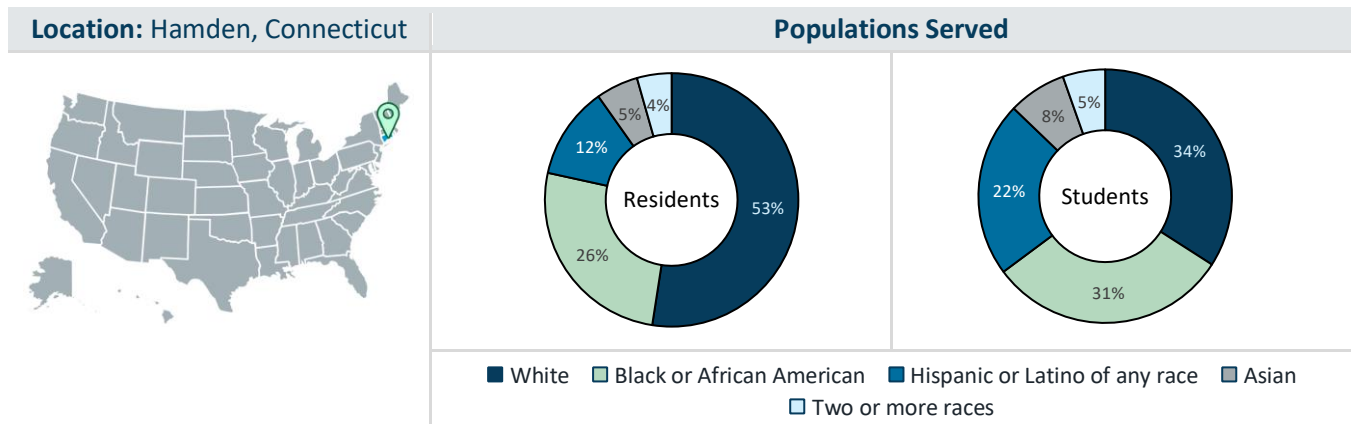


# BRIDGES COLLABORATIVE MEMBER PROFILE

## Hamden Public Schools



Organization type: Public School District



### Size



Hamden is a suburban community outside of New Haven, CT, with a population of approximately **61,000**.

Hamden Public Schools consists of **eight elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school**.

The district serves approximately **5,500 students**.

### Desegregation/Integration Focus



In 2020, Hamden Public Schools established the Hamden Diversity Advisory Council (HDAC). The HDAC is an initiative designed to “**engage community leaders in the process of reimagining, restructuring, and redesigning results for equity and diversity** in Hamden Public Schools with the unique challenges of today’s world.”<sup>1</sup>



HDAC’s steering committee produced a report that outlined the council’s priorities and possible policy recommendations for how to desegregate the district. As a result of this report, the steering committee established task forces to work on two of the report’s recommendations related to equitable school admissions: **expanding pre-K offerings and piloting an enrollment model designed to racially balance schools’ student populations**.

**HDAC leadership is shared between Hamden district administrators and community members, and the council gathers input from the broader community to inform its work.**

<sup>1</sup> Hamden Diversity Advisory Council, *Executive summary: What is HDAC?* 2020. <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1603383765/hamden/xa2lr7did3aajqahokwq/HDACexecsummary.pdf>



## Why and how did the Hamden Diversity Advisory Council form?

Connecticut state law requires that every school's student population reach a level of racial balance. Local or regional boards of education determine racial balance by first examining the average percentage of students of color (i.e., students who identify, according to state law, as a "racial minority"<sup>2</sup>) in their district. To achieve racial balance, every school's student population must have a percentage of students of color that is within 25 percentage points of the district average.

