



Advancing Integration and Equity Through Magnet Schools

Janel George and Linda Darling-Hammond

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	v
Introduction	1
Why Integration Matters.....	1
Magnet Schools’ Integrative Origins	4
The Nation’s Ongoing History of Segregated Education	6
The Federal Retreat and School Resegregation	7
Limitations on Race-Conscious Approaches to Integration	9
Segregation Today.....	11
Magnet Schools Today	14
Magnet Schools in the Context of Contemporary Segregation.....	14
Magnet Schools in the Context of Legal and Political Reversals.....	16
Key Findings: Diversity and Student Outcomes in Magnet Schools	18
Considerations for Magnet School Diversity: “Whole School” Magnets and District Demographics.....	18
Magnet Schools and Student Social and Academic Outcomes	20
Components of Effective Magnet Schools.....	22
Policy Strategies to Support Diverse and Effective Magnet Schools	27
Conclusion	33
Endnotes	34
About the Authors	46
 List of Figures	
Figure 1 Percentage of Intensely Segregated Schools, 1988–2013.....	11

Executive Summary

The long-standing effort to desegregate schools in the United States has been fostered, in part, by the development of magnet schools, which were launched in the 1960s to offer appealing choices of educational programs that could attract an integrated population of families. Magnet schools are public elementary or secondary schools that seek to achieve voluntary desegregation through parental choice rather than through student assignment by offering specialized instruction and innovative academic offerings. They are often situated in urban centers, with the goal of drawing students from surrounding areas—like a magnet—to attend the school. Some magnet schools operate on a regional basis in order to address interdistrict desegregation.

This report draws upon research findings regarding the components found in magnet schools that are both diverse and educationally effective and outlines evidence-based policy recommendations that can inform federal, state, and local efforts to help to design, implement, and sustain effective magnet schools that can foster integrated learning and positive student outcomes.

Why Integration Matters

Well-established research outlines the benefits of school integration, including increased civic participation in a diverse global economy and increased likelihood of living in integrated neighborhoods and holding jobs in integrated workplaces as adults. Studies have found that the academic benefits of attending integrated schools include:

- higher achievement in math, science, language, and reading;
- school climates supportive of learning and studying;
- increased likelihood of graduating from high school and entering and graduating from college;
- higher income and educational attainment;
- increased access to highly qualified teachers and leaders who are less likely to transfer to other schools;
- enhanced classroom discussion; and
- more advanced social and historical thinking.

Students attending schools that are highly segregated by race and poverty—known as “hypersegregated” schools—are deprived of the benefits of integrated education. Most significantly, hypersegregated schools are characterized by resource inequities that translate into large proportions of inexperienced and underprepared educators and a lack of rigorous coursework, which have negative consequences for students’ academic outcomes as measured by performance on standardized achievement tests and high school graduation rates.

The Changing Face of School Segregation and Magnet Schools

Despite the evidence of the harm of segregated schools, research shows that schools are resegregating at alarming rates. One study found that during the quarter century since the high point of integration in 1988, the share of intensely segregated non-white schools (defined as those schools with fewer than 10% white students) more than tripled, increasing from 6% to 19% of all public schools. And another study found that white and Latino/a students are the most segregated subgroups of students.

A confluence of factors, including the drawing of district boundary lines, district secessions and annexations, and white flight, among other issues, have contributed to deepening contemporary segregation, most often between school districts.

Limitations of Race-Conscious Approaches to Integration and Magnet Schools

District demographic changes have been compounded by legal and political developments that have impacted voluntary desegregation programs, including magnet schools and their ability to foster school diversity. For example, legal challenges to race-conscious voluntary desegregation programs, including in the 2007 U.S. Supreme Court case of *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, created uncertainty about the extent to which student race could be considered in developing voluntary desegregation programs. As a result of the widespread uncertainty about ways to promote school diversity, many magnet schools and other desegregation programs departed from their original integrative missions.

Congressional prohibitions on the use of federal funds for transportation—an attempt to reduce busing in the 1970s—have also slowed desegregation. Further, changes to the federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP), the primary source of federal funding for magnet schools, have impacted the ability of magnet schools to expand. The MSAP has shifted its selection criteria to consideration of other factors in addition to school diversity and has not added incentives to address the evolving nature of school segregation. In addition, funding of the MSAP has declined in real dollar terms and has not kept pace with the demand for magnet schools nationwide. These changes have negatively affected the expansion of magnet schools as well as magnet schools' focus and goals.

The issuance of federal guidance by the Obama administration in 2011 sought to provide clarity to states and districts about permissible voluntary integration strategies by outlining legally permissible, evidence-based school diversity strategies, including magnet schools. However, that guidance was rescinded by the Trump administration in 2018, depriving districts of useful information for advancing school desegregation.

In this context of deepening school segregation, it is important to examine the evidence on the conditions in which magnet schools can innovate, improve the quality of education, boost the achievement of students, and promote integrated learning environments.

Components of Diverse Magnet Schools That Promote Positive Student Outcomes

Because magnet schools vary so significantly in theme, pedagogy, design, and implementation, it can be difficult for researchers to draw generalized conclusions about their effectiveness. As described in detail in the report, many, but not all, studies show positive effects of magnet schools on student outcomes. For example, a recent synthesis of research on magnet school effectiveness found positive effects in most studies on student achievement, attendance, and graduation rates. “Whole school” magnets and those without selective admissions policies have been generally found to be more effective at integration that supports achievement gains.

Research shows that diverse magnet schools that support positive social and academic outcomes share some common features. These components can be categorized as “first door” components,

which help to bring students from different backgrounds to magnet schools, and “second door” components, which help to foster inclusive environments and promote shared success for students of color within diverse magnet schools, without tracking them into separate classes that depress their opportunities for success.

First door components include:

- incorporation of integration into school design, mission, structure, and goals;
- intentional and ongoing family outreach and engagement;
- implementation of inclusive enrollment practices; and
- provision of free transportation.

Second door components include:

- access to the magnet school curriculum that is culturally responsive and program elements for all students throughout the school;
- culturally responsive curriculum and instruction;
- staff who are prepared to teach students from different backgrounds and cultures in heterogeneous classrooms;
- ongoing professional development opportunities for staff; and
- nondiscriminatory, restorative discipline practices.

Magnet schools need support to effectively implement evidence-based components. The following recommendations outline approaches at the federal, state, and district/local levels that can be taken to create and foster diverse and effective magnet schools.

Considerations to Help Create and Foster Diverse Magnet Schools

Diverse magnet schools that incorporate these components can be created and fostered through policies at the federal, state, district, and school levels, including:

At the federal level:

1. **Reinstating federal guidance to states and localities about evidence-based approaches to support school diversity, including magnet schools.** The guidance was a valuable resource for states and districts interested in accessing best practices for advancing voluntary integration efforts. To ensure that states and districts have access to evidence-based best practices, the guidance should be updated before it is reissued so that it can include current research on magnet schools and other school integration efforts to help inform voluntary school diversity programs.
2. **Expanding federal investments in magnet schools and using them to leverage school diversity and student success.** The MSAP was funded at just \$107 million in 2020, compared to \$440 million provided to charter schools, which research shows are often more segregated. The federal government can increase investment in the MSAP and strengthen the program, including by expanding eligibility for the program and prioritizing applicants that embed evidence-based components, like family outreach, into their school design. Further, the federal government can create another grant program to support local voluntary desegregation programs.

At the state level:

3. **Expanding strategic state and local investments in magnet schools in ways that support school diversity.** States can provide targeted grant funding, similar to the federal MSAP, to districts to create and sustain magnet schools. States can also ensure that state law permits interdistrict transfers that facilitate opportunities for students from surrounding districts to attend magnet schools and allocate funding, as Connecticut has, to support and incentivize student transfers to achieve diversity.

At the district level:

4. **Supporting school-level strategies that promote both integration and student success.** Districts can support first door practices, or those practices that will help to ensure that a diverse group of students walks through the front door of a magnet school together, including:
 - supporting ongoing outreach to diverse families through multiple platforms;
 - supporting schools in implementation of open and inclusive enrollment practices, such as lotteries, interviews, and essays, to attract students of color, English learners, and students from low-income families along with white and more affluent families to magnet schools; and
 - making strategic decisions about school siting and feeder patterns to optimize diversity and accessibility.

