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The Pull of Magnets

Are magnet schools a desegregation tool that failed—or the last, best hope for improving public education?

BY SUSAN BLACK

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" Ask that question at Andrew A. Robinson Elementary School—a magnet school in Florida that emphasizes math, science, and pre-engineering—and kids from kindergarten through fifth grade will tell you they've set their sights on becoming oceanographers, or possibly computer scientists. In Pulaski County, Ark., kids attending Crystal Hill Magnet Elementary School—where the emphasis is on written, oral, and visual communications—say they intend to become film producers and journalists.

Moving up the grades, you'll find students in Charlotte's Middle and High School for the Visual and Performing Arts, a magnet school in North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg district, specializing in theater, music, dance, and visual art. And in Mercedes, Texas, students at South Texas High School for Health Professions are exploring careers in fields such as medical technology, pediatric nursing, and cancer research.

Magnet schools such as these—schools designed to attract students with special talents and interests—are increasing in number, according to a 1994 report prepared by Lauri Steel and Roger Levine for the U.S. Department of Education. In their study of the growth of magnet schools in the United States, Steel and Levine tally some 3,000 magnet schools—more than double the number in existence 10 years earlier. (The study concentrates on magnet schools; magnet programs—sometimes called "schools within a school"—are not counted.)

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Three reasons for growth

As Steel and Levine see it, much of this growth is due to "deep pockets" in the Magnet School Assistance Program, a federal fund that has spent more than $739 million between 1985 and 1993 to get magnet schools up and running in 117 school districts.

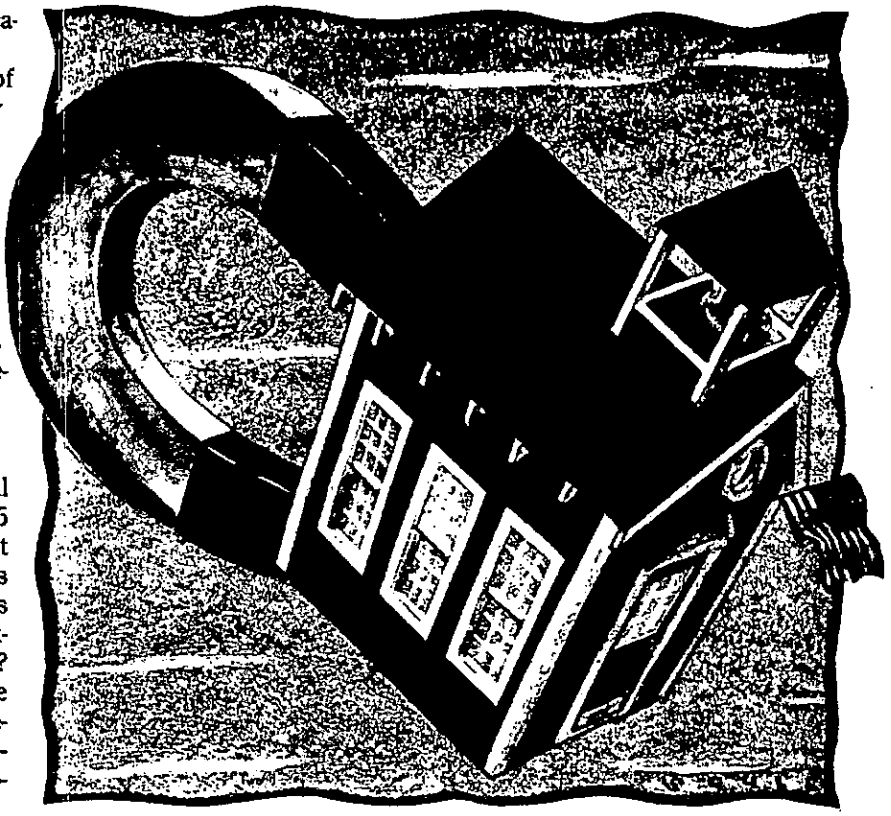
Money might well be a powerful incentive for creating magnet schools, but a strong second is the belief that such schools will solve a host of student-related problems—such as attendance, dropouts, suspensions, and other discipline problems. "In my imagination, I see great possibilities in magnet schools," says an assistant superintendent who admits to spending much of his time mediating disputes between parents and students and the school district. "I think magnet schools would give us more peaceful schools and a more contented community."

