

Specialized Students, Specialized Methods

How Hamden's Special Education PTA Generates Capital

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1 Introduction

Although all parents rely on forms of economic, cultural, and social capital to navigate the education system for their child, special education parents, by virtue of their child's unique educational needs, must do this on a much more regular basis than the parents of general education students. For parents of children with 504 plans and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), the ability to gather information and advocate for their child is critical for receiving even the bare minimum necessary programs, supports, and accommodations for the child to be successful. Thus, generating capital for these parents comes with an urgency that is not always the case for the parents of neurotypical children. In this paper, I do an ethnographic case study into parent organizers of Hamden Public Schools' Special Education Parent-Teachers Association (SEPTA). I analyze data collected through interviews with these parents, as well as field notes taken at a board meeting and SEPTA-planned community social event. I draw conclusions about the ways that the parents in this organization generate capital through SEPTA, and what this organization's impact is on Hamden special education parents. I conclude by comparing SEPTA's work with the work of non-special education PTAs to argue for ways that these PTAs could be structured differently to better support the needs of students (both general and special education) whose parents experience similar time poverty and access boundaries to generating capital as special education parents.

2 Background

2.1 Special Education Policy & Practice in Connecticut

According to *A Parent's Guide to Special Education in Connecticut*, "Connecticut's public education system has the duty to provide opportunities for all students to achieve these statewide student goals (motivation to learn, mastery of basic skills, acquisition of knowledge, competence in life skills and understanding society's values)" (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007, p. v). The two main services offered to students with special needs are an Individualized

Education Program (IEP) and a 504 plan. According to the CT government, an IEP is: “A written education program for a child with a disability that is developed by a team of professionals (administrators, teachers, therapists, etc.) and the child’s parents” (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007, p. vii). 504 is in reference to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which is a “federal civil rights statute that protects the rights of persons with disabilities in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance, which includes public schools” (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007, p. viii). These plans are used to determine whether a student should remain in a general classroom, or whether they require placement in an Individualized Instructional Center (IIC) classroom.

The choice on how to structure a student’s school day and navigate the mixture of inclusion and individualized attention is determined at the students’ IEP meeting of their Planning and Placement Team (PPT) – made up of teaching, administrative and pupil personnel staffs – which can occur as frequently as necessary, though no less than annually (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007, p. 4). While these meetings can occur without the presence of a parent or guardian, the school district must have documented proof that “it has made repeated attempts to ... have [the parent] participate in the meeting” (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007, p. 5).

Many services, both free and paid, exist to assist parents navigating the special education process in Connecticut. The main service referenced by participants in my study was the Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center (CPAC) – a non-profit organization that hosts trainings for teachers and parents on special education resources, offers materials on advocacy, and has a Facebook page with over 3,400 followers that provides a discussion forum for parents to talk about and share access to private and public resources (Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center, 2019). Also available are advocates for hire who can help advocate for parents wishes for their child’s education in PPT meetings. Finally, there are several Special Education Parent Teacher Associations across Connecticut. According to the Connecticut PTA website, SEPTAs exist in the Avon, Hamden, Fairfield, Plymouth, Stratford, and Enfield school districts (Connecticut PTA, 2019).

	District		State
	Count	Rate (%)	Rate (%)
Autism	159	2.5	1.6
Emotional Disturbance	93	1.4	1.0
Intellectual Disability	32	0.5	0.5
Learning Disability	307	4.8	4.6
Other Health Impairment	205	3.2	2.8
Other Disabilities	54	0.8	1.0
Speech/Language Impairment	173	2.7	1.9
All Disabilities	1,023	15.9	13.4

¹Grades K-12

Figure 1: Breakdown of Hamden Student Population by Primary Disability (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2016, p. 3)

2.2 Hamden Special Education Statistics

According to the Hamden 2015-2016 District Report, there are 1,023 K-12 students classified as special education students in Hamden School District (Figure 1). Of these¹, 586 (or 60.3%) spend 79.1% to 100% of their time in general education classrooms. There are also 67.0 special education teachers and instructors, and 100.8 paraprofessional instructional assistants² (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2016, p. 2).

Hamden spent \$29,788,741 in the 2014-15 school year on special education (Figure 2). Of these expenditures, 2.0% was spent on “Purchased Services” whereas 31.0% was spent on “Certified Personnel” and 29.9% on “Tuition to Other Schools” – in other words, out-of-district students. Hamden spent \$10,748,783 on “Costs of Students Tuitioned Out” for all students, meaning that special education students were 82.9% of the out-of-district budget in the 2014-15 school year (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2016, p. 3).