At the school level:

5. **Schools can implement second door efforts** that ensure that students within magnet schools are supported in positive, culturally affirming, and inclusive environments, including:
 - focusing on whole school magnet programs, which have been found to better foster diversity than “in-school” programs in otherwise diverse schools, and, to support this approach, supporting and preparing magnet school teachers to deliver instruction aligned with the school theme that is embedded in the curriculum, including through the provision of professional development opportunities;
 - providing innovative and culturally responsive curriculum to all students; and
 - implementing nonexclusionary, restorative school discipline policies and social and emotional learning in schools and supporting educators through ongoing training on implicit bias and anti-racism to aid educators in addressing bias and understanding how it may manifest in the school and classroom.

Introduction

As the nation reckons with the large and growing racial inequalities in health, employment, and education exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, it also confronts a history in which “separate but unequal” education was enshrined in law. Termed “slavery’s sequel” by scholar Carter G. Woodson, segregation—including the persistence of segregated education—continues to stain our democracy.¹ Even decades after “separate but equal” was legally invalidated, racially segregated and unequal educational opportunities are still prevalent in the nation’s public schools, with students of color and students from low-income families disproportionately attending racially isolated and underfunded public schools. The past instructs how imperative it remains to meaningfully integrate our nation’s public schools and expand access to quality equal educational opportunities for all students. Not only do all students gain the academic and social benefits of integrated education, but the nation benefits from an informed and engaged citizenry.

This report examines how magnet schools—one important approach to achieving school integration—emerged among various efforts to combat segregation and how this approach can be strengthened in the years to come. Given the deepening resegregation of the nation’s schools, examining the emergence and efficacy of magnets is both timely and useful, as the nation cannot continue to risk the educational futures of children to segregated and unequal educational opportunities.

This report begins by highlighting the research on the harms of segregation and the benefits of school integration for all students, along with the consequences of the status quo of segregation for students’ short- and long-term educational outcomes and for our democracy. It then explores the federal government’s role in advancing, and at times stymying, the progress of school integration and the implications for magnet schools. It outlines the evidence on magnet school components that are fostering school diversity and positive academic and social outcomes for students. This evidence is instructive of what can be done to promote the implementation and maintenance of magnet schools that are effective at achieving their original desegregative purpose. Finally, drawing upon this evidence, it outlines policy recommendations at the federal, state, and local levels to help to design, implement, and sustain effective magnet schools that can help to foster integrated learning and positive student outcomes.

Why Integration Matters

The negative effects of segregation

Considerable evidence over many decades shows that students graduating from racially segregated, high-poverty schools have poor achievement and long-term life outcomes. A number of studies have found strong relationships between racial segregation and racial achievement gaps; indeed, the racial composition of a school has educational impacts for students even after accounting for socioeconomic status, particularly due to resource inequities characterizing racially isolated schools.²

In a case that challenged school desegregation efforts in Jefferson County, KY, and Seattle, WA, more than 550 scholars signed on to a social science report filed as an amicus brief, which

summarized extensive research showing the persisting inequalities of segregated minority schools. The scholars concluded that:

More often than not, segregated minority schools offer profoundly unequal educational opportunities. This inequality is manifested in many ways, including fewer qualified, experienced teachers, greater instability caused by rapid turnover of faculty, fewer educational resources, and limited exposure to peers who can positively influence academic learning. No doubt as a result of these disparities, measures of educational outcomes, such as scores on standardized achievement tests and high school graduation rates, are lower in schools with high percentages of nonwhite students.³

Data trends over time illustrate both the large reduction in the Black–white achievement gap during the era of desegregation and school finance reforms in the 1970s and early 1980s, when the gap decreased by more than 50%, and the large increase in the gap when desegregation efforts were ended during the 1980s. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Black 13-year-olds have gained only 4 points in reading since 1988, whereas white 13-year-olds have gained 9 points, leaving a gap that is nearly 30% larger today than it was 30 years ago.⁴ Further, a 2019 study of every district in the United States found that racial school segregation is strongly associated with the magnitude of achievement gaps in 3rd grade, and with the rate at which gaps grow from 3rd to 8th grade.⁵

The academic benefits of integrated education

A substantial body of research has found that racially integrated learning environments have positive impacts on academic achievement for students of all races.⁶ A synthesis of 4 decades of research demonstrates the academic benefits of attending diverse schools,⁷ including:

- higher achievement in math, science, language, and reading;
- school climates supportive of learning and studying;
- increased likelihood of graduating from high school and entering and graduating from college;
- higher income and educational attainment;
- increased access to highly qualified teachers and leaders who are less likely to transfer to other schools;
- enhanced classroom discussion; and
- more advanced social and historical thinking.

Another recent research synthesis found that Black student achievement is improved by less segregated schooling, particularly in the earlier grades.⁸ And for white students attending racially diverse schools, there is no negative impact on academic achievement. For example, in a large-scale study of the effects of court-ordered desegregation on students born between 1945 and 1970, economist Rucker Johnson found that graduation rates climbed by 2 percentage points for every year a Black student attended an integrated school.⁹ Black students exposed to court-ordered desegregation for 5 years experienced a 15% increase in wages, an 11 percentage point decline in annual poverty rates, and a 22 percentage point decline in the probability of adult incarceration.¹⁰

These gains are tied to the fact that schools under court supervision benefited from higher per-pupil spending and smaller student–teacher ratios, among other resources. Alongside the positive outcomes for Black students, court-ordered desegregation caused no harm for white students.

As Johnson’s study suggests, many of the benefits of desegregation occur as Black students gain access to additional school resources. Reinforcing this point, a national study of school finance reforms over 40 years found that, for students from low-income families who had 20% more spent on them over the 12 years of school, graduation rates increased by 23 percentage points, and their rates of adult poverty were so significantly reduced that the gap between them and their more affluent peers was eliminated.¹¹

Magnet schools are generally designed to offer programs that are particularly innovative and often more costly than those of non-magnet schools. These offerings are attractive to many families of color because their goal has been to attain access to quality educational opportunities. In this context, some magnet schools have offered a way to achieve quality resources along with advancing integration goals.

The social benefits of integrated education

While much research focuses on the benefits that accrue to students of color who attend diverse schools, research has also documented the benefits for white students who attend diverse schools. A meta-analysis of more than 500 studies of intergroup contact across many kinds of organizations found that increased intergroup contact can have positive impacts on

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all groups by reducing prejudice, negative attitudes, and stereotypes.¹² Another analysis found that the intergroup contact theory operates in schools the same way it does in other environments, increasing positive relationships and friendships across racial lines.¹³

Furthermore, research shows that students’ exposure to other students from different backgrounds and the new ideas and challenges that such exposure brings leads to improved critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Other benefits of attending diverse schools include increased civic participation in a diverse global economy and increased likelihood of living in integrated neighborhoods and holding jobs in integrated workplaces as adults.¹⁴

It follows that students attending diverse magnet schools should also reap the academic and social benefits associated with attending diverse schools, and the evidence, as described below, indicates that this is largely true. However, not all magnet schools have been effective in promoting school diversity. As described in more detail, district demographics along with magnet school design, structure, and focus—particularly the centering of school integration in the school mission and the design for family outreach—matter for school diversity.

Magnet Schools' Integrative Origins

While magnet schools can vary widely in design and structure, they were developed to fit the federal definition of “a public elementary school, public secondary school, public elementary education center, or public secondary education center that offers a special curriculum capable of attracting substantial numbers of students of different racial backgrounds.”¹⁵ The goal of magnet schools has been to achieve voluntary desegregation through parental choice rather than mandatory student assignment by offering unique and innovative specialized instruction and rigorous academic offerings designed to draw students to the school from various surrounding geographic areas.

One of the first official magnet schools is believed to be McCarver Elementary School in Tacoma, WA, which was established in 1968¹⁶ as part of a controlled choice program designed to draw families to the school, which offered high-quality instruction and resources.¹⁷ The school still exists—although it has experienced some academic challenges—and serves approximately 420 students, from preschool through 5th grade, from diverse backgrounds.¹⁸ It was followed in 1969 by the William Monroe Trotter School in Boston (also focused on decreasing racial isolation) and others in Buffalo, NY; Houston; Minneapolis; and other major cities.¹⁹ These districts worked to spur integration through innovative offerings. Their distinctive offerings, featuring unique curriculum and teaching methods, continue to draw students to magnet schools located in urban areas.²⁰ Facing less vocal opposition than race-based mandatory integration measures, magnet schools expanded in the 1960s and 1970s, as they were often identified as remedies in school desegregation cases.

