

**THE DYNAMICS OF IMPLEMENTING THE AMERICAN RECOVERY AND REINVESTMENT ACT: EARLY  
CHILDHOOD AND TITLE I SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN CONNECTICUT**

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## THE DYNAMICS OF IMPLEMENTING THE AMERICAN RECOVERY AND REINVESTMENT ACT: EARLY CHILDHOOD AND TITLE I SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN CONNECTICUT

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To spur economic growth and to help individuals, states, and cities, hurt by what is widely believed to be the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, President Barack Obama proposed and Congress passed the \$787 billion ARRA. Signed into law in February 2009, the ARRA was designed not only to address the recession, but also to promote the policy priorities of the new Democratic administration. Expanding the life chances of the nation's children by improving the quality of public education was an important policy goal of candidate Obama. As Secretary of Education Arne Duncan explained, federal policy makers expected the ARRA funds to "advance reforms that will have an even longer impact" on public schools. As President Obama said at the bill's signing ceremony, "The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is an unprecedented effort to jumpstart our economy, save and create millions of jobs, and put a down payment on addressing long-neglected challenges so our country can thrive in the 21st century."

However, the politics of the adoption and passage of the ARRA was not lost to political observers. Congressional Republicans complained that the economic stimulus package was being used to advance Obama's and the Democratic Party's expensive policy agenda. No Republican House member and only three Senate Republicans voted for final passage of ARRA. Maneuvering the ARRA through Congress was a major political victory for the new president. However, Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky in their classic book, *Implementation*, reminded us that politics does not abruptly stop with agenda setting and policy formulation.<sup>1</sup> If President Obama is to achieve many of the ARRA's long-term objectives in improving outcomes for children, public officials at the state and local levels must have the capacity to effectively implement the ARRA. The ARRA provides an excellent opportunity with which to

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky, *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973.

better understand the political changes required to create a greater congruence within the public-policy process to ensure that legislated and policy intentions are actually carried out in reality.

This report focuses specifically on the implementation of ARRA on Title I schools and early-childhood education in two Connecticut cities: Bridgeport and Hartford. It focuses on the complexity of translating social policies into action. This report is based largely on interviews with 30 stakeholders in the public, private, and non-profit sectors in Bridgeport and Hartford, Connecticut. From our examination, it seems that two factors are important in considering the implementation of the ARRA in Bridgeport and Hartford: (1) how the state chose to disperse the ARRA funds; and (2) the scope and nature of the local coalitions in each community. Our research also suggests that the timing of the ARRA's passage impacted how states and communities implemented the funds.

### **The Dynamics of Implementation**

"There is no point," Pressman and Wildavsky wrote three decades ago, "in having good ideas if they cannot be carried out." Pressman and Wildavsky cautioned that "those seemingly routine questions of implementation" are often "the rocks" on which programs "eventually floundered."<sup>2</sup> They make clear that the most hazardous "rocks" are not the technological or financial obstacles, but the politics involved in the implementation process. The gap between policy conception and the political process of policy implementation remains as rough and as tenuous as when Pressman and Wildavsky studied it over three decades ago. Federal policymakers expected the ARRA to not only help the economy recover but to promote the Democratic administration's long-term policy agenda in critical policy areas. The Obama administration must rely on states and localities to implement many of the ARRA's provisions. Characteristics on which states and localities vary may affect the manner in which the Act is implemented and, in turn, whether it meets desired goals. The study of the implementation of the ARRA is in part a study of politics.

The conceptual framework for this study is guided by what recent scholars in urban politics call "civic capacity." Civic capacity is the extent to which various sectors of the community have developed the formal and informal means to define common objectives and pursue common goals.<sup>3</sup> Civic capacity

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 143.

<sup>3</sup> Clarence N. Stone, Jeffrey R. Henig, Bryan D. Jones, and Carol Pierannunzi, *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Public Schools*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas 2001; Jeffrey R. Henig, Richard C. Hula, Marion Orr, and Desiree Pedescleaux. *The Color of School Reform: Race, Politics, and the Challenge of Urban Education*, (1999).

is about various sectors of the community coming together in an effort to solve a major problem.<sup>4</sup> Civic capacity calls for cross sector participation. The assumption is as more community sectors participate, civic capacity increases. Civic capacity also takes as a given that the public sector alone is insufficient to carry out policy.<sup>5</sup> Hence, we are especially interested in the role played by a broad array of community sectors – business, parents, educators, state and local officeholders, nonprofits, and others.