But as Steel and Levine point out, the federal government supports magnet schools for a more fundamental reason than solving district-level problems with students or raising curriculum standards. The "explicit purpose" of magnet schools, they write, is to promote desegregation.

"Many school leaders think their magnet schools are the newest invention on the block," says the pupil personnel manager of an urban school district whose office keeps track of student enrollment in more than 30 buildings. "What they don't realize is that magnet schools—in one form or another—have been around since the 1970s." Then, as now, this school administrator explains, the government urged racially unbalanced city schools (those with higher than average enrollments of black, Hispanic, and other minority students) to create special schools that would appeal to white parents and their children. "By offering *optional* schools—that's what we called magnet schools back then—and by letting kids cross their home school boundaries, we accomplished two goals," he says. "First, we integrated schools by pulling students from predominantly white

neighborhoods, and second, we improved education for all kids, whatever their race."

But the magnet school's original purpose of improving racial balance is often obscured or forgotten in the current zeal to create more magnet schools. "Lest we forget," says a superintendent who's recently received three separate requests to establish new magnet schools from active parent organizations, "we need to take a step back in time and remember two facts: Magnet schools were developed as an alternative to forced busing, and in many cases they were implemented as the result of court desegregation orders."



Documented effectiveness

Have magnet schools fulfilled the original dream of desegregation? Do the more than 1.5 million students who now attend public magnet schools represent a racial balance of students within their school districts? Do magnet schools offer students of all races and economic backgrounds better opportunities to grow and learn? Experience shows that many magnet schools are a powerful draw for parents, and a number of research studies document their effectiveness—both in breaking down racial isolation and providing high-quality education programs.

Offering parents a choice of what school their children will attend—a founding premise of magnet schools—is unquestionably popular. Consider the Blythe Academy of Languages, a magnet elementary school in Greenville, S.C., where all 425 students learn their lessons in French or Spanish. Nearly half of the current students come from outside the school district, says Blythe Principal Cynthia Minton, who points to a waiting list of about 40 children—including some who have not yet reached their first birthday.

Blythe Academy is not alone: Nationwide, Steel and Levine estimate, more than 60 percent of magnet schools cannot accommodate all the students who wish to enroll, and about half of all magnet programs maintain waiting lists. Upwards of 120,000 students are on those lists, Steel and Levine say—most of them hoping to get into gifted and talented programs and career/vocational magnets.

In *Magnet School Policy Studies and Evaluations*, Beatriz Clewell and Myra Joy describe their extensive research on the voluntary magnet school plan in Montclair, N.J. The district's magnet school plan was adopted in 1976, when the state education department threatened to withhold funding after determining that neighborhood schools—like the city's housing patterns—were racially segregated. After studying more than a decade's worth of data collected from the Montclair schools, Clewell and Joy conclude that magnet schools cannot right every wrong, but such schools—particularly when they're well-planned and supported by the entire community— are promising in terms of "achieving racial balance, providing quality education, and offering diverse educational programs."

Similarly, in a large-scale study of state-supported magnet schools in 14 urban districts in New York state, researchers Ronald Szczypkowski and Marilyn Musumeci conclude that magnet schools help desegregate school districts by "reducing racial isolation in schools." For each district included in the longitudinal study (from Niagara Falls to Yonkers), the researchers attribute significant and sustained improvement in desegregation to the implementation of magnet schools. In fact, Szczypkowski and Musumeci say, once magnet schools were up and running, racial balance evened out in both the magnet and the nonmagnet schools.

In addition to integrating schools, these researchers point to other compelling evidence in support of magnet schools: For one thing, students in magnet schools are twice as likely to finish high school than are students in other schools. And for another, students in magnet schools significantly outperform comparable control students attending other schools on measures of academic achievement. For these reasons and more, magnet schools should "be in the vanguard" of school reform, the New York researchers claim.

Concentrating solely on student achievement, Adam Gamoran, a researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, concludes that students enrolled in public magnet schools tend to learn more than those who attend comprehensive public high schools and private schools. In a recently completed study that tracked 4,000 urban students from eighth grade through 10th grade, Gamoran says students attending magnet schools made the greatest gains in reading, social studies, and science. (Mathematics scores are about the same among the various types of schools.)

