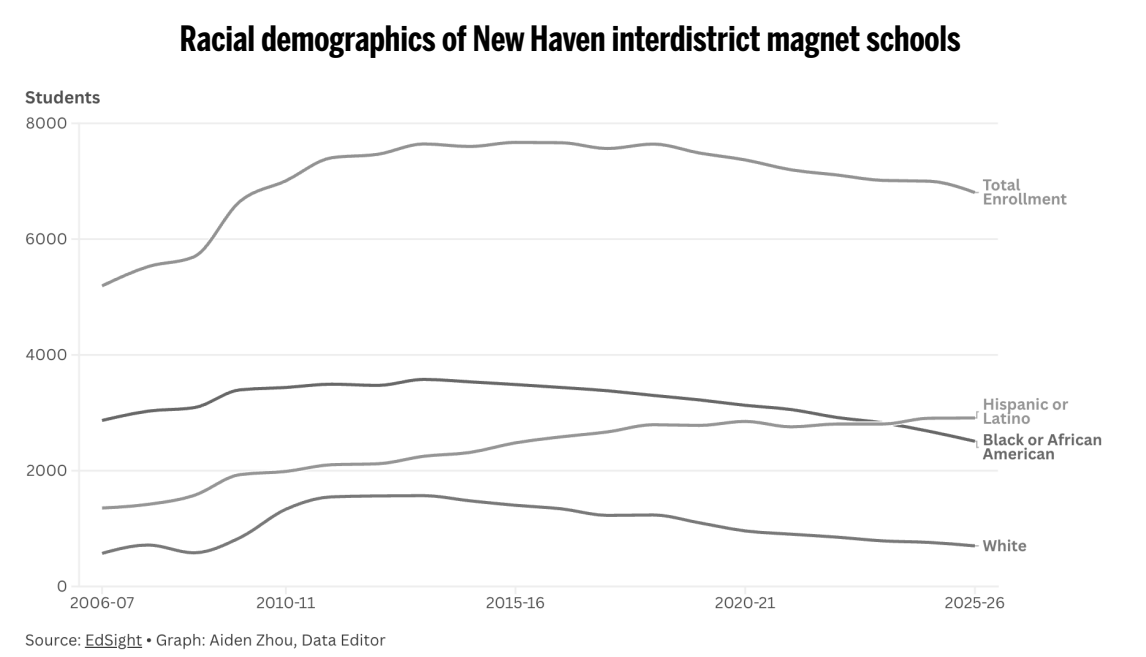
In her compliance reports, Finn said she outlines how she spends time advertising Ross Woodward’s magnet theme to prospective families, including those in suburban towns.

“We are a classical-studies-through-a-digital-lens-themed school,” she said. “In eighth grade, we’re reading Charles Dickens or Emily Brontë.”

She has traveled to popular family destinations, such as a trampoline park in Hamden and a Chuck E. Cheese in Orange, to tell parents about her school’s program, she said.

“It always is shocking to me how few people from East Haven and North Haven know that we’re an option,” Finn said. “People think New Haven, and you think downtown traffic and terrible bus commutes and all this negative, negative. And then I’m like, ‘Oh, no, I’m off of Exit 8 on 91.’”

The option to submit a compliance plan emerged in 2020 after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before then, schools that didn’t meet the state’s diversity standards could lose their state grant funding — a risk that, in 2018, prompted New Haven Public Schools to shutter Cortlandt



85.4 percent white residents. North Branford, just above it, has 91.5 percent white residents.

“So it’s made it harder where we have to go further into the suburban areas to attract families,” Middleton said. “But the reality is that a family living in, let’s say, Stratford or Milford, may not see the immediate value of coming into New Haven to help create and support diversity.”

Middleton said he thought state leaders should play a larger role in helping parents in suburban areas recognize the value of a more diverse education, perhaps through an incentive program for suburban towns to send their students into city schools.

Finn said that many of the suburban families she meets are impressed to learn about some of the offerings at Ross Woodward, like its two gym teachers, drumline and band programs and frequent school programming open to families. But she conceded that some families might choose to remain in their home districts because of extracurricular programs or after-school care not offered in New Haven.