¹This data excludes students in the category of “Intellectual Disability” and “Other Disabilities” (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2016, p. 2)

²“In the full-time equivalent count, staff members working part-time in the school are counted as a fraction of full-time. For example, a teacher who works half-time in a school contributes 0.50 to the school’s staff count” (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2016, p. 2).

Special Education Expenditures: 2014-15

	District		State
	Total (\$)	Percent of Total (%)	Percent of Total (%)
Certified Personnel	9,242,073	31.0	35.1
Noncertified Personnel	2,433,914	8.2	14.5
Purchased Services	583,443	2.0	5.5
Tuition to Other Schools	8,912,333	29.9	21.6
Special Ed. Transportation	2,603,244	8.7	8.3
Other Expenditures	6,013,734	20.2	15.0
Total Expenditures	29,788,741	100.0	100.0

Figure 2: Breakdown of Hamden Special Education Expenditures (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2016, p. 3)

2.3 Special Education Parent Advocacy

A particular area of focus of special education advocacy in Connecticut is on improving the funding system for special education. According to a report by the Connecticut School Finance Project, Connecticut “falls far short of best practices” (Connecticut School Finance Project, 2016, p. 5) when it comes to special education funding. In fact, Connecticut is one of only four states in the country as of 2016 that has no separate funding system for special education. Other states have policies in place that the Connecticut School Finance Project summarizes as: “Differentiates funding based on student need”, “Distributes state funding for special education equitably”, “Provides school districts with state funding that is consistent and makes local expenses predictable”, “Provides school districts with flexibility and encourages innovation”, and “Limits local financial responsibility for students with extraordinary needs” (Connecticut School Finance Project, 2016, pp. 5-6). By not including any of these methods, Connecticut places a budgetary burden on individual school districts and on parent’s ability to fundraise that is a critical concern for both district and state-wide special education activists.

Other topics of discussion for activists include the extent of inclusion of students in general education classrooms with their neurotypical peers (Idol, 2006), the cost of out-of-district placement in the case when the student’s neighborhood district is unable to provide adequate support (Put-

nam, Luiselli, Sennett, & Malonson, 2002), and the role of discipline in special education (Skiba, 2002). However, very little research has been done into how special education parents organize to advocate for policy changes.

2.4 Hamden 3R

One particular case study of SEPTA involvement in Hamden education policy work that is of particular relevance to this research is the Hamden 3R process. This initiative aims to restructure the Hamden school district in order to address the budget deficit in Hamden as well as achieve better racial parity within elementary schools. The most recent vote by the Hamden Board of Education (BOE) unanimously approved the policy changes which include the closing of two elementary schools, the moving of all sixth graders to a new wing of Hamden Middle School, and the re-integration of the Wintergreen school building – which is currently being run by Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES) but whose property is still owned by the town – back into the Hamden school system. The plan is estimated to save the town \$3.8 million by 2022 (Gurwitt, 2018).

Hamden SEPTA was involved in the decisions regarding Hamden 3R because the current plan for the Wintergreen building is to move all special needs students in IICs under one roof. Quoting Jacqueline Beirne, co-president of SEPTA, a New Haven Independent article reported that the existing system of having dedicated classrooms in every school “doesn’t work because not every school has the resources that are necessary to provide for those kids.” Since the Wintergreen building would also house general education classrooms, the new system would “have all the resources necessary for [special ed students] to thrive, but they would not have to be isolated from their peers without special needs” (Gurwitt, 2018). This paper looks at the ways that SEPTA was involved in these Hamden 3R discussions, along with other SEPTA initiatives.

3 Literature Review

3.1 Capital & Parental Advocacy

Pierre Bourdieu defines capital in terms of three categories: economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital is “immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights” (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital includes any form of cultural material goods (such as books, curriculum, instruments) as well as academic qualifications. Scholarly recognitions of this sort are “a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture” (Bourdieu, 1986). Finally, social capital is based on the ability to generate networks that can be utilized to obtain information and mobilized to advocate for what a particular member of the network demands.