In 2019, the Connecticut State Department of Education identified one elementary school in Hamden as racially imbalanced and two elementary schools at risk of becoming imbalanced; all three schools were located in south Hamden and had student bodies with significantly higher than average populations of Black and Brown students. The district had to submit a plan to the State Board of Education detailing how it intended to resolve the issue. In that plan, the Hamden Board of Education announced it would close two elementary schools, both located in south Hamden. Hamden families, especially those belonging to the schools at risk of closing, were concerned that closing schools would perpetuate existing inequities in the community and sought a way to voice their frustration and generate alternative policy solutions that would address racial balancing in Hamden's schools more comprehensively. In response, Hamden Public Schools established the Hamden Diversity Advisory Council (HDAC). The council began meeting in February 2020. As of August 2022, HDAC consists of over 80 community members, including Hamden students, parents, teachers, district-level staff, school board members, and city council members.



## Spotlight: How does the HDAC distribute leadership and engage the community in its work?

During its early stages, the HDAC held an open vote among its members to determine which five members would be on the council's steering committee; two parents, a student, a teacher, and a community advocate were elected. The steering committee developed a report that outlined the community's priorities and possible recommendations for how to desegregate the district. The report was shared with the Hamden Board of Education, the legislative council, and the wider community. As a result of this report, the HDAC established task forces to build upon two of the report's recommendations related to equitable school admissions: expanding pre-K offerings and piloting an enrollment model designed to racially balance schools' student populations (e.g., creating sister school relationships<sup>3</sup>). The steering committee then chose the leaders of the two task forces. Each task force is co-chaired by a district administrator and a community member from the steering committee to facilitate shared leadership. The ultimate goal of these task forces is to develop more detailed policy recommendations that the district's Board of Education should consider as part of its racial balancing plan.

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<sup>2</sup> Section 10-226a of the Connecticut General Statutes categorizes students and teachers who are "racial minorities" as "those whose race is defined as other than white, or whose ethnicity is defined as Hispanic or Latino by the federal Office of Management and Budget for use by the Bureau of Census of the United States Department of Commerce."

<sup>3</sup> Select members of the HDAC steering committee described the process of creating sister school relationships as taking two pre-K to Grade 6 schools that are currently serving students from different racial groups (e.g., one school serves mostly Black students, and the other school serves mostly White students) and splitting up those schools into separate sites for specific grade groups. For example, one school site might serve pre-K to Grade 2 and the other school site might serve Grades 3 to 6. Following the creation of sister school relationships, each school site would serve approximately the same number of students as before but be more racially balanced.

Members of the steering committee described the HDAC as an initiative designed to be powered by the community. The HDAC is structured to encourage as many community members as possible to participate in its work. For example, there is no formal membership list, members are not required to attend a certain number of meetings, and members are not required to have a child enrolled in the district.

To systematically gather input from the Hamden community about potential policies to recommend to the Board of Education, the HDAC has partnered with ThoughtExchange, an online learning process. For example, the task force that focused on expanding pre-K enrollment surveyed the broader community about potential policy strategies to achieve this end. Using the ThoughtExchange platform, community members chose which policy or strategy they preferred and shared input anonymously on a discussion forum. Community members could see one another's comments on the forum, flag them to show agreement, and add their own comments. This process has provided the HDAC with insight into which pre-K strategies members of the broader community preferred and will help determine which policies it will recommend to the Hamden Board of Education.



## What factors support the HDAC's work to desegregate Hamden Public Schools?

### Hiring an external facilitator to support the council

The district hired a consultant to facilitate the council meetings and coach the task force co-chairs. The consultant had legal expertise and relevant experience building community-based coalitions around the issues of desegregation and integration in the New York City Public Schools. During the early months of the HDAC, the consultant worked closely with the superintendent to outline meeting agendas, facilitate council meetings, and maximize member engagement (e.g., by hosting virtual meetings during the beginning of the pandemic). She also helped establish council meeting norms, trained the task force co-chairs on group facilitation techniques, and worked closely with task force co-chairs to ensure they were sharing leadership.