Finn said suburban districts don’t have an incentive to promote interdistrict magnet schools to their students.

“Realistically, districts don’t advertise for other districts,” Finn said. “I do think that that’s kind of silly, in my professional opinion, especially if you’re having a child that’s not being successful. Maybe interdistrict magnet schools offer some of those extra programs to help other kids be successful that might not be offered in a home district.”

The superintendents of the public school districts in Milford, Guilford, North Haven, North Branford, Woodbridge and East Haven did not reply to the News’ inquiries about their role in interdistrict magnet schools enrollment.

**A solution in vain?**

For years, New Haven government and school district leaders have attributed many of the school system’s internal challenges — the elimination of staff positions, struggling facilities, school closures — to insufficient support from the state.

Connecticut’s public education system is different from that of many other states in that Connecticut municipalities operate their own separate school districts within the same borders. Because most funding for Connecticut public schools comes

from local tax dollars, towns with higher property values and more taxable property can spend more money on their schools.

During the 2024–25 school year, New Haven spent \$21,346 per pupil, while the nearby towns of Guilford, Hamden and Branford — with higher median household incomes — spent \$23,841, \$24,882, and \$29,396, respectively. Some policy advocates think these disparities are exactly what has prevented interdistrict magnet schools — designed to make town borders “permeable,” as Linehan, the schools’ onetime supervisor, put it — from reversing deeply entrenched segregation.

“I don’t know if anyone thought that just creating a magnet school system was going to solve how segregated Connecticut towns and schools are. That was not a realistic goal,” Michael Morton, the deputy executive director of the State + School Finance Project policy organization, said in a Zoom interview.

“We’re very segregated by town, which means we’re very segregated by school district,” Morton said. “And that hasn’t changed. And it’s not the fault of magnet schools that that hasn’t changed.”

In her majority opinion in *Sheff v. O’Neill*, then chief justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court Ellen Peters made a similar observation about the state’s municipal school districts. The 1909 districting statute dividing the state’s school districts along town lines was, Peters wrote, “the single most important factor contributing to the present concentration of racial and ethnic minorities” in the Hartford region.

Elizabeth Horton Sheff, the lead plaintiff in the original *Sheff v. O’Neill* case and now an activist for integrated education in the Hartford region, said that the preservation of “local control” has held the state back from uprooting segregation in its public schools.

“Sheff is not meant to be a panacea,” she said of her case. “It never was, and it never will be.”

**‘Create these experiences for our kids’**

Beyond the specialized themes and the marketing investments, New Haven Public Schools’ strategy for attracting diverse suburban students is straightforward: “school improvement,” in the words of Bonanno, the magnet grant supervisor.

She described the district’s extensive efforts to strengthen opportunities at all of its schools, including career training, partnerships with professional institutions like Yale New Haven Hospital and dual enrollment courses at local universities. The grant funding the district receives to operate its interdistrict magnet program supports those opportunities.

“We are taking advantage of inviting their suburban peers here so that we can create these experiences for our kids,” Bonanno said. “Because without that, we simply do not have the resources to do it on our own.”

Hill Regional Career High School is located blocks away from the Yale School of Medicine and Yale New Haven Hospital. The school’s magnet programs focus on health and business, bolstered by ties to Yale and dual enrollment courses at Southern Connecticut State University. According to the school’s 2025–26 course catalog, one class includes “bimonthly visits to observe in the Yale Medical School Cadaver Lab,” while others offer training for students to become emergency medical technicians and certified nursing assistants.

The school also belongs to the majority of interdistrict magnet schools in New Haven that don’t meet the state’s “reduced isolation” standard. Of Career’s 626 students, just 8.5 percent are white, 5.75 percent are Asian and 3 percent identify as two or more races, according to state enrollment data. The rest are Black and Latino.

Sophomore Jelwa Hemat immigrated to the United States from Afghanistan when she was 4 years old, and said that many of her peers at Career hail from a variety of places, including Puerto Rico and Jamaica.