When applied to the context of parent advocacy, it is possible to view these three categories very distinctly in the ways that parents campaign for particular programming and policies in schools. In Annette Lareau’s 2018 paper on a redistricting initiative in a district she calls “Kingsley,” she writes, “parents frequently drew on their own professional knowledge and skills. They coupled this expertise with a willingness and ability to activate existing social networks and to forge new ties in a manner geared toward developing a mobilized group that could act as an effective counterweight to both the district administration and the board” (Lareau, Weininger, & Cox, 2018, p. 16). Many parents drew on their own educational knowledge through citing prominent researchers and census data while appealing to ethos by referencing their highly trained occupations such as university professors and psychologists. All of these were direct applications of their cultural capital (Lareau et al., 2018, p. 19). Meanwhile, parents also used their social capital to organize and mobilize through message boards, as well as tap into personal networks to amass experts in education who happened to be close friends or acquaintances who could supply research findings (Lareau et al., 2018, p. 22). Lastly, economic capital is the most visible of these forms of capital, and has been well-documented through research into the wealth and resource gaps between schools made up of majority high-income versus low-income families (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Wheeler, 2007,

p. 1377).

Bourdieu, Lareau, and Clotfelter draw a distinction based on access to these forms of capital. Clotfelter is clear that “the inequities with respect to the distribution of teacher and principal qualifications” due to the lack of funding (or economic capital) necessary to higher qualified staff “clearly work to the disadvantage of the students in the high-poverty schools” (Clotfelter et al., 2007, pp. 1372-1373). Meanwhile, Bourdieu acknowledges that “ability or talent is itself the product of an investment of time and cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986). This cultural capital is hereditary, takes time to accumulate, and is durable once achieved, thus disadvantaging families and students who have not had the time due to systemic inequalities to build up that capital. Finally, parents who, either due to their lack of higher education background or time constraints that prevented them from building up a community network, could not tap in to policy-adept social networks were disadvantaged in Kingsley’s redistricting process such that their perspectives on their children’s education could not be heard with as much force (Lareau et al., 2018, p. 32).

3.2 Time Poverty

Time Poverty is a concept that designates the relationship between families of low socioeconomic status and the amount of time they have outside of work to spend on familial tasks such as working with their children on homework and attending community forums or BOE meetings. Since families are now relied upon by the school system to assist in their child’s education (on everything from reading at home to attending school functions), the parents who have time to help their children to overcome “educational hurdles” will produce a generation of students able to succeed in the education system. Meanwhile, students whose parents are unable to designate that time due to long work hours or other responsibilities are falling behind in school by no fault of their own. Margaret Chin and Katherine Newman argue in their 2002 paper “that increasing the number of hours that poor parents—particularly single mothers—spend in the workplace is having a negative impact on their capacity to help their children over the increasingly challenging hurdles of elementary school” (Chin & Newman, 2002, p. 5).

The framework of time poverty has been applied to research on other overworked groups as well, such as undergraduate students who are parents (Wladis, Hachey, & Conway, 2018) and unmarried working mothers (Zilanawala, 2016). In this paper, I include special education parents as another population that experiences time poverty due to the added workload of managing a student with special needs, and look at the ways that this effects their ability to properly advocate for their child within the education system.

3.3 Parent-Teacher Associations

There has been extensive research into Parent-Teacher Associations/Organizations (PTAs/PTOs) on the ways that these coalitions have the potential to aid low-income and time poverty-stricken families but also cause active harm when organizers are not in touch with those families about their needs or are too focused on promoting their own, predominantly upper- and middle-class children. As Mira Debs writes, “While professionalized PTOs can help expand services and programming at an under-resourced school and change the perceived reputation of the school, they can also serve to widen the gaps between schools with well-resourced PTOs (some of the wealthiest of which raise upward of one million dollars) and those without” (Debs, 2019, p. 133). For many families, PTAs are not accessible due to prohibitive time constraints (Posey-Maddox, 2013) which leads already marginalized community members to feel left out of the conversation about their children’s education.

Meanwhile, research has found that PTAs are more effective at providing the relevant resources to lower class families when they take a more collective, rather than individualistic approach to advocating for children’s needs. These include providing a network for parents to build social capital and offering resources relevant to all parents with diverse needs (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). This is especially the case when the families involved in the PTA are able to “create bridges across diverse groups” (Debs, 2019, p. 133). However, when it comes to activating social capital, low-income families are far more likely to activate their own familial networks when necessity arises rather than reach out to other parents (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003).