Magnet schools have often been situated in urban districts with the goal of drawing white students into urban centers to attend them. This closely mirrors the federal definition.²¹ Magnet schools can also operate to draw students from segregated city school districts to better-resourced suburban districts in whiter, more affluent suburbs, as Boston's Metco program and a regional choice program in Milwaukee (known as Chapter 220) have done.²² Enrollment at magnet schools is completely voluntary, but the ability of students to exercise the choice to attend magnet schools depends on a variety of factors, including whether the magnet school operates on a regional basis and offers transportation.²³

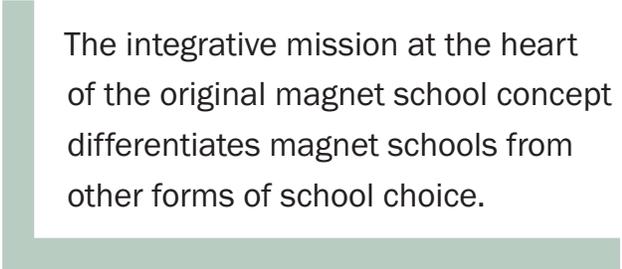
Research underscores a few distinguishing characteristics of magnet schools, including:

- a distinctive school curriculum organized around a specific special theme or method of instruction, such as a specific focus or themed curriculum centering on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) or the arts, or a specific emphasis, such as language immersion or specific learning techniques;
- voluntary enrollment elected by students and their parents; and
- choice across neighborhood, and sometimes district, boundaries (magnet school students are often drawn from many attendance zones, unlike other schools to which students are drawn because of the school's proximity).

Estimates of how many magnet schools are currently operating in the country depend, in part, on how one chooses to define a magnet school. While the definition outlined above is generally accepted, there are varying positions on whether to include in the definition of magnet schools those programs operating within schools (in-school programs) or whether only those magnet

programs embedded in the entire school (whole school magnets) should officially be considered magnet schools. Recent estimates of operating magnet schools range from 3,285 magnet schools (in 2014–15)²⁴ to as many as 4,340 magnet schools, educating over 3.5 million students nationwide.²⁵ The wide variation in estimates of magnet schools highlights the necessity for a widely agreed upon definition (particularly for policy and research purposes).

The integrative mission at the heart of the original magnet school concept differentiates magnet schools from other forms of school choice. However, due to a variety of legal and political developments—including demographic changes, absence of needed funding incentives to support integrated magnet schools, and limitations on mechanisms to accomplish desegregative goals—many magnet schools have departed from their integrative missions.²⁶ However, the demand for magnet schools has remained consistent over the decades. Magnet schools have expanded to comprise the largest sector of choice in the United States.²⁷



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These schools are needed more than ever today, given the resegregation of America’s school systems that has been growing ever worse since the 1980s and the emergence of a growing sector of hypersegregated schools that are under-resourced and serve high concentrations of children in poverty.

The Nation's Ongoing History of Segregated Education

The system of segregation that followed on the heels of slavery was legalized in Jim Crow laws and further enshrined in public jurisprudence in the 1896 case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*,²⁸ which granted legal recognition to the “separate but equal” doctrine (also upheld in many places through statute, known as *de jure* segregation). Segregation was also adopted in practice, known as *de facto* segregation, and enforced through campaigns of racial violence. Over a century of legal challenges to racially segregated education culminated in 1954’s *Brown v. Board of Education*, in which the U.S. Supreme Court declared that “‘separate but equal’ has no place in public education.”²⁹ But the remnants of this system—still deeply embedded in law, policy, and practice—persist in the form of public schools that are racially segregated and inequitably resourced.

School segregation past and present

Brown did not magically desegregate the nation’s schools. Following *Brown*, a variety of tactics, including school district boundary changes, secessions, annexations, and detachments, were used to circumvent desegregation. In the face of noncompliance with desegregation orders by states and districts, significant progress did not occur until the 1960s, when the Kennedy–Johnson administration mobilized all branches of the federal government—legislative, executive, and judiciary—to advance school integration. By the end of 1966, the Johnson administration “had terminated federal funds for thirty-two southern school districts based on their refusal to end racial segregation in schools.”³⁰

Strengthened by passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the Emergency School Aid Act of 1972 (ESAA) provided grants to districts that were working to desegregate their schools. They also allowed funds to be used to retrain teachers and develop more diverse and inclusive curricular materials.³¹ Federal enforcement efforts hastened the pace of school integration.

Federal aid to support magnet schools originated in an amendment to the ESAA. The integrative goals for magnet grantees were clear, as grantees were required to advance the ESAA’s statutory goals of reducing, eliminating, and preventing racial isolation and promoting equity. Also, because magnets were one program funded among other desegregation programs in the law, they were evaluated based on their effectiveness in desegregating schools. Therefore, ESAA-funded magnets were focused on desegregation and not focused on other educational objectives. This changed after the elimination of the ESAA and the creation of the stand-alone Magnet School Assistance Program in 1984 (which added objectives in addition to ones related to desegregation).

The ESAA program helped to expand magnet schools. In 1976, the first year that the ESAA provided funding for magnet schools, 14 school districts applied for funding. Four years later, over 100 districts submitted applications.³² Federal support played a significant role in the expansion of magnet schools. Between 1982 and 1992, the number of magnet schools more than doubled, to 2,433, and the number of students served in magnet programs more than tripled, to 1.2 million.³³ By the turn of the century, there were more than 3,000 magnet schools with explicit desegregation standards educating about 2.5 million students.³⁴

Desegregation was also supported by Title IV of the Civil Rights Act, which issued regulations and authorized the then–U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to investigate complaints

of discriminatory behavior by recipients of federal funds, conduct compliance reviews, and initiate enforcement proceedings against noncompliant school districts.³⁵

The focus of federal resources on school desegregation for that time made a significant impact. In 1961, only 6% of Black children in the South attended schools with white children,³⁶ but by 1973, almost 90% of Southern schoolchildren attended integrated schools.³⁷ Studies of the effects of the desegregation of Southern school districts during the high point of desegregation in the 1970s and 1980s show that desegregation had a positive impact on Black students and no negative impact on white students.³⁸

Racial achievement gaps declined substantially during the 1970s and early 1980s, showing that desegregation, in combination with school funding reforms, could promote improved educational outcomes. Indeed, from 1964 to 1969 and during the 1970s and 1980s, all three branches of the federal government worked collaboratively to advance desegregation. If the pace of reform had continued as it had during that time, the so-called achievement gap could have been fully closed by the beginning of the 21st century.³⁹

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The Federal Retreat and School Resegregation

The 1969 election of President Richard Nixon signaled the initial retreat of the executive branch from staunch support of school integration efforts. Nixon advanced an anti-integration agenda that included ending administrative enforcement of desegregation mandates and changing the position of the Department of Justice from “proactive enforcement” of desegregation to “passive acceptance” of segregation.⁴⁰

The 1971 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* significantly hampered the efforts of Nixon and other anti-integrationists because it confirmed the federal judiciary’s equitable powers to act to remedy past school segregation, including through approval of local plans involving busing as a mechanism to achieve integration.⁴¹

But Nixon, with the cooperation of the legislative branch, responded to *Swann* with prohibitions on use of federal funds to support transportation for school integration. Nixon supported the inclusion of anti-busing language in the reauthorization of the ESAA grant program for districts working to desegregate public schools, prohibiting use of funds for busing to “overcome racial imbalance.”⁴² Opposition to busing was undergirded by racial animus, reflecting that deep racial divisions existed in Congress and throughout the country. Prohibition on federal funds for busing was further solidified through passage of an amendment, Section 426 of the 1974 General Education Provisions Act, barring use of federal funds for the transportation of students or teachers (or the purchase of equipment for such transportation) for school desegregation. This language was only recently removed in the fiscal year 2021 appropriations cycle.⁴³

Nixon also departed from federal court precedent on desegregation, and his U.S. Supreme Court appointees decided the first divided desegregation cases following the *Brown* ruling. The Court was

reluctant to remedy any segregation it deemed de facto or resulting from private choices and not enshrined in law in many subsequent cases. Among the most significant of these cases was 1974's *Milliken v. Bradley*,⁴⁴ in which the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated a school desegregation program that included busing for Detroit public schools and the surrounding majority-white suburbs. In Detroit, as in many other Northern cities, white flight resulted in many urban centers comprised mostly of Black people. As a result, measures like busing were introduced to transcend the residential segregation resulting from white flight. In holding that the white suburbs did not have to be included in the desegregation plan because they did not intentionally cause the segregation of Detroit's public schools, the Court effectively permitted circumvention of school desegregation through white flight to surrounding suburbs. Essentially, the Court ruled that racially segregated schools that resulted from individual citizen residential choices did not amount to discriminatory state action.