Implementation scholars have long recognized that policy necessarily evolves and adapts to local conditions.<sup>6</sup> It would seem then, that states and cities with higher civic capacity may be better positioned, administratively and politically, to take advantage of ARRA. Characteristics on which states and localities vary may affect the level of civic capacity needed to implement the ARRA, in turn, whether it meets desired goals. In light of substantial differences in social, political, economic, and administrative characteristics, it is unlikely that implementation of ARRA will be uniform across cities and states. Moreover, it would seem that the relationship and capacity of specific local participants such as teachers, parents, non-profits, labor unions, and religious organizations (and how those local participants relate to state government) may shape how ARRA is implemented. Putnam and others have shown that dense and complex social networks that facilitate cooperation across community sectors and institutional lines are critical for achieving social goals.<sup>7</sup> Policy researchers have also recognized that policy proposals are normally formed and refined within communities of specialists, typically referred to as “issue networks.”<sup>8</sup> Although there is some overlap in participation, there are significant differences in the individuals and institutions involved in issue networks, which may result in differences in the manner and extent to which ARRA influences the direction of policy development and implementation.<sup>9</sup> Our research took account of the motivations, assumptions, incentives, and contextual variables that influence the issue networks in early childhood and Title I schools. We assessed the web of alliances and interactions that could potentially impact the civic capacity of Bridgeport and Hartford communities to implement the ARRA in ways that would achieve federal officials’ policy priorities.

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<sup>4</sup> See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Clarence N. Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1989); Paul Peterson, *City Limits*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene Bardach, *The Implementation Game: What Happens after a Bill Becomes Law*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977.

<sup>7</sup> See, Putnam, *Bowling Alone*; James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990, pp.300-321.

<sup>8</sup> Hugh Hecl, “Issue Networks and the Executive Establishment,” in Anthony King (ed.), *The New American Political System*; pp. 87-124; Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1978; Frank Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Ferman, *Challenging the Growth Machine: Neighborhood Politics in Chicago and Pittsburgh*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996.

Civic capacity is also about cooperation and how that cooperation is achieved across a range of stakeholders and issues. For example, in the area of economic development there exists an abundant amount of material incentives and other side-payments (e.g. contracts, jobs, etc.), making concerted action easier.<sup>10</sup> In early childhood and K-12 education, few such incentives exist and motivations appealed to are different. It follows that relationships, how those relationships are structured, and on whose terms are critical to civic capacity. Because a community displays a high level of civic capacity in one area say, economic development, does not mean it will have high civic capacity in early childhood and public education. Human capital development efforts, like early childhood and K-12 education (especially in communities with high levels of economic and social distress) require a high level inter-sector coordination.<sup>11</sup> Implementing the ARRA and working to build a system of long-term support for all children, requires more than elite coordination. It requires the participation of parents, children, and the community organizations in which they are involved. Cities are typically socially and economically stratified along race, ethnic, and class lines and these factors have been shown to affect civic capacity.<sup>12</sup> Hence, even when there is general agreement to say, develop an expanded and improved system of supports for children, different groups bring different concerns and interests.

### **Research Design and Methods**

We used a comparative case study approach as our principal research method.<sup>13</sup> We examined Bridgeport and Hartford, Connecticut. Bridgeport is Connecticut's largest city. Hartford is the third largest city and the state's capital. Hartford has long been an important component of the state's social and economic infrastructure. Bridgeport and Hartford are medium-sized cities. In the U.S., most city dwellers live in medium-sized cities with populations less than 500,000. Bridgeport and Hartford also typify many of the older, industrial, Northeastern urban centers that have undergone dramatic economic restructuring. Both have experienced significant declines in their local economic base. Finally, Bridgeport's and Hartford's demographic profile reflects the increasing racial, ethnic, and socio-

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<sup>10</sup> Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977.

<sup>11</sup> Lisbeth Schorr, *Common Purposes*. New York: Anchor Books. 1997; Clarence N. Stone, "Urban Regimes and the Capacity to Govern," *Journal of Urban Affairs*, Vol. 15, pp. 1-28; Clarence N. Stone, Marion Orr, and David Imbroscio, "The Reshaping of Urban Leadership in U.S. Cities," in *Urban Life in Transition*, Mark Gottdiener and Charles Pickvance, pp.222-239, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1991.