Despite comprehensive research on PTAs for general education children, there appears to be a dearth of research on Special Education PTAs which this paper hopes to rectify.

4 Methodology

I began research into Hamden's SEPTA and the Hamden 3R process through my Cities, Suburbs, and School Choice course offered at Yale University. I was connected through Professor Debs to Venezia Michaelson: the co-president and co-founder of Hamden's SEPTA. Through her, I was put in contact with other SEPTA board members as well as invited to the April SEPTA board meeting and monthly trivia night, both of which I attended. I interviewed three board members – one in a phone interview and two others in a joint interview after the conclusion of the SEPTA board meeting. These interviews were semi-structured and lasted from 30-90 minutes. They were both tape recorded and transcribed. I also took field notes during the interviews, board meeting, and trivia night to record the non-vocal ways that SEPTA members interacted with one another. Analysis of field notes and interviews was done based on grounded theory – a systematic methodology that bases all conclusions about theory on the collection of data (Charmaz, 2006).

All three board members I interviewed have been assigned pseudonyms, and all references to other board members have also been changed, except for in the case when a board member specifically mentions the founding of SEPTA by the two presidents (Venezia Michaelson and Jacqueline Beirne) or an event is public knowledge (such as Venezia's recent meeting with the Hamden mayor). All those that I interviewed were female mothers. While the children of the participants were of varying ages and races, all of them had at least one child who was designated as special needs by Hamden Public Schools (either through having a 504 plan or an IEP).

Throughout this process, I recognized that because I was not a mother, it was harder for me to understand the specific concerns that parents had about their children. I was also more removed from these women due to my position as a student at an elite institution who did not grow up in Hamden. However, I found that these women seemed to feel comfortable opening up to me because

I was also a woman and because all of the women I interviewed had some past experience with teaching, which meant they were happy to contribute to a student's project. I also have personal experience related to special needs since my younger sister grew up with a learning disability and my parents had to constantly advocate for her needs. While this gave me emotional ties to research, I also found that I understood more of the vocabulary and related to the concerns shared by those I interviewed because I remembered my parents' same concerns.

5 SEPTA & Generation of Capital

5.1 Economic Capital

5.1.1 District-Wide Fundraising

“We’re going to talk about Helen Street raising an amazing amount of money,” said the SEPTA treasurer to kick off the treasurer’s report section of the April SEPTA board meeting. “Over the course of the week, they had coin wars, . . . they had a door decorating contest, . . . and the entire theme of the week was around acceptance and celebrating differences. They had a goal of \$500 and they reached that by Tuesday, so the entire week they raised \$1,100.”

The April board meeting I attended was scheduled for the day before Hamden students went on spring vacation, so unlike most SEPTA board meetings where there are usually about 10 non-board members (and often the presence of BOE members or the mayor), this meeting was only three of the most involved board members: Victoria, Brittany, and Nicole. The board meets in a classroom in Hamden Middle School and each parent sits in the student school desks. They all come straight from their day jobs; some wear blazers and heels while others wear t-shirts and jeans. They all also appear to be close friends – hugs are exchanged whenever a new board member enters the room, and when one person complains about personal concerns, the rest chime in with messages of support that show none of this information is news to them. The treasurer reads her notes and information off of her cell phone rather than taking out a laptop, giving the meeting a laid back and

relaxed social atmosphere.

On the agenda for the day was Helen's Street School which had, independently of SEPTA, organized an Autism Awareness week that included a Dress Up in Blue for Autism Day and an award ceremony attended by the mayor to honor the grade that raised the most money throughout the week. The plan for the money was not yet decided although immediately the board members started suggesting ideas.

"What about a scholarship, for kids who are graduating?" suggested Nicole, "for kids who are either on 504 or have an IEP." She pointed out that another Hamden elementary school was doing a scholarship for a graduating high school senior alum of the school. However, Nicole was worried about its accessibility since all applicants have to submit a personal essay – a barrier for many special needs students. The other parents immediately jumped on the idea. "We could put it on the Facebook page too and the Helen Street PTA page," Victoria said. They all agreed to invite a Helen Street PTA board member to the next SEPTA meeting to discuss this plan as well as to plan an event for receiving the check.