The legal cover afforded to “white island districts” has allowed them to persist, while students in urban centers like Baltimore and Detroit attend schools as segregated as those of the pre-*Brown* era, characterized by high teacher turnover, limited curricular offerings, and crumbling facilities.⁴⁵ Other divisive policies, such as discriminatory housing policies that fortified racially segregated neighborhoods and the drawing of district boundary lines in racially divisive ways, have contributed to the endurance of segregated schools.

Retrenchment of segregation was deepened further during the Reagan administration. The administration favored voluntary school desegregation remedies and opposed race-conscious or mandatory remedies, instead deferring to state and local control and reducing federal enforcement efforts.⁴⁶ Funding for integration efforts, including magnet school funding, was struck a significant blow when the Reagan-backed Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 was passed, terminating funding for the ESAA. The elimination of the ESAA signaled federal disinvestment from supporting state and local school desegregation efforts.

However, funding for magnet schools was restored through the creation of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) as a stand-alone program in 1984 to support magnet schools as a strategy that districts could invoke to further desegregation aims with the imprimatur to expand parental choice in education. The MSAP provides federal funds to assist in the desegregation of public schools by supporting the elimination, reduction, and prevention of minority group isolation in elementary and secondary schools with substantial numbers of minority group students.⁴⁷ The MSAP played a role in the initial expansion of magnet programs.⁴⁸

Once again, additional limits on how integration could be pursued were imposed during the George W. Bush administration. Upon taking office, the administration diverted the focus of the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights away from k–12 desegregation enforcement.⁴⁹ This followed a series of legal challenges in the 1990s to magnet schools seeking to advance desegregation, including the Supreme Court case of *Missouri v. Jenkins*, in which the Court struck down a Kansas City interdistrict magnet plan, finding that the surrounding districts were not responsible for the district's segregated schools.⁵⁰ Following these decisions, the key mechanisms for diversifying magnet schools—specifically, intentional desegregation goals and accountability for meeting those goals—were undermined and civil rights policies were often abandoned.⁵¹

Further, the Bush administration eliminated desegregation orders in nearly 200 districts,⁵² and without court oversight, segregation deepened. Efforts to voluntarily combat segregation were hampered by the 2007 case of *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1 (Parents Involved)*.⁵³

Limitations on Race-Conscious Approaches to Integration

The Bush administration reversed the Department of Justice’s position in the 2007 case of *Parents Involved*, in which Bush’s Department of Justice argued in its brief that race should not be considered as a factor in voluntary programs designed to achieve racially integrated education.⁵⁴ *Parents Involved* is distinct from other desegregation cases in that it concerned the extent to which race could be used in voluntary programs not under court order to remedy past discrimination. Court-ordered desegregation programs have wide latitude to use race in devising strategies to dismantle segregation, but the Jefferson County, KY, and Seattle programs challenged in the case were not under court order at the time they were challenged (although Jefferson County’s program began under a court order and continued on a voluntary basis). Voluntary programs do not have similar latitude, and *Parents Involved* fueled more uncertainty about this issue. The case was consequential for magnet schools, which can be used in both court-ordered and voluntary programs, as well as for other integration programs.

The Court recognized that reducing racial isolation and achieving racial diversity were compelling government interests, but it divided over the circumstances under which individual student race could be considered in making student assignments. The Court concluded that districts can consider student race broadly (without relying on individual student race in making student assignment decisions) in voluntary desegregation programs if they have a compelling interest for using student race and can adopt plans narrowly tailored to achieve that interest. The Court also noted that districts could adopt general race-neutral policies to encourage a diverse student body.⁵⁵ Chief Justice John Roberts advocated for a colorblind approach to overcome racism.

Justice Anthony Kennedy emphasized that “the decision today should not prevent school districts from continuing the important work of bringing together students of different racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds.”⁵⁶ He underscored that mechanisms may be used that do not lead to different treatment based on classifying individual students by race, including race-neutral and general policies to encourage diversity. Race-neutral approaches “allow school districts to be aware of or to consider the racial or ethnic outcomes in developing plans so long as no specific student is assigned to a school based on his or her individual student race.”⁵⁷

Policies that do not rely upon individual student race, Kennedy noted, are consistent with the Court’s reasoning. Kennedy outlined permissible approaches to fostering school integration, including strategic school siting decisions, drawing attendance zones with general recognition of neighborhood demographics, allocating resources for special programs, and targeting recruitment for diverse students and faculty. For example, a magnet school enrollment or student assignment policy that considers a student’s geographic location or socioeconomic status may be considered a race-neutral approach that is likely to result in fostering student diversity.

Kennedy outlined permissible approaches to fostering school integration, including strategic school siting decisions, drawing attendance zones with general recognition of neighborhood demographics, allocating resources for special programs, and targeting recruitment for diverse students and faculty.

However, widespread uncertainty followed the ruling—compounded by the issuance of a 2008 “Dear Colleague” letter by the Bush administration narrowly interpreting the ruling and failing to recognize the Supreme Court’s conclusion that districts have a compelling interest in promoting school integration and avoiding racial isolation.⁵⁸ It also failed to acknowledge the evidence-based approaches to advance these interests—like magnet schools—outlined in Justice Kennedy’s concurrence. This guidance contributed to the lack of clarity about the extent to which (and even whether) race could be considered in making student assignment decisions to voluntarily achieve integration. As a result, many advocates “scrambled to devise and identify plans they believed would pass constitutional muster, knowing that failure to do so would effectively concede the end of desegregation in our nation’s schools.”⁵⁹

The confusion has impacted the ability of many schools, including magnet schools, to voluntarily adopt or maintain integration goals, despite the fact that Kennedy’s opinion made clear that the means for admitting students had to be race-neutral, but not the goal itself. Many have grappled with how magnet schools can meet their racial diversity goals through race-neutral means. For example, “In Connecticut ... school officials who help manage the state’s magnet school program worry about losing funding if they are unable to maintain the required racial balance.”⁶⁰

In an effort to provide clarity on the decision to states and districts, the Obama administration issued guidance in 2011 outlining a range of evidence-based strategies for reducing racial isolation and fostering racial diversity, including the creation of magnet schools and other strategies consistent with Kennedy’s concurring opinion.⁶¹

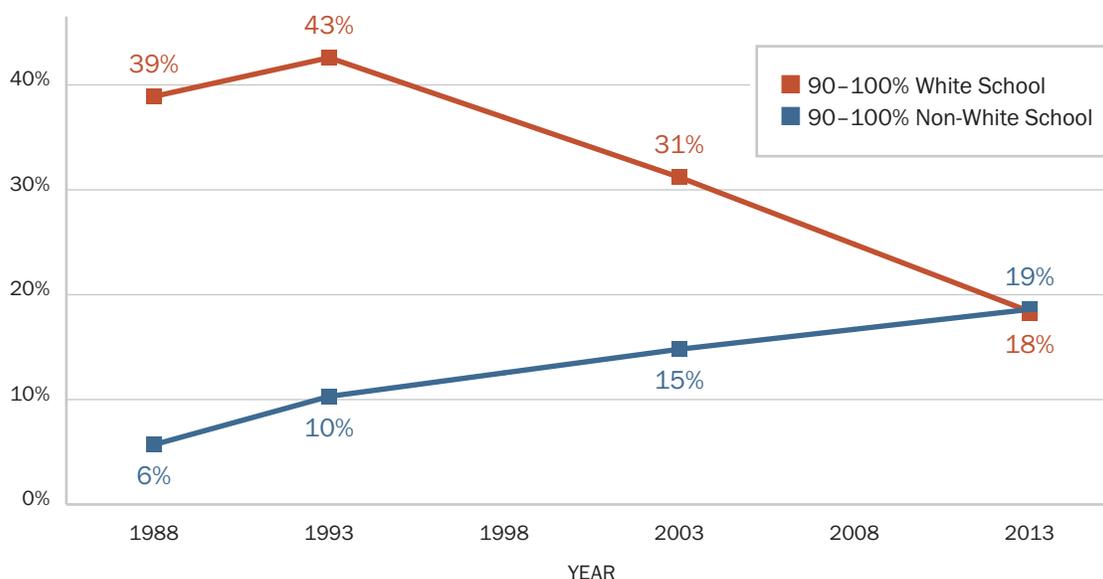
The Trump administration rescinded the Obama administration’s guidance on school diversity in July 2018 and replaced it with the post-*Parents Involved* Bush-era policy document referenced above. The Trump document stated, “The Department of Education strongly encourages the use of race-neutral methods for assigning students to elementary and secondary schools.”⁶² While guidance is nonbinding and does not have the effect of law, it often sends a message about an administration’s position on an issue and sometimes includes evidence-based strategies and resources, both of which can influence state and district policies and practices. The Trump administration’s rescission of the Obama guidance signaled a federal retreat, once again, from desegregation efforts. It compounded misunderstanding about the extent to which race can be considered in crafting school integration programs and policies, and it deprived states and districts of the valuable resource of evidence-based strategies for fostering diversity.

