

Dear Tolland Families:

Each day for the last ten years I have come to work every morning feeling the energy of the children in our schools. Their youthful exuberance, honesty (sometimes *profound honesty*), optimism and love of learning and each other inspire me. It has been my great pleasure serving you as an educator here.

Last night I didn't get much sleep. In fact, I finally arose at about 2 AM and figured I would just get some work done. I have been told of "information" communicated through social media and otherwise about the Open Choice Program and "those kids" being "bussed in," as well as a perceived heavy financial impact of doing so. I feel that I need to communicate something at the risk of passing over the "Superintendentee" line of being very official and sometimes abstract.

While I think there has been much accomplished in Tolland, including a consistent Math program, excellent SAT scores, Writer's Workshop, and more; we are desperately lacking in our approach to culturally responsive education. This is *not* an ancillary part of educating a child, it is as critical as a consistent Math program. Not having an education that is culturally responsive will leave children with significant deficits as they attempt to navigate their way through our increasingly multicultural and complex world.

The Tolland Public Schools are highly segregated; we are one of the most highly segregated in a highly segregated state. This needs to be recognized as a problem that is necessary to solve. This negatively impacts the children. In a Board meeting that included students from Social Studies classes last year, our own students described the disadvantage to them of what they called "living in a bubble." Our own Board Policy 6011 reiterates **the 21st Century Skills** schools are required to foster in children, not the least of which are:

- Personal responsibility and productivity through positive contributions to society
- Interpersonal skills that actively support and contribute to the community and school effort
- Skills for personal growth as well as cultural and global awareness

In this letter I want to dispel some of what I have been hearing is "out there." I deeply respect any opposing opinions respectfully stated on any matter. And I hold every child and resident of Tolland dear to my heart. If that were not true, I would not bother attempting to remedy this issue. It seems the path forward on this issue is not necessarily the easy one – but it is the right one.

I will put out a document on the Open Choice Program in Tolland with Q and A. Based on the timeliness of responding to some of the concerns, I am sharing this letter first. Therefore, some of this information will be somewhat more generalized than it will be in the later document.

The Open Choice Program: An Overview

In accordance with Connecticut General Statute 10-266aa there is a state-wide inter-district public school program called Open Choice. Under this program, local and regional school districts identify seats available to students from certain cities, in our case, Hartford. Students attending those districts may apply for such seats and once admitted, attend school there. In the Hartford region, the program has been in place for 50 years and is serving over 2,400 students attending schools in 28 districts. Open Choice has been identified as an important program in helping to reduce racial and ethnic segregation.

The state provides funding for this program in three ways: 1) School districts are entitled to count one-half of students attending the Open Choice Program for purposes of state ECS funding. 2) School districts receive funding based on the percentage of Open Choice students in relation to total student population in the district described in the link (presentation) in my 9/19 newsletter: \$3,000 Per OC student with enrollment of less than 2% of student body, \$4,000 per OC student with enrollment greater than 2%, \$6,000 per OC student with enrollment greater than or equal to 3%, \$8,000 per OC student for districts who enroll greater than or equal to 4%. Regional Educational Service Centers, in this case CREC (Capitol Region Education Council) manages the Open Choice Program on behalf of the state, and serves as a liaison between the families and the receiving school districts. In the Hartford region, the State Department of Education runs the Regional School Choice Office lottery that places student applicants into districts that participate in Open Choice. The local district (in this case Tolland) determines how many seats, and in which grades, it opens up each year to this program. In Tolland, as a new participant, I anticipate less than ten applicants, and most likely less than five, for the 2017-2018 year. 3) The state covers the cost of transportation for Open Choice students, and the sending district (Hartford) is responsible for any special education costs above the grant amount received in item #2. These factors are often large considerations in per pupil expenditures, and they are covered *by the state and the sending district (Hartford)*.

I will go over the financial components of the Open Choice Program as they relate to Tolland in greater detail later in the letter. Although this is *not* why we would participate in the program, Tolland does stand to have a financial benefit by being involved. Please see “Financial Considerations” for more information about the financial implications of participation. Please also note the allocations above do not account for the additional monies available to districts through the various grants that will be available. Therefore a statement that this program would be unadvisable for financial reasons does not take into account all of the information.

One important thing to think about regarding *who* will apply for this program, for any seats **the Tolland BOE and administration consult on to make available** in Tolland, is the following: parents who seek participation in this program are as likely as any to deeply care and be involved in their child’s education. They are willing to put their precious children on a bus, earlier in the morning, to travel twenty four miles away from their homes to a place that has a sea of faces unlike their own. They will be surrounded by people that are culturally different from themselves. This is a huge act of faith, and trust, in Tolland (if they select to make Tolland one of the places to which they apply). The children from Hartford have the same fears, dreams and goals, and in many ways are similar to Tolland children but leave the familiarity of their own neighborhoods to improve their future. The district will work closely with CREC to ensure a smooth transition, and we will have community conversations this year to encourage dialogue about diversity and integrated education.

Educational Considerations

When considering the Open Choice Program, and the other districts that are a part of it—Avon, Berlin, Bolton, Bristol, Canton, Cromwell, East Granby, East Windsor, Ellington, Enfield, Farmington, Glastonbury, Granby, Newington, Plainville, Portland, Rocky Hill, Simsbury, Somers, South Windsor, Southington, Suffield, West Hartford, Wethersfield, Windsor and Windsor Locks—one might wonder

what they know that we do not. I would suggest that what they are aware of is that much can be gained from participation.