Jody Goeler, former superintendent of Hamden Public Schools and former task force co-chair,<sup>4</sup> said, *"We recognized early on that HDAC members would be discussing hot button issues, so it was important to have an [external person] facilitate the meetings, not a superintendent, but a person who has done this work before, who is thoroughly engaged in this work, [and] who wants to see more towns like Hamden do better for our kids and families."*

### Sharing leadership with the community

Each task force is co-chaired by a district administrator and a community member. Select steering committee members noted that this shared leadership helped the HDAC leadership have more candid conversations with the broader community than if the council was led solely by district administrators. *"It's really helpful that I'm an elementary classroom teacher,"* said Kathleen Kiely, task force co-chair and Hamden community member. *"I think that helps [community members] feel like they can tell me what they're honestly thinking."* The diversity of the task force members also contributes to the success of their work. The members are diverse not only in background and ethnicity but also in resources and knowledge. For example, one task force includes a lawyer, a

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<sup>4</sup> Jody Goaler retired as superintendent of Hamden Public Schools as of June 30, 2022. The new superintendent will be Gary Highsmith, and his term began on September 1, 2022. AIR conducted interviews for this profile in June 2022.

teacher from Hamden Public Schools, a leader of a child advocacy group, and a school guidance counselor from a neighboring school district.



## What are the challenges the HDAC faces when working to desegregate Hamden Public Schools?

### Gathering input from all members of the community

The HDAC wants to ensure that the policies recommended to the Board of Education are informed by the Hamden community; however, engaging all members of the community in the council's work remains a challenge. For example, although HDAC has a self-invitational membership approach, this approach may still lead to a lack of engagement from underrepresented voices in the community who may not have the time and/or resources to seek out or participate in HDAC discussions. Additionally, while the council has used ThoughtExchange to solicit community input, they recognize that only a subset of the community responds to online surveys. As a first step to reaching the nonrespondents, the HDAC plans to add a data point to future ThoughtExchange surveys to understand which community members currently provide input on potential policy recommendations. For example, the council might ask respondents to list their legislative council district to learn about where survey respondents live in the community. Task force members can then use this information to come up with outreach strategies that will engage areas of Hamden with a high percentage of nonrespondents.

Kathleen Kiely explained the importance of gathering broader community input: *“You can put up a survey and say, ‘Look how many people agreed with it,’ and that helps move boards and councils but it's not something that's going to move families, right? Just because everybody else thinks it is a great idea that this school becomes a K–3 school, if it's not great for [your family], it doesn't matter. I think people can handle something that's not popular or they can handle something that's not what they want, as long as they feel they were heard and they understand ‘the why’.”*

### Developing policy recommendations that do not place a greater burden on Black and Brown residents than on White residents

North Hamden has primarily White residents, and south Hamden has primarily Black and Brown residents. There is widespread buy-in among all residents that the populations of schools should reflect the population of Hamden. However, through its outreach efforts, the HDAC has learned that residents from south Hamden are concerned that any plans to racially balance school populations will place a greater burden on their students.

For example, when the HDAC was first formed, families from south Hamden voiced concerns about one of the district's initial desegregation strategies, which was to create magnet schools. As Kathleen Kiely noted, the steering committee quickly learned that most council members did not want magnet schools because they felt that magnet schools would require Black and Brown students from south Hamden to travel to schools in north Hamden. She said that families in south Hamden would rather stay in their current school than *“trust a re-districting system that was garnered around not upsetting those that already have the power.”* In response to the HDAC's nonsupport of the magnet school model, the district decided not to pursue magnet schools as a racial balancing strategy. To ensure

that their recommendations to the Board of Education are equitable, the council continues to solicit input from residents in north and south Hamden.



## Lessons learned

- Hiring an external facilitator who understands and can navigate group dynamics has been beneficial, as desegregating a public school district is highly charged work. The external facilitator helped the council engage in productive and thoughtful conversations about complex issues.
- Creating and empowering a steering committee to lead desegregation efforts can be a powerful way to jump-start the process and drive progress.
- Gathering community input is critical to generating buy-in for the council’s policy recommendations. When the district presents these policy recommendations to the Board of Education, the board needs to understand that community voices, not only district administrators, were involved in selecting the recommendations.
- Ensuring that community input is fully representative of all populations in the community requires targeted effort and awareness of the reach that existing communication tools and strategies have.
- Recognizing that the work of the council will evolve over time, and the council must be prepared to modify strategies and priorities as necessary.



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