“The diversity in our school really shows you a different perspective,” Hemat said. “It also shows you what people can go through, because there’s people from all over the world, and once you hear their stories, you’re genuinely shocked.”

She said she would call Career diverse, with the caveat that “there’s not a lot of white people that go to our school.”

Hill Regional Career High School is located at 140 Legion Ave.

Contact  
**SABRINA THALER**  
at [sabrina.thaler@yale.edu](mailto:sabrina.thaler@yale.edu).

*“We are taking advantage of inviting their suburban peers here so that we can create these experiences for our kids.”*

reimbursed by the state for all capital expenditures associated with the construction of schools that would demonstrably “reduce racial, ethnic and economic isolation.” The funding boosted an effort already underway to rebuild and modernize New Haven’s public school buildings.

“We were like, ‘Shit. We’re gonna, you know what? We’ll rebuild every school,’” John DeStefano, who was New Haven’s mayor from 1994 to 2014, said in a phone interview, referring to the conversion of some local school buildings to interdistrict magnet schools with full state reimbursement.

Linehan said that by the time his tenure in the district ended in 2006, it was operating 18 interdistrict magnet schools, some brand-new and some converted from existing schools.

Within about a decade of their establishment, New Haven’s interdistrict magnet schools appeared to be making a difference, a 2009 report by researchers at University of Connecticut found. Students of color in the New Haven, Hartford and Waterbury school districts experienced “considerably more integrated peer environments” in interdistrict magnet schools than other schools, the report said.

The report also found that the magnet school students outperformed those at non-magnet schools across several criteria, with higher attendance rates, lower drop-out rates and better performance on standardized tests. The researchers conducted school climate surveys of students, which determined that the schools’ diversity fostered closer relationships across racial groups than in non-magnet settings.

Still, in the 2007–08 school year, most Latino and Black students enrolled in New Haven’s interdistrict magnet schools attended schools with less than 20 percent white enrollment.

**From Chuck E. Cheese to 50-page reports**

Elizabeth Finn directs recruitment efforts at Ross Woodward Classical Studies Interdistrict Magnet School, promoting the K-8 school in Quinnipiac Meadows to prospective families within and beyond New Haven.

V.R. Creed Health and Sports Science High School after it failed to meet the reduced isolation requirements.

Demographic data released by Connecticut shows an overall rise in Latino enrollment in New Haven’s interdistrict magnet schools as the proportion of Black and white students has declined since 2007, the earliest year for which data is available on a state website.

In 2007, Cooperative Arts & Humanities Magnet High School enrolled 27.8 percent white students, 22.5 percent Latino students, and 49 percent Black students, the News reported at the time. Today, according to state enrollment data, that school enrolls only 12.7 percent white students, 40 percent Latino students, and 42.7 percent Black students. Most of the district’s interdistrict magnet schools have seen a similar shift over the past 20 years.

According to data provided by Connecticut’s Department of Education, most of New Haven’s interdistrict magnet schools continue to meet Connecticut’s residency standard for interdistrict magnet schools, which requires that no more than 75 percent of the students at each be residents of the host school district.

But one significant reason for the magnet schools’ shrinking white population, district leaders told the News, was that the suburban areas they recruit from are simply less white than they once were — a demographic trend affecting schools far beyond New Haven and Connecticut.

William Frey, a demographer and senior fellow at Brookings Metro, said in a Zoom interview that an aging white population and largely Latino immigration have contributed to an increasing proportion of people of color among American youth, including in historically white suburbs.

According to Michele Bonanno, the New Haven district’s supervisor of magnet grant programs, its magnet admissions process is race-blind: Administrators cannot see applicants’ races.

West Haven and Hamden, two neighboring towns, have populations with near-parity between white and non-white residents. Branford, a more distant suburb, has



Logan Dinkins / Staff Photographer

In a 1990s integration push, New Haven began building specialized schools to expose Black and Latino students to more white peers. Today, district leaders striving to market the magnet schools still struggle to hit diversity targets.