



For Immediate Release

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UNIQUE TECHNOLOGY EMPOWERS PARENTS TO NAVIGATE PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE PROCESS

SmartChoices Expanded for Parents in Greater Hartford Region

Hartford, CT – As the public school choice season opens in Greater Hartford, both urban and suburban parents can again rely on a powerful digital tool to compare their growing number of options. Now in its second year, the SmartChoices website (<http://SmartChoicesHartford.org>) has been launched with expanded capabilities and supported with a series of hands-on workshops to increase access for parents across the “digital divide.”

SmartChoices, available in both English and Spanish, covers over 200 public schools and programs in the city of Hartford and 17 suburban towns. When parents type in their child’s address and grade level, SmartChoices shows all of their eligible district and interdistrict public schools on a map, with the ability to sort and compare by distance from home, racial balance, and test scores. Additional links take parents directly to individual school websites, application forms, and bus information. SmartChoices is the only comprehensive website that brings together all of this information for “one-stop shopping.”

Last year, over a six week period, more than 1,600 users logged onto the website to research schools located in Greater Hartford.

“The website was very informational,” commented Sylvia Garcia, a Hartford parent who learned about SmartChoices at a recent workshop. “It showed me a lot of things that I didn’t know a website could provide, such as test scores.” Garcia’s son attends Kindergarten at their neighborhood school, and she is now thinking about applying to schools that she might not otherwise have considered.

To increase parent access, SmartChoices will be brought directly to Hartford’s neighborhoods through a series of free parent workshops and “choice parties” in residents’ homes and community centers.

Both the website and parent workshops are products of collaboration between three academic and non-profit organizations: Trinity College, the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN), and Achieve Hartford!

The interactive map-based digital tool was designed by a team of faculty, students and computing staff at Trinity, led by Jack Dougherty, associate professor of educational studies, working in collaboration with ConnCAN. Achieve Hartford! joined the project in its second year as a funder and promoter.

In Greater Hartford, January is the peak of the public school choice season. Parents are encouraged to search the website before and after attending the upcoming school choice fair on Saturday, January 30 from 9 a.m. to noon at the Hartford Magnet Middle School, 43 Vernon Street, Hartford.

The Regional School Choice Office accepts interdistrict school applications (paper or internet) through February 5, and the Hartford Public Schools accepts district all-choice applications (internet only) through March 30.

SmartChoices was created to help parents navigate through the maze of public school options arising from the *Sheff v O'Neill* desegregation remedy and Hartford Public Schools' "all-choice" initiative. As a result of the 1996 state Supreme Court ruling, Connecticut has subsidized voluntary city-suburban desegregation efforts, largely through suburban choice options and the expansion of interdistrict magnet schools, rising from 5 to 26 over the past decade. In addition, as part of a reform agenda now underway in the Hartford public school system, a citywide "all-choice" system has been adopted to increase parent access and school accountability within Connecticut's largest urban district. Parental choice is a key driver in Hartford's turnaround efforts. From a parent's perspective, the combined effect of these reforms means that a typical Hartford family now faces 25 to 35 different public school options for each child.

"Families can only make informed choices if they have user-friendly and reliable information," explained Dougherty. "Compared to other websites we've seen across the nation, SmartChoices is the only one that provides address-specific public school eligibility and school-to-school data comparisons that parents can understand."

Dougherty and his students in the Cities, Suburbs, and Schools Project at Trinity are also researching how parents interact with the website and whether it affects their school choice decision-making process. To encourage broader dissemination, Trinity is sharing the SmartChoices computer code as free and open-source software for other regions to adopt and modify for their local contexts.

"Parents vote with their feet in a system of choice," said Alex Johnston, ConnCAN chief executive officer. "And SmartChoices Hartford helps parents use their powerful choice tool wisely."

"For Hartford's promising progress to continue, parents need to know the facts before they can make smart choices for their children," said Jim Starr, executive director of Achieve

Hartford!. “We’re hopeful that with tools like the SmartChoices Hartford website, parents around the city will be empowered to not only actively participate, but to help drive positive change in our public schools.”

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The Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN) is an advocacy organization building a new movement of concerned Connecticut citizens working to create fundamental change in our education system. To learn more, visit: www.conncan.org.

Founded in Hartford, CT, in 1823, Trinity College (www.trincoll.edu) is an independent nonsectarian liberal arts college with more than 2,200 students from 43 states and 41 countries. The faculty and alumni include recipients of the Pulitzer Prize, the MacArthur Award, Guggenheims, Rockefellers and other national academic awards.

Achieve Hartford! Is an independent, nonprofit organization of business and community leaders that focuses on student achievement and supporting effective and sustained school reform in the Hartford public schools. To learn more, visit: www.achievehartford.org.