<sup>12</sup> Marion Orr, *Black Social Capital: The Politics of School Reform in Baltimore*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999; Rodney Hero, *Racial Diversity and Social Capital: Equality and Community in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Robert K. Yin. *Case study research: Design and methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

economic diversity present in America's urban centers. Both cities have high needs in the areas of early childhood and public education. Though no two cities can claim to represent all cities, Bridgeport and Hartford are in many respects typical of other cities, especially in the northeast.<sup>14</sup>

The primary research questions centered on how the ARRA was implemented in the areas of early childhood education and Title I school improvement. We started from the premise that understanding the implementation of the ARRA in Hartford and Bridgeport required a clear understanding of how the civic structures-- the coalitions, issue networks, and local culture—shape the scope and nature of local stakeholders' response to the ARRA. Data was culled from a variety of sources. In-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in each case study city (see Table 1). We employed purposive and snowball sampling to identify subjects with known or demonstrable experience with ARRA, state and local government budgets, and programs and initiatives targeted at early childhood and K-12 education. We aimed to interview general influentials (mayor, city council members, business leaders, foundation heads, etc.), community based representatives (heads of children organizations; religious leaders, parent leaders, heads minority advocacy groups, etc.) and, education and related human investment specialists (school superintendent, Head start administrator, principals, teachers, etc.).

The aim of the interviews was to have respondents tell us about their understanding of the implementation of ARRA in the areas of early childhood and Title 1 school improvement (see Appendix A). We asked questions about civic and political relationships in both cities and specific questions about the implementation of ARRA in the areas of Title I school improvement and early childhood development. We were also interested in their understanding of what the policy concerns and views of others are, their own policy concerns and views, and their understanding of the grounds of cooperation and conflict. Interview transcripts were coded to identify recurring themes in responses

We interviewed 30 individuals in Bridgeport and Hartford. Many of our Hartford-based respondents were active in state-level activities related to early childhood and public education. As the state capital, Hartford is home to several organizations devoted to improving the life chances of children across Connecticut. However, we had limited access to the leaders and key players who are intimately involved in early childhood and K-12 issues in the City of Hartford. We believe that many Hartford leaders who could provide information about the implementation of ARRA in early childhood and K-12

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<sup>14</sup> Peter F. Burns, *Electoral Politics is Not Enough: Racial and Ethnic Minorities and Urban Politics*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006.

education were reluctant to participate in the study. The city was undergoing a political transition. No one from the Hartford School District participated in the study. Although we received very little cooperation from leaders and officials in Hartford, we believe that the community and political tensions our small number of Hartford respondents reported, could be turbulence from the political changes that the city is experiencing.

Although our research has been largely informed by interviews, we also relied on studies, official reports, newspaper articles, and public documents. Archival resources were also utilized, including federal, state and local government documents. Documents from non-government entities were also collected. A comprehensive internet search was also undertaken to identify all ARRA-related reports, media accounts and journal articles.

### **State and City Context**

Federal policymakers expected ARRA to not only help the economy recover but to promote the Democratic administration's long-term policy agenda in critical policy areas like early childhood and public education. The US Department of Education posted on its recovery website suggestions for use of ARRA education funds with respect to education and early childhood. Among the Department's concrete programmatic suggestions in these areas were: formative student assessments; software programs that track college matriculation among high school graduates; incentive pay for teachers; 9th grade transition academies; and extended school days. In early childhood, federal officials suggested programs that would: expand or enhance full day kindergarten; complement or extend Head Start programs to full day and/or extend the year of service; provide professional development for early childhood teachers; and support minor remodeling of facilities to accommodate a preschool program.

### **Connecticut Governmental Structure**

The primary impetus for the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) was to help stabilize job loss. Federal officials left substantial authority in the hands of states regarding how to direct ARRA funding; though dollars originated at the federal level, states were charged with awarding most of the stimulus grants to local agencies. State officials in Connecticut used existing governance structures and relationships to direct how funding was distributed to school districts as well as to inform which community groups received stimulus funds.

When the ARRA was passed in February 2009, Democrats controlled the Connecticut state legislature and a Republican, Jodi Rell (2004-2011), was governor. Many stakeholders felt Governor Rell was not supportive enough of public education. Rell's detractors note that during her tenure, state spending as a whole shrank, and funding to the school districts remained flat for the three years prior to the ARRA. Spring 2009 was a particularly fractious time in Connecticut politics. The Republican governor and Democratic legislature were locked in a months-long budget battle over Rell's desire to cut spending and the legislature's refusal to go along with her plan. The battle ended with the governor signing a 2009-2010 state budget underfunded by \$3.4 billion. Governor Rell used the ARRA funds to fill in the state's budget gap. She faced criticism both for signing the budget into law and for using the stimulus funds as a stop-gap measure. Governor Rell defended her decision, saying "I make no apologies for using the stimulus funds. Our state was in desperate need of cash to keep us going, even after we made cuts and I made the cuts."<sup>15</sup> Governor Rell did not seek reelection, and in January 2011 Democrat Dan Malloy took office.