As I mentioned before, schools are required to teach to 21st Century Skills. The Common Core is full of references to cultural education, and students who do not have exposure to this crucial aspect of life skills will, without a doubt, be at a disadvantage as large as if any school system failed to provide Mathematics, Language Arts, Social Studies, English or Unified Arts instruction. When they arrive at the next stage of life and interact with others different from themselves, without such education, young people can inadvertently end up judged, isolated, and driving division rather than making the “positive contributions to society” 21st Century Skills require.

The ability to interact productively with others is crucial. Such skills are important in work, community settings, and to one’s overall economic condition as productivity depends on problem solving and action in a workplace and society that is more culturally diverse. Given the learning process is socially constructed and shared, prior knowledge, beliefs and experiences shape what we learn. The opportunities of what we learn are shaped by those with whom we interact. Having cultural diversity in our student body will provide an opportunity to develop life skills that no isolated power point or “visit” to another school, devoid of daily interaction with other individuals different from ourselves, could ever provide.

Challenging previous assumptions, grappling with problems that do not have easy answers and considering different viewpoints of events provide opportunities for academic and social growth. Working through problems with people different from ourselves creates opportunities for learning new skills that otherwise are not possible.

Financial Considerations

I deeply respect this concern. We have struggled in Tolland, there is no question. We have had failed referendums, and we have been subject to a loss of positions over the last few years. New sources of revenue for Tolland, and the schools, are hard to find. That being said, please take into consideration the following: other than the current tax base of Tolland and what is allocated to the schools through referendum, the Tolland Public Schools do not have a lot of sources of “outside” revenue. This is *especially* important to consider given our *fixed costs*. The “per pupil expenditure,” while a part of the overall equation, is an amalgamated number that is insufficient to use to foster an understanding of the big picture.

Some of our biggest fixed costs are facilities, transportation, personnel and special education/outplacements. One could argue that up to a certain threshold curriculum, insurance, security and other items could be added as well. These costs represent costs we will incur whether Tolland is involved with the Open Choice Program or not.

For example if an early elementary grade X has 135 students, with eight teachers employed for this grade, an average class size of 17 is achieved. In order for there to be a teacher (personnel), a classroom (facilities), heat (facilities), required transportation to and from school, and special services for those who need it, we have fixed costs in our budget. If the number of students in grade X is increased by **ten** the average class size would go up to 18. These same fixed costs would exist whether we have an average size of 17 or 18 in the classroom. Although relatively few additional fixed costs will be incurred

up to a certain threshold (adding 10 is different than adding 100 for the grade X for instance), the district will *receive* additional funds *from* the state for being a part of this program, and we determine the number of seats offered to Hartford students. In the Open Choice Scenario #1, where under 2% are enrolled, Tolland could stand to see upwards of more than \$100,000.00+ for enrolling approximately ten students in Kindergarten and ten in First grade. This is \$100,000.00+ we would otherwise not have, it is funding that is not taken from the taxpayers of Tolland, and it is funding that can make a big difference in our schools. Many other school systems have seen the benefits of this, as their local budgets and enrollments decline, as a way of providing a financial benefit to the district. One piece of information to note is that some districts whose percentage budget increase is not that different from our own were *adding* net positions last year while Tolland was eliminating them. We cannot continue to operate with business as usual in Tolland, something has to change if we are going to adapt to the changing climate both cultural and financial.

Moral and Patriotic Considerations

As was pointed out in an education periodical (Edweek) back in 2004:

"Most Americans agree that the nation should aspire to be a society in which racial and ethnic differences are respected and do not predict one's life chances. The successful pursuit of this goal would lead to a reduction in crime, the narrowing of the achievement gap, and the greater realization of individual potential. School integration will hasten the day when these benefits can be secured."

Although the Tolland Board of Education has requested to be a part of the Open Choice Program, the state must approve Tolland's participation in the program. If people express that "those children" are not welcome in Tolland, the state may deem Tolland to be a place to which it will not subject the children of Hartford.

In my opinion, this would be a very sad day for this community. I sincerely hope that Tolland does not close its doors to the growth and learning that our students have asked for, and which we are trying to provide, in part through the Open Choice Program.

What Happens Next?

- (October) A school site visit conducted by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and Capitol Region Education Council (CREC) to assess the school climate and the school system's readiness to participate in the Open Choice Program.
- (October) Administration meet with the Connecticut State Department of Education Choice Division staff and CREC staff to discuss operational procedures, professional development, programs and services.
- (October) CSDE considers the Tolland Board of Education request for participation in the Hartford Region Open Choice Program.
- (October/November) Town-based series of Community Conversations facilitated by CREC staff during the year scheduled by October.
- (October) School based professional development planned for execution this year.
- (October) CSDE review, in partnership with CREC, of district and school handbooks and policies.

- (October) CSDE in partnership with CREC reviews district portfolio including staffing practices.
- (November) Inventory of human capital and diversity experiences of staff conducted to develop professional development opportunities with the assistance from the CREC staff.
- (November) Diversity and school climate survey conducted in the Town with the assistance of CREC staff.
- (April) District participates (if accepted) in a centralized registration process for the seats it opened up for Open Choice participants.
- (April) District professionals and key support personnel participate in a bus tour of Hartford facilitated by CREC.

I hope that this information is helpful. Please let me know if there is any additional information I can provide. While I get lots of requests for information, I will work through any request for information in as timely a manner as I can. I will engage in conversation on the topic with anyone who desires it.

Sincerely,

Walter Willett

Superintendent of the Tolland Public Schools