In the face of legal challenges and uncertainty, many magnet schools—along with other schools—have retreated from their original race-conscious integrative missions and proactive diversity efforts. This does not mean that the commitment to diversity does not exist, but rather that clarity on how to achieve it without running afoul of the law remains elusive. In response to legal challenges, shifting education priorities, and MSAP priorities, among other influences, some magnets have focused more on other factors, such as socioeconomic diversity, in addition to, or in lieu of, racial diversity. While socioeconomic status and other factors are important considerations, they are not interchangeable with the integrative purpose of magnet schools.⁶³

Segregation Today

As a result of these actions, about half as many Black students now attend integrated schools than was the case in the 1980s. One study found that, on average, a Black student attends a school in which two thirds of his or her classmates (64%) are from low-income families, compared to white and Asian students who, on average, attend schools in which classmates from low-income families comprise 37% and 39% of their peers, respectively.⁶⁴ Since 1988, the high point of integration, the share of intensely segregated non-white schools (defined as those schools with only 0–10% white students) more than tripled, increasing from about 6% to 19% of all public schools.⁶⁵ (See Figure 1.) A national study of districts and charters found that, nationwide, more than one third of all Black and Latino/a students attend schools that are more than 90% non-white.⁶⁶

Figure 1
Percentage of Intensely Segregated Schools, 1988–2013



Data sources: Orfield, G., Ee, J., Frankenberg, E., & Siegel-Hawley, G. (2016). *Brown at 62: School segregation by race, poverty and state*. The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles. <https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/brown-at-62-school-segregation-by-race-poverty-and-state/Brown-at-62-final-corrected-2.pdf> (accessed 02/21/19); U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). Common Core of Data, Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey Data. <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/pubschuniv.asp> (accessed 01/19/19).

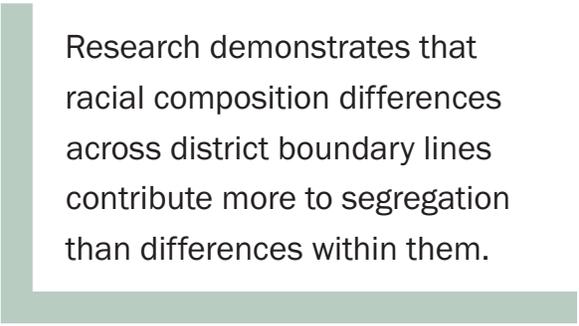
Conversely, a large proportion of white students attended overwhelmingly racially isolated schools, with more than one third attending schools that are 90–100% white.⁶⁷ White and Latino/a students are the most segregated subgroups of students, with white students attending, on average, a school in which 69% of the students are white, and Latino/a students attending a school in which 55% of the students are Latino/a.⁶⁸ In fact, “segregation has been increasing steadily, creating a growing number of apartheid schools that serve almost exclusively students of color from low-income families.”⁶⁹ For example, 74% of Black students attend majority non-white schools (50–100% minority), and 15% of Black students and 14% of Latino/a students attend “apartheid schools” in which white students make up 0% to 1% of the enrollment.⁷⁰

Further, a 2016 study found that a growing percentage of k–12 public schools in the nation are hypersegregated, with largely Black and Latino/a student populations and students from low-income families.⁷¹ This is significant, as another study reviewing 8 years of data from all U.S. public school districts found that racial segregation appears to undermine achievement, in part, because it concentrates minority students in high-poverty schools, which are, on average, less effective than lower-poverty schools.⁷² These high-poverty schools tend to be under-resourced.⁷³ A 2018 study found that, nationally, the highest poverty districts in our country receive about \$1,000 less per student than the lowest poverty districts.⁷⁴ These funding gaps are even more significant when the additional educational needs of students from low-income families are considered, with the same study estimating that it costs a district 40% more to educate a student in poverty.⁷⁵

The disparities are even more stark when race is considered. A 2019 study found that districts serving mostly students of color spend on average \$2,200 less per pupil than whiter and wealthier districts do.⁷⁶ These resource inequities are undergirded by the lower property values prevalent in lower-wealth districts, where many students of color have been concentrated. Consequently, higher-wealth, predominantly white districts are able to garner more revenue for education, even when imposing lower tax rates, due to higher property values.

Even when states seek to equalize disparities by providing more funding to lower-wealth districts, it has been difficult to counteract the effects of long-standing patterns of segregation and resource inequities between districts to completely mitigate the disparities. This is why a primary goal of desegregation is not just about changing the racial composition of schools, but also about expanding access to quality resources. Or, as some scholars phrased it: “Sitting next to a white student does not guarantee better educational outcomes for students of color. Instead, the resources that are consistently linked to predominantly white and/or wealthy schools help foster real and serious educational advantages over minority segregated settings.”⁷⁷

Of course, changing demographics, including movement of families of color to the suburbs and white families returning to city centers, has impacted deeply entrenched residential segregation, but the relationship between metropolitan school segregation, interdistrict disparities, and residential segregation remains a significant one.⁷⁸ Particularly because students are often assigned to schools in their local communities, neighborhood demographics can dictate school demographics. Research demonstrates that, as a result, racial composition differences across district boundary lines contribute more to segregation than differences within them.⁷⁹



Research demonstrates that racial composition differences across district boundary lines contribute more to segregation than differences within them.

District boundaries and increasing segregation between districts have made it more difficult for magnet schools to draw integrated populations, as many of them were designed to focus on segregation within a district rather than between districts.⁸⁰ For example, when Prince George’s County, MD, attempted to launch a magnet program, because the district was composed mainly of

students of color, the district’s magnet schools remained predominantly Black even though racial balance guidelines were implemented.⁸¹ This phenomenon is not isolated to Prince George’s County, as many districts are racially isolated, as described earlier in this report.

Despite deepening school segregation and recognition of the mechanisms that fuel it, efforts to integrate schools continue to be met with opposition and even apathy, as scholars have observed: “The country has retreated from the belief that segregation itself is harmful, quietly settling for an education policy regime that accepts segregated schools as a given.”⁸²

Contemporary segregation has persisted. However, efforts have been waged to desegregate schools, and magnet schools have been a key part of this effort.

Magnet Schools Today

Magnet Schools in the Context of Contemporary Segregation

As discussed above, segregation among districts has material consequences, including racial isolation accompanied by resource inequities, with white and wealthier districts generating more per-pupil spending than districts composed mainly of students of color and students from lower-wealth families. In the resegregated context of today's schools, regional interventions designed to transcend residential segregation are particularly important for promoting integrated education.

Although most magnet schools are established by school districts, others are founded on a regional basis. For example, Connecticut's regional magnet schools have operated for about 20 years, with magnet school enrollment comprising about 8% of the state's total district public school enrollment.⁸³ Magnet schools in Connecticut emerged as a result of a significant state supreme court desegregation case, *Sheff v. O'Neill*,⁸⁴ which invalidated the drawing of district boundary lines that had segregating effects on schools. The state turned to magnet schools as a way to address the court's concern. Today, the state has about 95 magnet schools—including more than 50 interdistrict magnet schools, serving 44,495 students⁸⁵—in regions including metropolitan Hartford, New Haven, and Waterford. The state's magnets have both supported desegregation and achieved positive results for students, with 7 of the state's 19 Blue Ribbon public schools being magnet schools.⁸⁶ (See “Interdistrict Magnets: A Snapshot of Hartford, CT,” below.)

Interdistrict Magnets: A Snapshot of Hartford, CT

Interdistrict programs, like the magnet program in the Hartford, CT, region that resulted from the *Sheff* litigation, have proven successful in drawing diverse students to magnet schools. The program encouraged two-way transfers between Hartford schools and those of surrounding districts. Families can now select from 44 magnet schools in addition to the Open Choice program (for 28 non-magnet districts) in the Greater Hartford region.⁸⁷ Hartford's program relies upon cooperation and coordination between the urban and suburban districts to help facilitate the transfer of students and sustain investments in the program.

