

Magnets' Long-Term Future Questioned

by Paul Bass | May 25, 2016 7:43 am



D'Agostino confers at Capitol on tuition bill with New Haven State Rep. Robyn Porter.

He started a statewide conversation about charging suburban kids tuition to attend New Haven magnet schools. He ended up raising a broader question: Are magnet schools on the way out?

Hamden State Rep. Michael D'Agostino popped the question [when New Haven announced it might start charging tuition to suburban students](#) in order to close a budget gap created by emergency state funding cuts. D'Agostino proposed a bill requiring communities to give other towns a year's notice before beginning to charge tuition at magnet schools. The bill also requires the state education commissioner to sign off on any new tuition charges.

The bill — [which passed both houses of the legislature late last month and awaits the governor's signature](#) — ended up enjoying broad support, including from New Haven.

But it had one unintended consequence: Bridgeport officials said they hadn't realized before that they *could* charge suburban towns for the tuition. [So they notified the towns that they intend to do so starting next year.](#) New Haven is considering following suit.

A broader debate hovers above the tuition question: In an era of state budget-tightening, will Connecticut shore up its traditional public schools, continue promoting charter schools, or take a new look at its support of magnets? Or all of the above?

D'Agostino, who's 45 and a practicing attorney, dived into that question during an appearance on WNHH radio's "Dateline New Haven" program. He predicted that tuition will prove the "death knell" for magnet schools, which he predicted will shrink anyway. And he's not so sure that's a bad idea.

Education has always played an important part in D'Agostino's life. His family moved to Hamden when his father became superintendent of schools. D'Agostino himself served on Hamden's Board of Education, including a stint as president, before his 2012 election to the state House of Representatives.

So he had a lot to say about where education is, and should be, headed in Connecticut. Edited excerpts of the interview follow. You can hear the whole episode by clicking on the audio file at the bottom of this story.

Intra, Not Inter-District



Paul Bass Photo

D'Agostino at WNHH.

D'Agostino: We [in Hamden] send students to the New Haven magnets — Career, Cooperative, etc. You send students to ACES in Hamden. The tuition issue came up. I wasn't proposing that you can't [charge tuition], but that you have to at least have to get approval from the commissioner so you're not overcharging. New Haven [already] gets, every host school, gets \$7,085 student per student from the state.

WNHH: What does it cost to educate a student?

D'Agostino: I don't like the idea of a per-pupil cost. Because I don't think it's an accurate way of assessing. There are children with severe medical needs who may cost you \$60, \$70, \$80,000 a year.

So [pretend] you're the education commissioner. How are you going to look at whether they're overcharging?

What aid do you get per student? What other state aid does that school get? What did you get in terms of your construction costs, etc.? Generally, what is the per-pupil cost per student at the school? But assess it further. How many are special needs?

In the end do you think it's a good idea to charge [the suburbs] tuition?

I don't.

What's your reason?

I think what you're ending up doing is a death knell for magnet schools. Philosophically they've fallen out of favor. They're kept alive in the Hartford region because of the [Sheff \[v. O'Neill desegregation\] case](#). But down here there's less of a rationale.

Hamden is a very diverse town. Some of our schools are exceptionally diverse. And I think what you've seen is a pivot toward charter schools at the state level... What you do when you start talking about things like, 'We're going to slash transportation costs? We're going to start charging magnet tuition?' You're abandoning the state rubric for the magnet schools.

What is that state rubric? Why do we care about having magnet schools?

They developed out of the Sheff v. O'Neill case.

Actually they were popularized by the Sheff ruling, but the magnet schools in New Haven came out of [the Bank Street model](#) in New York. The idea, I thought, of magnet schools was that you were going to have a different idea of how you run a school...

Yeah, Wintergreen [in Hamden] is like that too. You have some courses that are not offered at our local schools.

Sheff v. O'Neill, that was the idea that you want a racial mix.

Magnets became a panacea. “Oh we’ve got magnet schools! There we go! There’s our solution!” Rather than solving the underlying issue of poverty

The idea is you have people from suburbs sitting together [with urban kids] ...

They’ll come in, that will desegregate schools.

Black parents [in the city] say, “we don’t need white students from the suburbs to learn ...”

Exactly!

... so why do we need to pay their tuition?

Isn’t the underlying question not “why should we pay their tuition?” but “why should they come here at all?” Shouldn’t the resources be going to our local schools to make them better rather than worrying about bringing in white kids for the suburbs?