Unlike PTAs that are school-specific, SEPTA's funding is distributed across the district to all special education students – making the ability to receive funding for resources less tied to the wealth of parents in a particular elementary school. Moreover, school-based PTAs who often contribute to SEPTA's fundraising efforts do not require that the funding return exclusively to their school. When discussing the Helen's Street fundraiser with the rest of SEPTA, Brittany, a parent at Helen's Street, made it clear that the Helen's Street PTA had "no expectation" that the money raised would remain only for Helen's Street. In Hamden, SEPTA is seen as an initiative supporting the greater good of under-served students, which makes it worth disregarding school-based ties. When it comes to generating economic capital, SEPTA's district-wide but also mission-based approach is a way of combating wealth inequality by joining all families under a common goal.

5.1.2 The Budget and the School Board

SEPTA's funding is used primarily to be a resource for students and families who are desperate for more special education funding. This means that fundraisers such as the one at Helen's Street and the monthly trivia nights are critical for providing opportunities to students across the district. The funding deficit was actually the catalyst for the initial founding of SEPTA by Venezia Michaelson. As Brittany explained, "There was something that [Venezia's son] needed in the classroom and she recommended it and the response was 'oh well we don't have a special ed PTA.' And here we are." The lack of funding for her specific child's needs led Venezia to start SEPTA with the hope of providing materials for all students.

Victoria also emphasized the exigency of SEPTA's fundraising for special education curriculum, which she emphasizes is not at par with student need. "Pars" – short for paraprofessionals – are individuals who stay with a student, usually in a general education classroom, to assist in the individualization of the material for the student's particular needs and to help them interact with other students. While ideally these paraprofessionals would be highly trained to be of maximum benefit to the student, Victoria said:

They don't even buy the curriculum that our kids need. We have kids who have pars that are not trained on their speech devices. It's the only way your kid knows how to communicate and you have a par with them all day who isn't trained on their speech device? It's unbelievable.

The SEPTA board members all agreed that when it came to school district budget decisions, special education often received the short end of the stick. Due to its lack of funding and resources in schools, Hamden ends up sending a large number of special education students out-of-district to schools with better funded programs. In 2014-2015, the district spent \$8,912,333 to send special education students out-of-district (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2016, p. 3), which Victoria called "astronomical" amounts of money all because "we're failing the kid in district." One of Victoria's friends, after having to quit her job because her child's special education advocacy had essentially become a full time job, is now going out-of-district and individually costing Hamden \$100,000.

Victoria explained that the hope of converting the Wintergreen facility into a special ed-specific school is to be able to pool the district resources and no longer have to send students out-of-district. An eventual goal would even be to become a district that students from other districts get placed in thus bringing the district money. But for now, because of the money spent sending students out-of-district, the school board finds themselves in an impossible position: all of their special education budget is spent on out-of-district, so they are failing their students in district because they cannot afford appropriate resources, thus forcing more students to go out-of-district. Victoria explained the reaction of parents and school board members to the special education budget:

You have a lot of people who just s*** on special needs kids once budget time comes around, except it's their failure, right? We've got all these kids going out-of-district and we're spending tens of thousands of dollars per kid to go out-of-district ... but then that kid gets demonized and that family gets demonized because taxpayers don't want their dollars going to them.

In response to the lack of resources, SEPTA's role as a provider of funds for trainings and curriculum is critical. They have helped organize tactile learning spaces, purchased materials for teachers, and offered opportunities like the scholarship they are hoping to provide with the money from Helen's Street. However, without control over the school board budget, SEPTA's job is still primarily to serve only as a temporary resource to parents in the hopes that the district will come up with a lasting change with more permanent impact. Potentially, this solution could be found in the re-apprehension of Wintergreen.

5.2 Cultural Capital

5.2.1 School Resource Officers & Meeting with the Mayor

The Hamden Mayor Curt B. Leng's proposal to add School Resource Officers (SROs) to the budget for Hamden Elementary Schools is a topic of hot contention among Hamden parents (Dignan, 2019), and especially so among the parents in SEPTA. SROs are meant to act as security guards whose job is primarily to provide conflict resolution as well as keep schools safe. However, many parents, including those in SEPTA, are extremely concerned about the impact this decision could

have on their students. Victoria explained:

As far as I understand it they will be going into the elementary schools that are overwhelmingly African American. So there's a lot of concern about that. We've had a couple incidents in town of kids, young, not old kids, 10-, 11-, 12-year old kids being handcuffed by cops. Those with IEP's and 504's have been handcuffed and taken out of schools by cops. ... We do not want cops in our schools and we certainly do not want SROs in our schools – masquerading as social workers but basically just being cops.