Strategic investments have been key in helping to build and sustain the program, including investments of \$1.4 billion in school construction over the first 10 years, per-pupil grants to receiving districts to help make the interdistrict transfers attractive and affordable, coverage of transportation costs for out-of-district pupils (up to a maximum of \$2,000 per student), and provision of an additional \$350,000 for marketing campaigns through its Regional School Choice Office.⁸⁸ The community engagement investments are particularly robust and aid in placement of diverse students within the magnet schools. The program also engages in targeted marketing to help attract diverse students; a 2012–13 study showed that magnet school enrollments in the state were more equally distributed across racial subgroups than statewide enrollment.⁸⁹

And the program has demonstrated positive outcomes. A study of the program that focused on estimating the effects on achievement found that attending an interdistrict magnet high school had positive effects on both mathematics and reading achievement of central city Hartford students. The authors concluded that “interdistrict magnets are largely meeting their mission of providing learning environments that are both more diverse and more conducive to academic achievement than would otherwise be available to students in Connecticut’s central cities.”⁹⁰ City magnet students reported more positive intergroup relations with less racial tension and more feelings of closeness to students of other races, with magnet students expressing stronger future multicultural interests. Other research also showed smaller achievement gaps between student racial subgroups compared to state averages.⁹¹

A continuing challenge of Hartford’s popular magnet program is that funding has not enabled the program to expand to meet the demand for spots in the region’s 20 magnet schools.⁹² Additional investment would enable magnet schools like those in the Hartford region to better meet demand.

Omaha, NE, demonstrates another example of an open enrollment plan designed to address deeply entrenched housing segregation. After failed attempts to implement strategies to promote school diversity, an interdistrict desegregation program—the Learning Community—was launched. The regional governance system, the Learning Community Coordinating Council (LCCC), was tasked with supporting high-poverty schools. The program included three major changes for districts: regional governance, tax-base sharing and resource distribution, and a diversity plan.⁹³ The program allowed for voluntary transfers to the 11 Learning Community school districts, prioritizing students who enhanced the program’s socioeconomic diversity for placement. The initial Open Enrollment plan funded districts to establish magnet schools or focus schools (which are themed schools similar to magnet schools that draw students from 11 school districts). This plan also funded transportation to increase diversity, enrolling thousands of students each year, demonstrating wide appeal for many parents. Three years of LCCC evaluations compared the performance of Open Enrollment students on 3rd- to 8th-grade reading and mathematics assessments to their resident counterparts. In low-poverty schools, Open Enrollment students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch scored dramatically higher than peers in high-poverty schools in both reading and mathematics in all tested grades.⁹⁴ While the program has changed and continues to be impacted by state and local political considerations, there are some features of the program that direct resources into high-poverty and traditionally marginalized communities. The program has been cited as a successful approach that should be considered in diversity strategies, including mobility policies such as interdistrict magnet programs that enable movement across district boundary lines, as well as in-place investments.

The legal and political challenges that have impacted the regional programs in Connecticut and Nebraska illustrate the significance of context for integration efforts like magnet schools. In particular, the influence of the federal legislative, judicial, and executive branches has been significant for both progress and regress of school integration efforts. As described below, magnet schools have evolved in response to these legal and political influences and, in some cases, have deviated from their integrative origins. However, these legal and political influences need not mean that magnet schools remain detached from their original desegregative mission. Instead, these developments can provide a blueprint for how the federal government—in cooperation with state and local governments—can support integrative magnet schools and how magnet schools can reconnect with their missions.

Magnet Schools in the Context of Legal and Political Reversals

Magnet schools post-*Parents Involved*

While magnet schools had endured legal challenges preceding the *Parents Involved* ruling, the legal uncertainty surrounding the *Parents Involved* decision had a substantial impact on magnet schools and their historic race-conscious approach to fostering diversity.⁹⁵ District recipients of magnet school funding reported federal administration reviews of their student assignment policies that were critical of magnet schools' integration efforts using race as a criterion for admission.⁹⁶

These federal developments, coupled with other long-standing legal challenges, influenced the shift of many magnet schools' objectives away from their integrative missions. As a result, many magnet school objectives focused on academic achievement or other outcomes, rather than on racial integration. Some of these objectives were first added after the *Nation at Risk* report in 1983.⁹⁷ Other iterations of the MSAP, including those that followed the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (a version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act), expanded grantee focus and obligations over the years—such as adding several components in addition to reducing racial isolation—and have gradually tempered the program's original focus on magnet schools' efficacy in desegregation.

The MSAP's selection criteria have shifted to include factors beyond fostering interaction among students of different social, economic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds and improving the racial balance of students in magnet schools.⁹⁸ The Secretary of Education reviews applicants to determine (among other things) how applicants will carry out a high-quality educational program that will substantially strengthen students' reading skills; their knowledge of mathematics, science, history, geography, English, foreign languages, art, and music; or their vocational, technological, and professional skills.⁹⁹

Currently, the program and its requirements are outlined in Title IV of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The most recent iteration of the law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), made a few changes to the MSAP, including:

- extending the grant term from 3 years to up to 5 years;
- increasing the cumulative grant award from \$12 million to \$15 million for each grantee;
- permitting grantees to use funds for transportation as long as the funds are sustainable past the grant period and a significant portion is not used for student transportation; and
- prioritizing the creation and replication of evidence-based magnet programs and magnet schools that seek to reduce, eliminate, or prevent minority group isolation by taking into account socioeconomic diversity.

The program has not added incentives to address school segregation's evolving nature. For example, the program could include incentives for districts to implement interdistrict approaches. The MSAP could replicate incentives included in legislation recently reintroduced in the House of Representatives, the Strength in Diversity Act, which would provide federal funding to

support voluntary local integration efforts, such as interdistrict programs.¹⁰⁰ The MSAP's current shortcomings not only limit the focus of grantees on furthering desegregation, but also undermine the program's overall effectiveness in fulfilling its original purpose.

Limited funding has also restricted the ability of the program to fulfill its purposes. Over the past 30 years, the federal MSAP has granted \$3 billion to districts to create or significantly revise magnet schools.¹⁰¹ In real dollar terms, this represents a decrease in funding over time. Throughout these years, the small allocation for magnet schools has been far less than the demand from the field for start-up and expansion funds. In 1984, the MSAP was funded at \$75 million. Current funding for the program is \$109 million, which is less than a quarter of current funding for charter schools, which have been shown to be more segregative.¹⁰² The National Coalition on School Diversity distributed a letter to Congress for the fiscal year 2022 appropriations cycle requesting that the program be funded "at least" at \$500 million.¹⁰³ The current funding represents a relatively small amount of federal support given the important role magnet schools can play in creating more integrated education settings.

Key Findings: Diversity and Student Outcomes in Magnet Schools

Given the wide-ranging expectations for magnet schools to innovate, to improve the quality of education, to boost the achievement of students, and to desegregate learning environments, it is important to examine what we know about the conditions under which a variety of these goals have been achieved.

Considerations for Magnet School Diversity: “Whole School” Magnets and District Demographics

Research shows that magnet schools can effectively foster school diversity and positive outcomes,¹⁰⁴ but magnet school design and implementation matter for success.¹⁰⁵ Specifically, research demonstrates those magnet schools that most effectively foster school diversity share key features, including the incorporation of integration into school design, mission, structure, focus, and goals; intentional and ongoing family outreach and engagement; implementation of inclusive enrollment practices; and provision of free transportation.

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In addition, whole school magnets in which all students in the school participate in the magnet program can be more diverse than in-school magnet programs.¹⁰⁶ This does not mean that in-school magnet programs cannot be diverse or that some do not strive to be. But data show that tracking can occur in these programs, particularly when schools are designed to recruit white students by offering an in-school magnet program, while non-magnet students in the school are served in different programs. Not surprisingly, this approach can result in a situation in which students within the magnet programs are predominantly white, while those in the traditional programs are taught separately, although there may be some elective classes such as band, art, or physical education that enroll a more diverse group of students.¹⁰⁷ This practice of tracking students into magnet programs is consistent with the widespread practice of tracking in public schools, in which white students are tracked into higher-level courses and Black students and other students of color are relegated to lower-level courses. This practice deepens segregation and the unequal allocation of curricula and teaching resources within schools.¹⁰⁸

One example of this challenge is found in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in Maryland. Like many other districts, MCPS developed magnet programs in the 1970s to maintain diversity and avoid racial isolation, but it later adopted competitive criteria for some of the magnet programs, identifying them as limited to “gifted and talented” students based on standardized test

scores. This practice negatively impacted diversity within the magnet programs. Consequently, a study found significant racial and socioeconomic disparities, with low numbers of students of color and students from low-income families being accepted and enrolled in academically selective programs in the district.¹⁰⁹ Further, the study found that even with the placement of selective programs—like magnet programs—within otherwise diverse schools, “in the absence of targeted mechanisms to integrate the program participants and non-participants, ... [the magnet initiative] created conditions of within-school separation.”¹¹⁰ This phenomenon is not isolated to MCPS; similar outcomes have emerged from several other districts. The district has since implemented changes to its selective entrance practices, shifting from an application-based process that was largely parent driven to universal screening, which means that more students have been screened for admission than in prior years. School officials note that the selection process is “name blind” and “race blind,” but these enrollment changes have garnered backlash, including litigation on behalf of Asian American students that alleges that changes to the programs’ enrollment process have disadvantaged Asian students by reducing their representation in the programs.¹¹¹ Like many other districts, the MCPS example demonstrates that changes to enrollment practices can be difficult to implement. The concluding section of this paper offers some considerations for district leaders and policymakers as they approach the implementation and maintenance of diverse and effective magnet schools.