I can’t figure out if you’re saying we should still force New Haven to pay the difference in tuition for suburban students, but also give less support for magnet schools....

No, what I’m saying is it’s a zero-sum game right now in terms of funding. There’s \$110 million in there for charter schools. There’s money in the budget for magnet schools. There’s ECS [Educational Cost-Sharing general money for traditional schools]. I’m saying that our first focus has to be the public school system.

And you’re not defining charter schools as the public school system. You’re not defining magnet schools as the public school system. You’re saying “traditional public schools.”

Traditional public schools. There’s something to be said for the idea of the Bank Street model, expanding the educational offerings. But why aren’t we doing that in our local schools? What’s wrong with an *intra*-district magnet school system?

How would that work?

So you have a school building in Hamden or New Haven, and you open it to all students in Hamden or New Haven. Rather than opening it up to students from the outside and worrying about having to charge tuition.

[Most] New Haven school have intra-district [openings].

You can’t do that in Hamden. It’s entirely neighborhood-school based. Most districts in Connecticut are neighborhood school based.

Within a school system, you’ve got a building. You want to dedicate it for a specialized thing or particular educational model. You’ve already got your transportation set up. You’ve got your

educators set up. You've already paid for your teachers. You've already paid for your bus contracts. It's just a question of logistics.

In Hamden, we had a building we weren't using, the Alice Peck School. We said, "we're going to make it a special education center." So all the kids from all across the town who need certain services that we can't provide in neighborhood schools, we're going to put our specialized staff there. We're going to set up transportation to get our kids there. And it's become an incredible *intra*-district special ed model for Hamden. Instead of paying tuition to send those kids out of district to specialized schools across the state or even outside the state, we do it and save money.

I'm going to make this a Twitter summary with no nuance. So is Mike's position: "Let's focus instead of charging people tuition to go to a magnet school out of town, or paying a lot of money in our budget prioritizing magnets and charter schools, you'd like to go to *intra*-district magnets within your own town and have the funding follow that"?

I'd like to give local boards and local towns the flexibility to do that. Rather than have them have to worry about paying for transportation to charters, having New Haven and Hamden fighting over tuition.

The New Haven Wink

If they still want to send their children [from Hamden] to a magnet school in New Haven, why should New Haven be paying tuition for them? Why should the taxpayer in New Haven be paying for the Hamden parent's kid to be going to New Haven? Why should we be putting blocks up against charging tuition?

I didn't say you couldn't do it.

I'm asking your personal opinion, why you think it's a bad idea.

Let's back up. Why should you have to pay for it? Remember you've got 95, 100 percent funding from the state to build that school in the first place. You wanted that magnet school built.

And the truth is, the mayor at the time is thinking, "OK I can get a lot of money to build a school" ...

... a free school ...

... "but I'm still going to have to run it for 20 years after."

"I'm going to send 70 percent of my kids from New Haven there. So I've got to open 30 percent of the spots [to suburban children] ...

So the deal is if I get money from the state [to build the school], I have to pay in perpetuity for kids from wealthier towns that don't have all this property of the tax rolls [and thus can charge their citizens lower mill rates] to go to my school.

Right.

So you're saying everybody knew that going in, so don't whine about it.

I'm saying everybody who builds a magnet school knows that part of the deal is you get to build a free school, and you have to make it available to kids from other districts.

You also said magnet tuition would be a death knell for the magnet schools. That was an interesting observation. You weren't talking about what you wanted or didn't want. It seemed to me you were analyzing.

Here's what I think is happening. Remember what's part of this budget: School transportation is zeroed out.

How did that happen? Just like New Haven was playing fast and loose by saying, "we'll take your money now, and we want to make you pay for students to come here," wasn't the state saying, "you have this mandate to transport kids across municipal lines. In the past we gave you the money to do it. Now we're not going to ..."

Here's the thing. It's not a mandate. There's actually nothing in state law that says New Haven has to pay for transportation for Hamden kids to go to New Haven. Just as nothing says Hamden has to pay for New Haven kids to go to Wintergreen [School]. But you do. And we do. And if you do, you could get these state grants to reimburse your transportation costs. That's been zeroed out.

You guys were trying to pass a budget, and you weren't willing to raise taxes. Because you weren't willing to raise taxes, you couldn't do it right.