All three SEPTA parents were particularly concerned about the ways that this decision will impact students of color and students with disabilities. Brittany specifically said:

SROs are not a path to school safety. Like if this is about school safety I directly refute the idea that these will result in school safety. Like all the literature and all of the science shows that that is not true. It actually actively makes our black and brown kids and kids with disabilities less safe.

For these mothers, SROs going into schools brought about a true feeling of fear for the safety of their children. Victoria described her concern:

As a mom with a kid with autism, when he gets stressed out, he usually gets aggressive. What's going to happen to him when a school resource officer who is untrained on disabilities and untrained on what's going on, doesn't know that my kid when he's really scared he bites people, what's he going to do to my kid? And my kid is half Hispanic but he looks white and he has a mom who is head of special education PTA in town, but if he were brown and had a mom that worked three jobs, what's going to protect him? Nothing's going to protect him. And he's going to bite somebody and then what's going to happen?

In response to these fears, co-president Venezia met with the Hamden mayor to discuss her concerns and show him the research she had collected on why SROs would be unsafe to have in Hamden elementary schools. Their conversation, which lasted two hours, she described as a constant back and forth on the relationship between research and policy choices:

It got to this place where he was like, "What about dispute resolution?" And I was like, "Hire a social worker." And he was like, "What about restorative justice stuff?" "Hire a social worker." Literally going down the line everything he said: "Hire a social worker."

However, by the end of the conversation, Venezia said that the mayor told her, ““This is the most informative conversation I’ve had,”” which she said she hopes will lead to policy changes.

5.2.2 Board of Education & Hamden 3R

The SEPTA board members were united in their wish for SEPTA to have more representation at Hamden BOE meetings. While they are currently working on finding an official BOE SEPTA representative so that someone is at every meeting, Victoria explained how difficult it is for parents to commit time to SEPTA when they have a special needs student at home:

I think being a special needs parent is really hard. ... Most [special ed] parents cannot just get a babysitter. ... It’s not the same as having one neurotypical kid whose like, “Okay, mom I’m going to bed.” ... It doesn’t work like that. So representation is harder. ... You can have easy days or harder days but harder is just harder. I honestly am pretty proud of representation at our meetings. Our SEPTA meetings are lovely.

Brittany calls being a special education parent a “double wammy” because of the time poverty associated with more to take care of for your child at home, while at the same time the requirement that you be more involved in advocating for your child:

You have so many more complicated needs to manage as a special education or special needs parent but at the same time you have to put in so much more effort to make sure that your kid gets what they need from the systems level and policy level perspective. Like I feel like I have to have a fight with the board of education every year at this point.

When it came to Hamden 3R, SEPTA found several ways to still make sure the voices of special education parents were heard. Venezia hosted a gathering of individuals at her house that included town officials and SEPTA parents. For several SEPTA meetings that were of particular import, childcare was provided to make it easier for parents to attend. And while usually at least one representative from SEPTA would attend each BOE meeting, the majority of the work happened in one-on-one meetings with officials. Thus, for SEPTA, their strength comes primarily from the relationships they have built.

5.2.3 Gaining “Clout”

In the two years since SEPTA was started, it has grown from a two woman operation to an organization with 87 official members and at least two monthly events open to the entire community of special education parents. Most board meetings include a speaker who gives a presentation on a particular topic related to special education advocacy, such as how to read an IEP or on the uses of assistive technology. The purpose of these talks is to educate parents on how to navigate the system of special education, which Nicole calls a “bear” of a process.

However, SEPTA has also made a name for itself through advocacy work. While Brittany insisted that SEPTA’s approach is primarily focused on “relationship building” rather than advocacy, she also acknowledged that SEPTA’s relationships with town officials (such as the superintendent, school board, and the mayor) are useful resources in holding the administration to appropriate standards. After all, as she points out, Venezia can get a 2-hour long meeting with the mayor. However, SEPTA has only been successful in this way because they chose wisely which roles to take on. Brittany said:

The reason this has been successful is we’ve positioned ourselves as not the experts but the resource for parent views on special education. But, done in a way that’s like we’re still going to push officials and keep them accountable but also done in a way that’s collegial at the same time. Like more as a relationship building approach than a protesting or activist approach.