Another important consideration is magnet school geographic context, including existing district demographics, which can impact school diversity.¹¹² For example, a study examining data from the 8th-grade wave of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study found that, while magnet schools did not lead to increased stratification of students of color, levels of integration were similar to those in traditional public schools, after controlling for district racial composition.¹¹³ This finding could be interpreted to mean that magnets did not increase integration; however, it could also be interpreted to mean that magnets—if created in racially isolated neighborhoods within larger city or county districts, as is often the case—increase the diversity of schools in their neighborhoods to the levels found in the district as a whole.

A study of Prince George’s County, MD, which attempted to implement a magnet school program whose school demographics reflected the racial composition of the school system, illustrates the challenges of district demographics in many communities. Because, due to white flight, the district was composed primarily of students of color, students often ended up assigned to racially homogenous schools even in the context of a magnet school program.¹¹⁴ This example demonstrates that it is important to consider the district racial composition when creating a magnet school program, particularly because an increasing share of racial and ethnic segregation in American public schools occurs between, not within, school districts. For a district that has become more racially isolated over time, like Prince George’s County, an interdistrict approach that draws students from several surrounding districts, as described more fully in the next section, may be a more viable option to achieve diversity.

Some design features in the Prince George’s County initiative did reduce segregation. The study found that magnet schools were more integrated at the classroom level (particularly for honors and mathematics classes) than was generally the case in other schools, with increased classroom-level diversity noted between white and Latino/a students.¹¹⁵ At the same time, it concluded that, while Black students were not disadvantaged in magnet schools compared to traditional public schools,

their access to these higher-level courses did not increase to the same extent, and it urged more focus on extending diversity to the classroom level for Black students.¹¹⁶

These contextual considerations are consistent with other research noting that magnet school design, mission, structure, focus, and goals have profound implications for magnet school effectiveness in fostering and sustaining school diversity.

Magnet Schools and Student Social and Academic Outcomes

Because magnet schools vary so significantly in theme, pedagogy, design, and implementation, it can be difficult for researchers to draw generalized conclusions about their effectiveness. As we describe in this section, many, but not all, studies show positive effects of magnet schools on student outcomes. A recent synthesis of research on magnet school effectiveness found positive effects in most studies on student achievement, attendance, and graduation rates, particularly for secondary magnet schools and for those that admit students

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by lottery. Positive results were found across large-scale national studies, studies of statewide programs, and local analyses using rigorous comparison group designs.¹¹⁷ Researchers noted that it is unsurprising to find diverse conclusions in studies of the effects of magnet schools on student achievement, given the different themes, student populations, designs, and implementation contexts in which they operate.

Consistent with the findings of this meta-analysis, research shows particularly positive effects at higher grade levels. After controlling for a variety of student-level factors, a study tracking the outcomes of 48,561 Los Angeles Unified School District high school students found that the district's magnet program students graduated at much higher rates than non-magnet students: 73% of students attending a magnet high school graduated, compared to 43% of students not attending a magnet high school.¹¹⁸

Similarly, a study of Hartford's interdistrict magnet high schools found high percentages of students meeting or exceeding goals on state achievement exams and reporting positive academic attitudes and behaviors.¹¹⁹ The study concluded that the state's magnet high schools provide academic environments that support student learning. According to the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), Black and Latino/a students who attended CREC Magnet Schools outperformed their peers across the state in both math and reading on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) and Connecticut Academic Performance Test, with "76.4% of black Hartford resident students attending a CREC Magnet School [achieving] proficiency in reading on the CMT, compared to 64.5% of black students statewide."¹²⁰

Another study of Connecticut magnet high schools found that magnet students were also exposed to academic climates and peer support that fostered higher educational expectations.¹²¹ A national study found that both student achievement levels and rates of gain in achievement were higher in

magnet schools than in regular public high schools or private schools for similar students.¹²² One survey also found higher rates of teacher retention in integrated magnet schools, which also has positive effects for student outcomes.¹²³

The most available measure of academic achievement in these studies is primarily the limited assessments of mathematics and language. Yet many magnet schools offer innovative educational experiences outside of the traditional curriculum focused on mathematics and language—including themes like aeronautics—that would be even more appropriate outcomes for evaluating their programs. A study found that students attending magnet schools reported more positive peer influences of adults in their schools regarding college expectations, better intergroup relations, and less racial isolation, compared to student reports from traditional city or suburban schools studied. Students also reported experiencing strong norms supporting peer achievement.¹²⁴

The few studies that found little or no effect of magnet schools on student academic outcomes were often examining schools or programs with selective enrollment. As a result, after controlling for students' initial ability, the studies concluded that the magnet program did not show a positive additional influence on achievement.¹²⁵ By contrast, a study of San Diego magnet school students found that acceptance via lottery into a nonselective magnet school was linked to positive gains in mathematics achievement for students extending 2 and 3 years into the program.¹²⁶

Two studies controlling for the self-selection bias that may operate in schools of choice found no significant differences in student achievement between magnet high schools and comprehensive public high schools serving similar students.¹²⁷ Selection bias and the extent to which it may impact magnet school student outcomes (just as it may impact student outcomes in other schools) presents an area for further study and analysis.

It is important to understand what differentiates successful magnets from less successful schools and programs. A recent meta-analysis of research on the effectiveness of 24 magnet schools located in 5 districts across 4 states in promoting positive student outcomes explored these differentials in student outcomes.¹²⁸ The study used a set of rigorous statistical strategies to construct comparison groups of matching students for each school within its district. In addition to finding widely variable outcomes across schools, the study also documented that the variation in school effects was explained by factors influencing program implementation and support. In particular, programs that had high fidelity of implementation and that were able to access strong support from magnet resource teachers had much stronger outcomes than those that struggled to implement their plans and to gain the instructional support they needed.¹²⁹ In the cases in which schools struggled to get resource teacher support, Black students suffered the most, reinforcing the need for educator training to serve diverse students well.

As mentioned previously, magnet schools differ significantly in design, implementation, and student population, which makes comparisons complicated. The next section examines components of magnet schools that research has identified as important for supporting both their integrative purposes and their ability to support students' learning successfully.

Components of Effective Magnet Schools

As noted above, research shows that when magnet schools receive assistance from their districts, they tend to be well implemented and to support student learning more effectively. One study categorized these components as “first door” components—features that help draw diverse families to magnet schools—and “second door” components—those that foster inclusiveness and that help retain students within diverse magnet schools.¹⁵⁰ These features are described in further detail below.

First door components

Integration embedded into school design, mission, structure, focus, and goals: Magnet schools with integrative missions incorporated into their school design, structure, and goals have been found to be more diverse than magnet schools that fail to intentionally incorporate diversity into school design, structure, and goals.¹⁵¹ This is important, as a survey of hundreds of magnet school leaders found the highest percentages of one-race magnet schools were those that did not have desegregation goals.¹⁵² This is exemplified in several prominent districts that retreated from their race-conscious integration goals, including Buffalo, NY; Charlotte, NC; and San Francisco, CA, and experienced declining school integration as a result.¹⁵³ Another example is Boston Latin School, an exam school, which in 1995 boasted that one out of every three students was Black or Latino/a.¹⁵⁴ But after legal challenges resulted in the removal of racial/ethnic goals from the school’s enrollment criteria and in changes to the enrollment process (including abandoning set-asides for students of color), that ratio fell to one out of every six students being Black or Latino/a in 2005.¹⁵⁵

Like other schools, magnet schools have been impacted by the changing demographic and legal landscape. The first federal report on magnet schools receiving federal funds through the MSAP (districts under court-ordered desegregation), released in 1983, found that more than 60% of magnet schools studied were “fully desegregated,” with the sample reporting substantial progress on diversity.¹⁵⁶ But following release of many districts from federal court oversight, that progress was reversed. The 1996 report found only 42% of the MSAP programs were operating under desegregation goals, and the 2003 study reported 57% of magnet programs making progress in desegregation, attributing rising rates of segregation to pressure to implement race-neutral approaches to diversity.¹⁵⁷

Since then, as many more districts have become majority minority, it has become difficult to diversify schools using within-district strategies for that reason as well, making interdistrict strategies more important.

