



Book Review: *The Children in Room E4*

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The Children in Room E4, by Susan Eaton, provides a vivid account of education in a Hartford elementary school classroom, interwoven with the history of the *Sheff vs. O'Neill* school desegregation lawsuit.

The classroom that was the focus in this book is at Simpson-Waverly Elementary School in Hartford. In interviews with the principal, James Thompson, the author learns that the school has the lowest teacher turnover rate in Hartford, and is one of the city's smallest elementary schools. The principal indicated that school size makes a big difference in the school environment, and creates "a sense of manageability." Dr. Thompson recognizes that Simpson-Waverly's "high" test scores were just fragile numbers, which could vary dramatically from year to year.

At Simpson-Waverly, the superintendent had served for 18 years, and had promoted student achievement not by magic, but by developing effective tools:

- A meticulous teacher evaluation system
- Developing individualized plans for each student

- Hiring and retaining talented teachers

The author points to the highly acclaimed efforts in Houston, where dropout rates appeared to have fallen and test scores rose. However, in 2003 an independent researcher revealed that Houston underreported its dropout rate (by as much as 48%) and manipulated testing data and college attendance rates.

At times, the author is overly critical in describing original plans developed under the legislation proposed by Governor Weicker, she indicates "the legislature eventually watered down Weicker's proposal, and none of the plans came to action." In fact, there are several examples of ongoing interdistrict efforts that grew out of that regional planning process.

The book provides a comprehensive review of the history of the *Sheff* litigation, with interesting background and insights about many of the key players over the years. Most compelling is the author's ability to make the true impact of issues in the case come alive through the eyes of the teachers and students in a Hartford elementary classroom.