



MAGNET SCHOOLS

Primer on Magnet Schools

- Magnet schools are the largest set of choice-based schools in the nation.
- Many have special themes or curricular offerings to help attract a diverse community of students.
- Magnet schools were originally designed to incorporate strong civil rights protections (such as good parent information/outreach, explicit desegregation goals, and free transportation). Most were also created without selective admissions processes.
 - Many magnet schools have evolved over the years and have lost some of these original structures.
- Research suggests that magnet schools help promote positive academic outcomes for students.

In an era of exploding educational choice options – rapidly accelerated by the popularity of charter schools – and with growing racial diversity, how can magnet schools provide a tool for combining diversity and choice?

Some key differences between magnet and charter schools

- Magnet schools were located in 31 states in 2005-06, the latest year for which there is available data, and enroll more students (just over 2 million) than charter schools.
- Charter schools also contain a higher percentage of white students than magnet schools, while there is higher segregation of black students – and isolation of white students – in charter schools than magnet schools.

In short, in comparison to magnet schools, many charter schools today are enrolling a disproportionately white student population. These data suggest that it is important to consider the experiences of magnet schools alongside those of charter schools as educational choice grows.

How are magnet schools changing?

The mission of magnet schools has shifted considerably from its historical focus on racial desegregation. Today, in the aftermath of federal court decisions limiting race-conscious efforts by school districts, magnets comprise a diverse set of schools serving a variety of functions. Federal evaluations,¹ along with a recent survey of magnet schools, support these statements.

- The first federal report found that over 60% of magnets studied were “fully desegregated,” with the remainder still reporting substantial racial/ethnic diversity.
- The next evaluation found less encouraging results: only 42% of new magnet programs were operating under obvious desegregation guidelines.
- Finally, the latest federal magnet study found that 57% of newly founded magnet programs were making progress in combating racial isolation, while another 43% were experiencing an increase in segregation.
 - This study did not research desegregation goals, suggesting that priorities – at least at the federal level – may have been shifting as later magnet schools were established.

¹ For more information on federal magnet evaluations, see Blank et al., 1983 Steele & Eaton, 1996 and Christenson et. al, 2003

CRP's 2008 magnet schools survey found that only one-third of schools in the sample still had desegregation goals. Nearly as many schools no longer or never had desegregation goals. The conditions under which magnet schools are structured have important implications for levels of diversity.

Some of these conditions include:

- *Desegregation goals*
Schools with desegregation goals are more likely to be substantially integrated *or* experiencing increasing integration.
- *Type of Magnet Program*
Whole school magnets as compared to school-within-a-school magnets were more likely to be diverse.
- *Type of admissions process*
Competitive admissions criteria, such as using GPA or test scores as part of the admissions process, were used more often by a larger number of segregated schools.
- *Outreach*
Magnet schools that outreach to prospective students are more likely to have experienced increasing integration over the last decade, while one-quarter of those without special outreach were one-race schools.
- *Transportation*
Transportation has been an important provision of magnet schools, specifically to ensure that everyone who chooses what might be out-of-neighborhood schools is able to attend. Magnet programs that offer free transportation appear less likely to be racially isolated since they provide a concrete means for a broad community of students to access the school.

How can we promote and preserve the integrative mission of magnet schools, and extend those policies to other schools?

Policymakers:

1. Renewed commitment to creating magnet schools with guidelines for racial diversity that fall within the bounds of the recent Supreme Court decision.
2. As the growth of charter schools continues, federal and state charter school legislation should contain some recognition and enforcement of equity provisions from magnet school history.

District and school personnel, along with community stakeholders:

3. Continued funding for districts to provide free transportation to magnet school students, even in the face of rising fuel costs. Districts should think about geocoding, consolidating bus routes, or using public transit (where available) as strategies to offset costs.
4. Support for magnet programs that emphasize non-competitive admissions policies like open enrollment (with broad outreach) and lottery systems. If competitive admissions policies *are* used, interviews and essays can help counter the segregating effects associated with the consideration of test scores, GPAs, and audition performances. Competitive magnets should also add race, geography (e.g., neighborhood residence), and/or socioeconomic status as one or more admissions factors.
5. Continued and increased use of special outreach to attract students from a variety of backgrounds.
6. An increased emphasis on teacher training for racially diverse learning environments.