While forging relationships is critical to SEPTA’s productivity, so is what Brittany refers to as SEPTA’s “clout” as an organization. Nicole explains that while administrators knew all the problems before, with the presence of SEPTA they realize, “Oh, now I have to answer back.” Victoria even said that “everyone is kind of afraid of us.” She explains:

I think deep down they are afraid because special education parents are usually just so overburdened and exhausted. And we don’t usually organize or complain in a group way. So the fact that we are now a pissed off group of people saying this is not working for our kids I think has spurred people on.

Between providing resources and gaining respect, Hamden SEPTA uses their position to give cultural capital resources to other Hamden special education parents. The talks about IEPs and how

to advocate for your child are examples of the material goods of cultural capital being shared. Also, while being a part of SEPTA is not an academic distinction, it is a method of, as Brittany explains, making “people pay attention a little bit more,” providing credentials that can be employed to gain respect from administration.

5.3 Social Capital

5.3.1 Social Media

When it comes to outreach, SEPTA’s main method of communicating with members is through social media. Special education parents across the country are using social media as a method of discovering resources (Simon, 2012) and drawing publicity when their children’s needs are not met (Sokol, 2014). Hamden SEPTA, too, has tapped into the internet to easily reach parents who may be looking for resources.

According to Nicole, parents primarily reach out to SEPTA via Facebook and email. While some parents come upon SEPTA through their membership flyer drive at the beginning of the school year, usually parents begin to make use of SEPTA’s resources when they have a specific question or need someone to talk to. As Brittany explained:

It’s not so much us reaching out but more I find that parents have been reaching out for help. ... Before SEPTA existed, there was nowhere to go. But now, people are starting to get the memo that SEPTA exists and so now people are reaching out to SEPTA with a very acute issue that they need help with.

SEPTA has two Facebook Pages: one that is public and advertises events such as the SEPTA trivia night, while the other is only available to SEPTA members. This second Facebook page is often a resource for parents who are looking for information on advocates to hire for their child, materials and curriculum, or which summer programs are accessible for their student’s needs. Some parents also discuss school choice options, though more of those conversations happen in groups such as the CPAC Facebook page – a resource SEPTA points families towards as needed.

Also important are discussions about policy, such as the decision as part of Hamden 3R to

send all 6th grade students to the middle school. Victoria explained that special education parents are particularly concerned about that decision because of the susceptibility to bullying that special education students will face, as well as transition barriers such as the use of lockers and changing IEPs. Victoria summarized the discussions by saying, “You name it, we’ve heard fears about what’s going on.” By having a strong social media presence, SEPTA is able to reach parents who may not have the time to attend SEPTA or BOE meetings but still want to stay updated on the discussions around educational policies that will affect their students.

5.3.2 Trivia Night & Social Network Building

Another method that SEPTA uses to build up the social networks of special education parents in Hamden is through their monthly trivia nights. These events happen on a weekday night at 7:00pm in the Playwright Irish Pub in Hamden. When I visited the venue for their April iteration, SEPTA members promised that it was usually more packed (there was a BOE meeting that evening that had been scheduled last minute), but even on one of their “chill” nights, it was still filled with around 25 people. The restaurant itself, however, could potentially fit up to 80 individuals and according to Victoria is usually packed most SEPTA trivia nights.

While the people at Playwright were primarily white parents (which was confirmed by Brittany as standard at their events), there was still about a 20% attendance by parents of color. Attendees brought their children with them, and groups of families worked together to answer trivia in categories ranging from children’s literature to “name the song.” While SEPTA board members sat at the front collecting donations, they, too, were joining in the fun of ordering food and competing in the trivia.

Through the Facebook page and events such as trivia night, SEPTA works to build policy-adept social networks that parents can tap into regardless of background. These networks span schools, age, and race in an attempt to make it possible for SEPTA to become an accessible resource to as many parents as possible as well as to make sure they are addressing the issues of all parents and students. While still struggling with the same problems as other PTAs in regards to lack of full

racial and economic class representation, the SEPTA leaders recognize the time poverty hindrances of low-income families when it comes to advocacy because they, too, experience versions of those same burdens. This provides them with the insight to actively try to relieve those burdens through providing child care and hosting events that children are allowed to attend as well as having an active social media to make resources and policy discussions more accessible to those who cannot attend meetings. SEPTA parents also have experience with lacking the proper social network to ask for help, since prior to SEPTA's creation two years ago there was no one and no place to turn to. Thus, building a network of relationships to stimulate the generation of social capital is key to SEPTA's mission.