But Gamoran's findings leave some doubt—or, at least, suggest the need for additional study. Earlier studies conducted at the University of Chicago followed students from 10th through 12th grade and reported that those attending private Catholic schools surpassed all others—including students attending magnet schools—on achievement measures.

In a 1994 summary of research conducted on magnet

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schools, Cordelia Douzenis, a professor at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, proposes that to fully explore the educational effects of magnet schools, researchers need to "go beyond the ordinary" and consider more than students' achievement scores. Citing *Educational Effects of Magnet Schools,* a research paper presented by R.K. Blank to the Conference on Choice and Control in American Education, Douzenis says an "ideal evaluation" of magnet schools should include the following three components: (1) the track records of students in magnet and nonmagnet schools on achievement and other outcomes; (2) an examination of how the magnet school's leadership, staffing, policies, and curriculum affect student outcomes; and (3) an in-depth study of factors that affect the entire district, such as enrollment policies and students' access to magnet programs.

Until studies expand beyond narrow research questions (such as how much students learn in magnet schools) to broader evaluations, we simply don't have adequate information "to determine the merit and worth of magnet schools," Douzenis concludes.

'Coarse arithmetic'

In Kansas City, Mo., and other cities where court-ordered desegregation has been an ongoing struggle for years, magnet schools fulfill what John McCormick, writing in *Newsweek,* calls "the coarse arithmetic of integration goals." But, as McCormick points out, Kansas City buses most of the district's 37,000 students in pursuit of those goals. The irony is not lost on one local school board member, who says the burden of desegregation is being carried by "little kids shivering at bus stops in the dark." For all the district's efforts, schools in Kansas City still are not fully integrated, and test scores show that students in magnet schools fare no better than students in the city's 18 schools that are not magnets. And Kansas City's desegregation program comes with a stiff price tag: So far the total cost has climbed to $1.3 billion.

But times are changing. On June 12, 1995, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down a 5-4 decision in *Missouri v. Jenkins,* an 18-year-old school desegregation case. The ruling: that lower federal courts had improperly ordered Missouri to help pay for magnet schools designed to change what Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg calls the state's "deep, inglorious history of segregation." The Supreme Court determined that, at most, the massive desegregation plan implemented in Kansas City had merely shuffled students around, a practice the court had expressly forbidden. Moreover, said the high court, standardized test scores are "not the appropriate test for deciding whether a previously desegregated district has achieved partially unitary status."

In a concurring opinion, Justice Clarence Thomas laid out what he called "a few thoughts" about the "twisted theory of racial injuries" in this long-standing case. "The mere fact that a school is black," Justice Thomas said, is not in and of itself a constitutional violation unless it stems from "purpose or intent to segregate." Reassigning students in order to eliminate or decrease observed racial imbalances runs contrary to the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment, which he said should be envoked not to enforce "strict race-mixing, but to ensure that blacks and whites are treated equally by the State without regard to their skin color." Noting that schools may be racially imbalanced as the result of parents opting for private schools, housing patterns, and other demographics, Justice Thomas cautioned the federal courts against using racial equality as "a pretext for solving social problems that do not violate the Constitution."

But Kimberly West, writing in the *Yale Law Review* in 1994, takes a different view. Magnet schools, West says, are a "desegregation tool that backfired." According to West, racial composition in magnet schools is almost always reported according to the mix of students attending a particular building. But breaking down the racial portrait of a whole building into mini-portraits of *classrooms* is the only way to test for desegregation, she argues. And as her data show, "many magnet schools are rife with racially segregated classrooms." The outcome is a "horrible irony," West says: Minority students—who often are routed into the lowest tracks and ability groups, as well as remedial programs within the building—are treated as inferior by the very system that was designed to help them.

In these cases, West finds, the notion of "separate but equal" simply does not apply. Minority students are denied all of the opportunities and benefits (such as better staffs, more spending and resources, and a superior and specialized curriculum) that are reserved for the magnet students, most of whom are white.

Kids who are kept out of magnet classrooms are inescapably labeled as "regular" or "nonmagnet," and, according to West, are thought of by teachers and students alike as being "less intelligent, less capable, and less significant."

The focus of magnet schools might indeed be shifting from the primary purpose of desegregating schools to creating schools with high interest, motivation, and learning for students and with support and satisfaction for parents. But if magnet schools are to be truly effective, school leaders need to remember Kimberly West's admonition to be certain that they're effective for everyone.

For more information

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