### **Social and Economic Trends in Connecticut**

Education and other policies related to children and youth in Connecticut are shaped by social, economic, and political structures. For example, there are 172 independent school districts of varying sizes. Not only does this cost the state more in administrative fees, it means that very poor cities like Bridgeport do not benefit from the resources of a town in surrounding Fairfield County, one of the wealthiest counties in the nation. As a state, Connecticut boasts some of the highest test scores in the nation—and some of the lowest. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Connecticut reports some of the largest black-white achievement gaps in the nation<sup>16</sup>. Although between 2002 and 2009 the black-white achievement gap narrowed, the state still reported some of the highest gaps in the country.

Data on the state economic situation paints a picture of two Connecticut's—extreme polarities of income and economic status. Though the state has the highest average per-capita income, it is also the state with third largest "wealth gap," the income differences between wealthiest and poorest

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/local/article/Accidental-governor-Jodi-Rell-leaves-mixed-908625.php#ixzz1JSV9vnWX>

<sup>16</sup> In 2009, the NAEP reading scores for black and white 8<sup>th</sup> graders showed a 34 point gap, the highest in the nation, and a 37 point gap in math, the sixth highest. 4<sup>th</sup> grade scores showed a 29 point gap in reading and a 31 point gap in math, the sixth highest. <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/statecomparisons/withinyear.aspx?usrSelections=1%2cRED%2c1%2c0%2cwin%2c0%2c0>



households. These divisions are widening, and economic changes over the past several decades have impacted the state's poor much more than the wealthy. According to the Connecticut Economic Resource Center, "Connecticut is at a 20-year low point in terms of job creation. Jobs that are being created are generally low-wage and mostly service-sector, while jobs being shed are typically high-wage in manufacturing and insurance. Connecticut is the only state with no business growth since 1989... the only state in the country with fewer businesses in 2006 than it had in 1989." The rate of job creation in the state has been almost flat since 1990, and the one area of job growth—financial services—have primarily provided employment for college educated, upper income residents.<sup>17</sup> In 2009, when the ARRA was adopted, the unemployment rate for the state as a whole was 9%; this represented a steady rise in unemployment since 2000.

Hartford and Bridgeport rank amongst the ten poorest cities when compared to others their size.<sup>18</sup> Bridgeport and Hartford have been heavily impacted by the 2008 economic recession and their public school systems reflect the cities' economic struggle. The ARRA was designed to stem the loss of jobs in communities like Bridgeport and Hartford.

### **Current Economic Situation in Bridgeport**

Once a thriving manufacturing and industrial center, Bridgeport suffered tremendously from the deindustrialization of the 1970s and 1980s. Like many old industrial cities, Bridgeport continues to confront high unemployment and an eroding tax base. A large proportion of the city's residents are poor (see Table 2). For example, Bridgeport's rate of child poverty, 28%, is more than twice the statewide rate of 12.5%.<sup>19</sup> The City of Bridgeport has experienced financial difficulty in the past few years. In recent years, city government has had to reduce its operating budget. In 2011-12 the city's operating budget dropped by \$468 million; \$1.3 million less than 2010-2011. This was achieved by "reducing department budgets, reining in police overtime, and by working collaboratively with nearly every labor union in the city to gain concessions."<sup>20</sup> These cutbacks are a response to both reductions in state support and in financial troubles within the city. In 2009, when the ARRA was enacted, 20% of the

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<sup>17</sup>Connecticut Economic Resource Center, *Connecticut 2020: Fiscal Implications of economic and Demographic Change* (2008)

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, Richard A., "Dropouts to Diplomas: Closing the Attainment Gap in Connecticut High Schools" (2010). *Research Papers*. [http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/hri\\_papers/8](http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/hri_papers/8)

<sup>19</sup> Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition, "State of the Child in Bridgeport 2010 Report." Bridgeport, CT: Author.

<sup>20</sup> City of Bridgeport, (2011). *Mayor Finch sends budget proposal to city council; \$468 million budget reduces spending by \$1.3 million* Retrieved from: <http://www.bridgeportct.gov/pages/NewsDetails.aspx?itemid=200>

population was living below the poverty line, and Bridgeport had a 12 % unemployment rate, compared to 9% statewide.