6 Conclusion & Policy Implications

Hamden's SEPTA provides us with a case study of a parent advocacy organization that, despite member's time poverty and lacking in pre-existing social networks, has found methods of generating capital with far reaching effects. Unlike school-based PTAs that generate economic capital for their own school's benefit, SEPTA uses a district-wide approach to spread the wealth they accumulate across schools. SEPTA provides resources to parents in the form of presentations on important special education topics as a method of sharing cultural capital. Board members also take a relationship building approach to advocating for their members which has provided them with the organizational "clout" and recognition that special education parents make use of to hold the administration accountable. Finally, SEPTA uses social media and community-wide family events to help overcome member time poverty by finding ways to include as many parents as possible in discussions and generate social capital through network building.

District-wide parent affinity organizations of this sort could have the potential to fight for the particular initiatives associated with subgroups of students who are often left out of the discussion in school-based PTAs. While there is precedent for starting elementary school parent affinity groups within individual schools (Collins, 2018), one of the ways that SEPTA is able to be power-

ful in Hamden is due to its district-wide reach and ability to share resources across schools. PTAs that are mission-driven, oriented around parents and students who are in need of additional support, and are district-wide have the potential to use the Hamden SEPTA's techniques of generating capital to provide a voice to traditionally underrepresented groups in parent advocacy. This could be especially helpful for racial and ethnic minority parents given the significant number of equity issues that have been identified nationwide in education advocacy work for these parents in particular. By increasing visibility and amplifying representation, affinity district PTAs could go beyond the goal of addressing the concerns of underrepresented groups, and instead give them the tools to fight for the resources they need by themselves.

7 Limitations & Further Research

Due to time constraints, this research suffers from a limited number of participants from whom to collect qualitative data. An expanded research project would include a broader range of subjects including special education parents not involved in SEPTA, member parents who are not on SEPTA board, general and special education teachers and administrators, Hamden board of education members, and non-special education parents. It should also include visits to more SEPTA board meetings and trivia nights over the course of an entire school year. Further analysis could also be done on other Connecticut SEPTA chapters to compare strategies across groups. This expanded investigation may also be able to include quantitative data looking at rates of graduation among special education students and other quantitative metrics at districts that have SEPTAs and those that do not.

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8 Appendix

8.1 Interview Questions for SEPTA Parents and Board Members

1. What school does your child currently attend, and how did you choose that school?
2. What has your experience been like there?
3. When did you first become involved with SEPTA and what has been your experience being involved in this organization?
 - (a) What does involvement across Hamden look like in SEPTA? Do some schools have more representation than others?
 - (b) What was your experience advocating for your child's needs before the existence of SEPTA and after?
 - (c) What sort of outreach is SEPTA doing to reach more parents?
 - (d) Can you think of a specific story of a time when SEPTA has help you or helped another parent?
4. Which initiatives are you most in favor of, and against, in the proposed changes?
 - (a) What has been SEPTA's role within the redistricting conversations?
 - (b) What are your thoughts on the choice to centralize special education at Wintergreen?
 - (c) How were you involved in advocacy for this particular issue? Were there any pieces of that advocacy work that were particularly challenging?
5. Have you attended any public meetings or board meetings? What has been your reaction to them?
 - (a) How do you feel about SEPTA's representation at board meetings?
 - (b) How did you feel about the reaction by Wintergreen parents to the proposed changes?

- (c) Are there other forms of advocacy that SEPTA has engaged in beyond individual advocacy work or policies with the school board that has not been covered yet?
- 6. Do you have any concerns about the transition next year? Are there any things that you think would be helpful for district and school officials to do?
- 7. Are there any other parents or administrators involved in this decision that you might be able to put me in touch with?
- 8. Are there any other questions we haven't asked you that you would like to share?
- 9. Demographics:
 - (a) How do you identify your race/ethnicity on a census form?
 - (b) What is your current job?
 - (c) What is your level of schooling?
 - (d) Do you own or rent where you live? If you own, has your property value changed at all in the last few years?
 - (e) If you are comfortable sharing it, what is your family's annual income?
 - (f) What is your marital status?
 - (g) What are the ages of your children, and what schools do they attend?