Keep in mind that that money is part of an overall pot that goes to each town. If you're getting net-net — New Haven gets \$155 million in ECS ...

So why is it not a mandate? Are we allowed to say, "come to our schools, but we're not going to pay to get you here?" You're basically saying then your kids are not going to be able to come?

Yeah.

So why don't we just charge for the transportation and not the tuition?

So what happens right now is Hamden and New Haven have worked this out amongst themselves for years. It's an understanding. You're sending several hundred kids to our magnet

schools and charter schools. And quid pro quo, New Haven will pay for the Hamden kids to come to New Haven schools. We have at least 200-300 who go to ACES [in Hamden] alone.

It makes sense to do it this way. Look, New Haven knows which kids are going to which school. They already have the transportation set up. It makes sense for New Haven to handle the transportation of all kids going to Hamden schools. And it makes sense for Hamden [to do the same].

What about in situations where there are not roughly equivalent numbers of students [traveling to each other's communities]?

I don't know how other towns do it. I'm not sure what New Haven has worked out with some of the other feeder towns to your magnet schools.

De-Magnetization & Charters

The broader question is: How do you feel about magnets? Some people think magnets are a way to bring suburbs and city together. It's a great way to have regional cooperation. More choices for children and parents. Other people say it's really a way of subsidizing the suburbs in the name of racial integration. Other people say it's a waste of money. I can't tell if you're happy or not that we have magnets.

Let me break it up this way. The schools themselves, having been into our Wintergreen Academy, are terrific. They're collaborative. They offer great programs. They're fantastic.

What I'm saying is philosophically if we are in what we're in now, which is a zero-sum budgeting circumstance, we've got to pick and choose. I'm choosing my local board of education first, whatever that means — neighborhood schools, intra-district schools, whatever they want to do, I'm supporting first. Then I'm supporting magnets. Very last on my list are charters.

Why charters last?

I have a real problem with charter schools. I think that they cherrypick. They don't educate the same kids with special-ed. needs, discipline problems, behavioral problems, English as a second language, that our public schools have to educate. Constitutionally we have to educate every kid. No matter what problems that child has.

OK: You're cherrypicking the kids out who are not as expensive to educate. ...

Correct.

... When you pull them out, the schools left behind have fewer of the other kids who are less expensive to educate.

Correct. And they have fewer resources.

But what you see in New Haven is, especially African-American families, whose parents are involved more in education, they may agree with that larger philosophical point. But right now they have a kid to send to school.

You just hit the nail on the head.

They're saying, "Why does this white guy in Hamden or Westville get to send their kid to a private school because they have the money? I want my kid to have that experience, even if that's not best for the school system."

I've met these parents. They come up to the state capitol all the time. And they just want what's best for that child.

But think about that for a second. Those are exactly the kind of parents you want involved in our schools.

No question. But they're saying, "why do I have to help you for your school system rather than get my kid the best education when I don't have the same opportunities wealthier families have?"

I get it. The problem really is what you're leaving behind. In a zero-sum game, to me, you can't, for lack of a better word, "segregate" like that.

Isn't the real problem we don't fund or make our schools good enough overall, so that if you don't have the option to send your kid wherever you want, the people left behind, their incentives aren't the same as the greater [system's] incentives?

As a middle-class white intellectual, I don't want to point to a black family in New Haven and say, "you can't do what's best for your kid because it's not good for the whole school system." On the other hand, you have to make laws that do what's best for the whole system. So you turn around and say, "Why should I make it worse for the people left behind?"

Within a rubric where every kid is entitled to a free education.

So why don't we just raise taxes?

Before we leave this topic ...

I'm not leaving this topic.

The question you raised is a conversation I've never heard anyone have before. And it's an incredibly important debate. Which is: Maybe that's right. I'm just throwing it out there. I don't believe this: Maybe we take the best kids with the best parents and put them in a school where they can achieve? And we put the rest where we have them and we do what we can.

I thought you had the solution, which is to make all schools good.

That's my solution! This debate that's related to charters, I've never heard anybody have this debate that you're having now: Why shouldn't — that parent viewpoint — why shouldn't we get to send our kids to those charter schools if we want to? If those other parents don't have the time or inclination to fill out the application?

It still seems like the answer is that you make all public schools good.

That's what I believe. In a zero-sum atmosphere, that money needs to be going to those school systems first to let them work out those solutions. Rather than have to dictate to a state philosophical bent toward a charter model. I don't think it's fair.