### **Current Economic Situation in Hartford**

Hartford is the state capital and home to the headquarters of several national insurance companies. Nevertheless, Hartford’s economic challenges are also significant. In 2009, 32% of the population was living in poverty and the unemployment rate was 14% (see Table2). Hartford’s rate of child poverty, 43%, was more than three times the statewide rate of 12.5%. Interestingly, the proportion of the city’s revenues devoted to education increased, according to the most recent available budget. For 2010-2011, the city’s budget allocates \$544 million for education, a \$9.8 million dollar increase from 2009-2010. Just more than half (52 %) of that year’s city budget went towards education.<sup>21</sup>

### **Culture and Demographics of Bridgeport**

Bridgeport is the most populous city in the state, with 143,748 residents in 2010. Latinos (38%) and African Americans (34%) outnumber whites in Bridgeport – it is a “majority-minority” city. Bridgeport has a younger age distribution among its population than much of the rest of the state. Twenty seven percent of Bridgeport’s population is under the age of 18, compared to 21% statewide.<sup>22</sup> When asked to describe the civic culture of community work in the city, one longtime resident described it as having a “roll up your sleeves” ethos, where although many stakeholders are invited to the table, and many voices are included, “we get it done.” Stakeholders described Bridgeport as collaborative and hard working with striking consistency. Also significant is that when asked to mention “important figures” in the city, people described a mix of community members, civic leaders and government officials, and the “important agencies” mentioned were often community based and grassroots. These observations are consistent with a recent study that concluded that though Bridgeport is in many ways typical of an aging industrial city, a striking culture of democratic deliberation and civic engagement set the city apart from demographically similar peers.<sup>23</sup> The study concluded that Bridgeport had developed in recent years a more inclusive leadership structure and that Bridgeport’s children are benefiting.

### **Culture and Demographics of Hartford**

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<sup>21</sup> City of Hartford, [http://www.hartford.gov/budget/Budget10\\_11/Adp\\_1011\\_6\\_BudSum.pdf](http://www.hartford.gov/budget/Budget10_11/Adp_1011_6_BudSum.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Connecticut Economic Resource Center, (2011)Town Profiles, Bridgeport

<sup>23</sup> Will Friedman, Alison Kadlec, and Lara Birnback, “Transforming Public Life: A Decade of Citizen Engagement in Bridgeport, CT.” Public Agenda, 2007.

Hartford is the third largest city in the state, with a total population of 124,775; the city has lost over 18,000 residents since 1990, although the population has stabilized in the last 10 years. Like Bridgeport, Hartford is a “majority-minority” city. The city’s Latino (largely Puerto Rican) population represents 43% of the population; African-Americans are 38%, and Whites 29%. Interestingly, during this time of population loss the number of schools in the city has grown, due in part to a proliferation of charter, alternative and specialty schools developed as part of the “Your Choice” system of school reform.

Our research suggests an overall low level of civic engagement in the area of education. Educational advocacy in Hartford was typically characterized as tension-filled. Of the stakeholders we interviewed in Hartford, none mentioned coalitions of organizations working together, and many had a difficult time thinking of influential agencies. Hartford’s faith community was described as playing a strong role in civic affairs. Achieve Hartford, an affiliate of the Public Education Network, works closely with the Hartford Public Schools. However, several respondents characterized it as business dominated and oriented.

### **Early Childhood and Civic Engagement**

#### **Early Childhood on the State Level**

Connecticut was awarded \$13.6 million in early childhood stimulus aid during the 2009 fiscal year. The vast majority of these funds, \$9.7 million were used to fill the budget gap in the state’s Care for Kids childcare subsidy to working parents. The remaining \$2.7 million were distributed to “Quality Activities” for infants and toddlers on a discretionary basis; no one we interviewed was aware of how or if those remaining dollars were spent. Stakeholders in both cities noted that because the Care for Kids subsidy was an existing program, by using ARRA dollars to make up for reduced state support to the program, Connecticut did not follow the supplemental “spirit” of the bill. One stakeholder working in Hartford reported that the state manipulated the system by “under-budgeting” for Care for Kids in anticipation of the stimulus funds, thereby negotiating around the non-supplant rule. Several stakeholders reported more generally that the ARRA was used by the state for “their own purposes.”

In non-profits as well as schools, people reported a two-fold problem with the ARRA’s reporting requirements. First, there were the extensive reporting requirements and vast amount of paperwork required by the federal government. New ARRA reporting requirements were layered on top of existing state and federal reporting, leading stakeholders to complain that they lacked the capacity for this work. This was compounded by the fact that no RFP’s were released, leaving it up to each organization to draft

their own proposal; this meant that only well-established, organized groups were able to request funding. The cumulative effect resulted in many smaller organizations being unaware of how to seek funds, or perceiving that the funds required more work than it was worth to apply. Second, despite efforts at transparency, actual oversight of program operations was weak. Despite the online recovery.gov site and site-level data, it was extremely difficult to track funding. While amounts given to each organization or state agency were made available, how these monies were actually spent was not clear. Outside the public sector, stakeholders on all levels expressed this sentiment.

In considering how the ARRA impacted early childhood education, it is important to consider that the stimulus bill was about “recovery and reinvestment” and focused in employment; education was funded through these pathways. When dollars did reach local early childhood organizations it was not through federally designated early childhood education funds but instead via Community Service Block Grants (CSBG) that local community organizations or non-profits received. CSBG grants were not exclusively used for early childhood; this was based on each agency’s needs, mission and the proposal they wrote when seeking funds.

### **Early Childhood in Bridgeport**

Bridgeport is home to a number of community based, grass roots early-childhood and educational organizations. Action for Bridgeport Child Development (ABCD), Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition (BCAC), and Bridgeport Alliance for Young Children (BAYC) and the United Way are frequently cited as important civic organizations working in the areas of education and children and youth. As mentioned, our observation is that compared to similarly situated communities Bridgeport’s has a high level of civic engagement. Those we interviewed observed that agencies like BCAC and BAYC exist to facilitate communication and collaboration.

ABCD, a well established, multi-service agency in Bridgeport, was the only organization in Bridgeport to receive a Community Service Block Grant. The State of Connecticut awarded ABCD a CSBG of \$1.29 million; of this \$529,519 went to the agency’s early childhood programming (both Head Start and Early Head Start). The funds were primarily used to make repairs and renovations to Early Head Start classroom space the agency had recently taken over. Additionally, durable classroom supplies were purchased and all Early Childhood Education staff received a cost of living adjustment.

ABCD has been active in Bridgeport since 1964, when it was officially named as Bridgeport’s anti-poverty agency by the Johnson Administration’s Office of Economic Opportunity. The

organization's historical roots and influence in the community seems to have bolstered their successful pursuit of an ARRA grant and allowed the organization to put the funds to work efficiently. Additionally, as a large, established agency they had the capacity to write a winning grant and submit their proposal in a timely manner. Prior successful initiatives and a respectable reputation added strength to ABCD's application. Several of our respondents described ABCD as an "influential group" in the community and reported partnering with the organization through various coalitions. ABCD also has a strong relationship with the Bridgeport public school system. Once awarded funding, ABCD had the appropriate plan, human capacity, and resources needed to put the ARRA dollars to work quickly and effectively. ABCD's reputation was strong enough that they received additional ARRA grants, including a \$5.9 million weatherization grant, funds for job training and placement, and partnering with the school system to implement an ARRA grant awarded through the school system.

### **Early Childhood in Hartford**

Because it is the state capital, many of the groups based in Hartford and are active in education operate on a statewide level, including but not exclusively focused on Hartford. For example, Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding (CCJEF) is based in Hartford. However, it focuses on funding and equity issues on behalf of low-income school children across the state. Hartford Foundation, Community Renewal Team (CRT) and Achieve Hartford were frequently reported organizations; of these only Achieve Hartford is focused specifically on the particular needs of that city.

CRT, a multi service agency, was awarded \$2.9 million through a CSBG grant. It was the only agency in Hartford that received a CSBG grant. Like Bridgeport's ABCD, CRT is the Hartford region's Community Action Agency. CRT, however, serves Hartford and Middlesex Counties. CRT has a long history in Hartford, dating back to its founding in the 1960s. CRT provides broad delivery of social services in the areas of employment and training, mental health and wellness, housing, family services, senior services, and education and youth. Its budget of \$75 million is two-thirds funded by federal and state grants. CRT has a large staff, more than 800 employees, and runs more than 60 "human service" programs. CRT has a planning department with a professional staff able to successfully seek external grants and funding opportunities. As a major service provider to low-income residents in Hartford and Middlesex Counties, CRT has relationships with dozens of community based agencies throughout the Hartford region.

CRT used the \$2.9 million ARRA grant to expand "early care in education" in four classrooms. Specifically, the ARRA funds allowed CRT to offer approximately 100-200 low-income parents the

opportunity to enroll their children into early care for 10 hours instead of the typical 6.5 hours without additional payments. CRT staffers emphasized that this assisted their clients, many of whom are “the working poor who simply cannot pay for” full-day child care. All the CRT “school readiness” classrooms require parents to pay a fee. However, with the ARRA, CRT was able to offer all-day care for parents at or below the poverty level at no extra cost. Hence, with the help of the ARRA funds, a number of parents who wanted to attend school or go to work could do so without paying additional child-care fees. As one staffer noted, for two years low-income families “got a very comprehensive childcare program with no cost to them.”

## **Title I and Civic Engagement**

### **Title I Schools on the State Level**

The state distributed ARRA dollars to Title I schools based on the formula for the Education Cost Sharing Grant. This is worth mentioning because of the criticism surrounding the ECS grant, particularly as implemented in recent years. Several stakeholders mentioned that although the ECS began in the late 1980s as a reasonable tool for state contribution to needy districts, changes starting in 1995 weakened the grant formula. Later changes damaged the ECS further, including a 2004 “cap” setting each district’s allocation at the 2004 level plus 23% of the current year’s allocation that a district would have received under the original ECS formula<sup>24</sup>. In 2006, Governor Rell convened a Commission on Education Finance to examine the issue. The commission reported that “a number of elements in the original formula have been eroded or completely eliminated over time.”<sup>25</sup> The Education Cost Sharing Grant was not restored by the arrival of stimulus funds, however, and the weakened formula was used to distribute ARRA dollars to schools.

It is difficult to draw lessons on how the ARRA impacted education given the dire fiscal straits the state and the districts were in when the stimulus funds reached most districts. Connecticut as a whole has faced economic hardship in recent years, even in the context of the national recession the state is suffering. This hardship trickled down to the district level; state funding to schools has been flat for several years, compounding the impact of the current economic downturn. Generally, stakeholders reported that ARRA dollars were used by the districts as they were intended, to prevent layoffs and fill budget holes. Some stakeholders complained that, as with early childhood, this was an example of the state using these funds to supplant existing monies rather than as supplemental funding. However,

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<sup>24</sup> Lohman, J., OLS Research Report: Education Cost Sharing Formula (2004) <http://www.cga.state.ct.us/olr>

<sup>25</sup> [www.ct.gov/opm/lib/opm/budget/educationfinance/edufinancefinalreport.pdf](http://www.ct.gov/opm/lib/opm/budget/educationfinance/edufinancefinalreport.pdf)

others believed this was a necessary action and indeed the intention. Without ARRA's preventative effect, it does seem that the schools in both cities would have been severely impacted.

As with early childhood funds, many stakeholders complained about the lack of transparency and regulation regarding ARRA funds for Title I schools. It seems telling that many prominent educational actors in both cities had limited understandings of how funds to the districts were spent.

### **Title I Schools in Bridgeport**

Bridgeport Public School District has 20,488 students and over 95% are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Based on these figures, all schools in the district receive Title I funding. Bridgeport received \$7.8 million in stimulus toward their Title I schools and \$15 million in education stabilization funds, allocated according to the ECS grant formula (see Table 3). When asked to describe how they understood ARRA's function in the city, most Bridgeport stakeholders outside the school district expressed only tenuous understanding of how the funds were used. Most reported that their general sense was that these funds were primarily used to prevent layoffs, pay teacher salaries and fill funding gaps; a complaint was that stimulus dollars supplanted existing state funding rather than as a supplement.

As in Hartford, district officials in Bridgeport seemed reluctant to speak with interviewers. However, one Bridgeport school district official was eventually assigned by supervisors to work with us. This individual indicated that on a district level (separate from the state's actions), the funds were not used solely to supplant, and using them to stabilize school budget was in line with ARRA regulation. Additionally, according to this official, a small portion of the funds were used for a high school transition program, renovating the Bridgeport Parent Center and bringing the *Total Learning* program in 4 pilot schools. *Total Learning* is music and movement-based early childhood intervention created and implemented by ABCD.

Bridgeport chose to spend all of its ARRA funding, rather than saving a portion for next year's budget. Though these dollars were indeed needed at the time they were received, several stakeholders outside of the schools expressed concern for what might happen—potential layoffs, loss of programs, etc—once the stimulus funds have been exhausted.

### **Title I Schools in Hartford**

Hartford has 21,587 students and 41 schools; 92% of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Like Bridgeport, all schools in Hartford receive Title I funding. In the first round of ARRA funding Hartford received \$11 million toward Title I schools and \$17.2 million from the education

stabilization grant (see Table 3). These funds were primarily used to prevent layoffs and to fill budget gaps, though details of this plan have been inconsistently reported. Funds were also used to develop new special education and literacy curriculum and to purchase software for those areas. A second round of ARRA funds, totaling approximately \$11 million, was saved by the district for use in the upcoming fiscal year. Regarding educational issues, one longtime Hartford resident complained that “none of the ARRA money entered Hartford.” He explained that beyond the CSBG funds used for early childhood education, the money for public schools primarily maintained teacher jobs. His complaint was that, because teachers live outside the city, Hartford residents did not benefit from employment opportunities generated by the stimulus. No Hartford School district official would speak with us despite repeated calls, emails and letters.<sup>26</sup> The community and political tensions our small number of Hartford respondents reported, could be turbulence from the political changes that the city is experiencing.

## **Conclusion**

The timing of the ARRA funds was important in the implementation process. Federal aid arrived when state and local governments were entering into budget crises. The 2008 economic downturn prompted many states to propose substantial budget cuts in areas like education, including the elimination of arts programs and the layoffs of teachers. As noted in the introduction, states had substantial capacity to treat ARRA dollars as fungible. For example, if Connecticut received \$50 million ARRA dollars to improve its highways, it might cut its own contribution to the state highway budget by \$50 million and use the state funds to finance some other component of state government. ARRA directed funds to go to state and local governments for specific programs, such as schools in high poverty neighborhoods. Channeling ARRA funds through states created an environment where federal dollars could be used to replace state and local spending. In Connecticut, officials underfunded the 2009-2010 state budget and used ARRA funds to fill the gap. All of the Bridgeport and Hartford’s public schools are Title I eligible. In the Title I schools, it appears that the most significant impact of ARRA was preventing teacher and other staff layoffs. President Obama designed the ARRA as an effort to “jumpstart” the economy and to save millions of jobs. In Bridgeport and Hartford, respondents acknowledged that the ARRA funds allowed the school districts to keep hundreds of teachers and other school district workers employed by helping to fill the hole in state and local budgets brought on by the

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<sup>26</sup>We complied with the Hartford School District’s Office of Academics request to complete and submit a “Request to Conduct Research” form. The completed form was sent via postal mail and email to the district’s Office of Academics. We have not received a response to our request.



economic recession. State and local government jobs were saved because ARRA funds were largely used to off-set state and local revenue shortfalls.

The implementation of early childhood ARRA initiatives in Bridgeport and Hartford benefited from the presence in both cities of a multi-service social agency equipped to take advantage of the new opportunities. ABCD and CRT were designed as the anti-poverty “community action agencies” for Bridgeport and Hartford in the 1960s as part of the federal Office of Economic Opportunity. Today, both agencies work toward addressing the needs of impoverished city residents. ABCD serves over 35,000 individuals annually through its broad range of services in a six-town area, covering Bridgeport, Easton, Fairfield, Monroe, Stratford, and Trumbull, Connecticut. CRT serves over 130,000 individuals annually in Hartford and Middlesex Counties. As local agencies with many years of experience obtaining and disbursing federal grants, ABCD and CRT were critical in the implementation of components of the ARRA related to early childhood development. ABCD and CRT are distinguished from other organizations in Bridgeport and Hartford in three important ways. First, ABCD and CRT’s mandate is to assist the poor. Second, ABCD and CRT concentrate efforts and resources on identifying and eliminating the causes of poverty rather than only dealing with its effects. Third, ABCD and CRT have long records of providing early childhood services through the federally supported Head Start program. It seems that any effort in Bridgeport focused on early childhood development is likely to include ABCD. Similarly, if one is interested in implementing an effective and comprehensive early childhood development initiative in Hartford, CRT is likely to be involved. These organizations have demonstrated capacity, especially in the area of grant writing, which makes them key players in the implementation of the ARRA in the area of early childhood.

One of the issues that came up consistently in our research is that the application process for ARRA funds provided only a short window for organizations to submit proposals. As noted earlier, it is very likely that many non-profits interested in early childhood did not have the capacity to complete the federal application process before the short deadline. This meant that only a handful of local organizations with experience in writing grant applications were able to take advantage of the ARRA early childhood funds. Our research suggests that ARRA had some but limited impact in early childhood because not many agencies received ARRA funds for these purposes.

The ARRA funds were available for only two years. Our research revealed that local agencies were concerned about what would happen after the funds expired. In fact, local officials were told that because funds would “likely not be available at the same level” beyond September 2011, they should

not make “ongoing” programmatic “commitments that they might not be able to sustain once ARRA funds are expended.”<sup>27</sup> It seems that ABCD and CRT approached this challenge differently. ABCD used the ARRA early childhood funds for beautification projects, including new paint jobs, carpeting, signage, and playground surfaces. These improvements would, of course, remain in place after the ARRA funds expired. However, CRT decided to use the ARRA funds to expand early care in education for two years. CRT officials reported that after the ARRA funds expired, the expanded benefits also ended. As one staffer observed, “It was like giving them a taste of what life could be like” if they could afford all-day childcare. Although many of our respondents bemoan that the ARRA funds were temporary, several noted that in the area of early childhood, the ARRA funds demonstrated a real need.

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<sup>27</sup> Letter from Mark K. McQuillan, Connecticut Commissioner of Education, to Superintendents of Schools, “ARRA Early Childhood Education Opportunities,” June 2, 2009.