It is important for magnet schools to incorporate diversity in school design, mission, structure, focus, and goals and for states and districts to design programs in ways that can accomplish this diversity using both across- and within-district approaches. It is also important to implement accountability mechanisms, such as regular evaluation and recommitment to diversity, to prevent straying from the core, historic magnet goal of integration. This may mean targeted recruitment strategies both within and, often, across districts (e.g., outreach and transportation), as well as drawing diverse students via lotteries for student assignment and developing strong academic and social supports for keeping students enrolled.

Family outreach and engagement: Magnet schools cannot foster diversity unless diverse families are aware of their existence and are able to gain access through streamlined application

processes, including support in completing the application, and readily available transportation. Research finds that conducting outreach and disseminating information to a wide range of families is a critical component of recruiting diverse students.¹³⁸ One study found that schools with outreach to prospective students were more likely to have experienced increasing integration over the last decade, while one quarter of those without special outreach were substantially segregated schools.¹³⁹

Magnet schools that employ ongoing targeted outreach to diverse families have been found to be more successful in fostering and sustaining school diversity. A 2008 study analyzing the survey results of several hundred magnet school leaders found that magnet schools with targeted outreach to prospective students were more likely to have experienced increasing integration for the preceding decade, while one quarter of those without special outreach were one-race schools.¹⁴⁰ Such outreach is most effective when conducted through multiple platforms, such as social media, print, television, and radio. These outreach efforts are also most effective when accompanied by application assistance. Having a streamlined, easy-to-manage application process is important, as is having transportation plans that make accessing the school a feasible option for families outside the immediate neighborhood.

Inclusive enrollment practices: Evidence demonstrates that magnet schools with inclusive enrollment and student assignment practices, like lotteries, promote desegregation and equity more effectively than those with competitive enrollment practices.¹⁴¹ While the federally funded MSAP includes a preference for recipients to use inclusive enrollment approaches,¹⁴² many magnet schools do not implement inclusive practices, and they are not incentivized to do so.

Data from a survey of several hundred magnet school leaders found that competitive enrollment practices, like tests or grade point averages, are associated with less integrated magnet schools.¹⁴³ For example, Maryland's Montgomery County—as mentioned previously—experienced racial disparities inside schools as a result of highly competitive test-based enrollment policies for its magnet programs. Heavy reliance upon teacher recommendations, which may at times be biased, may sometimes also deter diverse enrollment in magnet schools. The survey also revealed that magnet schools relying upon grade point averages for student assignments comprised the largest share of schools that were experiencing decreasing integration.¹⁴⁴ Buffalo, NY, one of the earliest innovators of magnet school programs, experienced increased segregation when competitive enrollment practices, like cognitive skills tests and end-of-grade tests, were instituted in its magnet schools.¹⁴⁵

In adopting more inclusive enrollment policy practices, many schools must confront biases about the intellectual abilities of Black students and other students of color historically excluded from some magnet schools. These biases also include beliefs that diversifying schools will cause achievement to plummet (which is refuted by the research outlined herein on the benefits of diversity for all students). Confronting this kind of bias is exemplified in the recent effort of a Black student in Virginia who pleaded with her school board to encourage the adoption of a lottery system to bolster enrollment of Black and Latino/a students at her STEM-themed magnet high school.¹⁴⁶ The school board ultimately rejected the adoption of a lottery but eliminated the entrance exam and \$100 application fee.¹⁴⁷

Research shows that inclusive enrollment and student assignment practices, like lotteries, interviews, and essays, are more likely to attract students of color, English learners, and students from low-income families. And weighted lotteries, such as those that consider neighborhood racial

composition, can be employed to attract diverse students. What is much more difficult for many schools and districts is combating entrenched bias and resistance to implementing more inclusive approaches that will foster school diversity or to seeing admissions with limited slots as a “win-lose” proposition.

A consideration for changes that increase access to magnet schools is additional support for expanding the number of magnet schools with successful programs so as to make the admissions processes less competitive (as outlined in the policy recommendations section of this report). Changes can be accompanied by additional support needed for magnet schools to be able to meet increased demand.

Provision of transportation: The provision of free transportation is another critical component of diversifying magnet schools. Without free and accessible transportation, magnet schools may only be realistic for those families with the resources and flexibility to provide their children with transportation. Provision of transportation is particularly important for interdistrict magnet schools that may draw students from neighboring districts to attend schools. A 2008 study of magnet school leaders found that magnet schools that provided free transportation were less likely to be racially isolated than those that did not.¹⁴⁸ An earlier study of Midwestern districts found that, for parents of color, the availability of transportation was an important consideration in choosing a magnet school.¹⁴⁹ This is often the case due to inaccessible or unreliable public transportation, even though many magnet schools are located in urban centers.

In addition, changing demographics coupled with the intentional drawing of district lines along racial lines have contributed to some districts becoming racially homogenous, underscoring the importance of allowing for policies designed to bridge district boundary lines. Therefore, interdistrict magnet programs are vital for reducing racial isolation.

Second door components

In addition to these first door components, second door features are also important, such as fostering inclusiveness and success within the school once a diverse student body is achieved. Examples of second door components include the following:

Curriculum: Innovative school curricula attract diverse students and families to magnet schools. A primary second door feature is a strong curriculum in which the magnet school theme is embedded. Particularly for diverse magnet schools, a curriculum that incorporates cultural diversity and is responsive to the unique cultural experiences and contexts that students may bring to the school is important to promote inclusiveness.

Staff: Another important second door feature is a competent, diverse, and stable magnet school teaching staff. In addition to the evidence that a well-prepared, stable teaching force boosts student achievement, especially for those historically furthest from opportunity,¹⁵⁰ the growing evidence on the benefits of diverse educators, including for helping improve student academic performance and attainment for all students, is strong.¹⁵¹ Research shows that staff from a variety of backgrounds are better able to connect with students and support different learning styles. These staff are also better able to communicate with families of different backgrounds, to offer leadership reflecting the importance of positive cross-racial relationships, and to serve as role models for students.¹⁵² And for Black students, evidence shows that having same-race teachers can positively impact long-term

educational achievement and outcomes.¹⁵⁵ Scholars suggest a variety of reasons for these positive educational experiences, including role-model effects, higher expectations, the ability to offset stereotype threat for students of color, cultural awareness, instructional supports, and advocacy for students.¹⁵⁴ Particularly for diverse magnet schools, a diverse teacher workforce is important to support full school diversity and promote positive student outcomes.

Professional development opportunities: Another second door effort is the implementation of ongoing professional development for magnet school educators on embedding the magnet school theme into curriculum and instruction, teaching in diverse classrooms, and fostering culturally responsive learning environments to help create conditions of inclusiveness within magnet schools. Such training should be long term so that educators continue to improve and new additions to the faculty gain the benefit of these learning experiences.

Culturally responsive learning environments: Another second door effort is the fostering of culturally responsive learning environments within magnet schools. Research shows that students learn by building upon their prior knowledge, including their cultural and community context, and making connections between that context and what they are learning.¹⁵⁵ In diverse magnet schools, it is important for educators to help students make connections between their cultural context and community and the material they are learning. In addition, students' ability to learn also depends on the presence of strong, positive relationships between and among teachers and students in identity-safe learning environments that eliminate the stereotype threats that undermine achievement for many students. These so-called "stereotype threats" occur when students encounter bias about one or more groups with which they identify.¹⁵⁶ Educators in diverse magnet schools can help to address bias through participating in ongoing training. They can also work to foster strong, genuine, and trusting relationships with students. Lastly, when educators receive training on how to deliver culturally responsive instruction, they are better prepared to connect to students' lived experiences and acknowledge students' cultural assets. Such learning environments also help students to build their own voices and learn about each other's cultural backgrounds, thereby enhancing learning opportunities for all students.

Nondiscriminatory and restorative discipline practices: Another important second door feature is the implementation of nondiscriminatory discipline practices that are focused on supporting student inclusion. Discriminatory discipline practices, like dress codes that prohibit natural hairstyles or so-called zero-tolerance policies that impose suspensions or expulsions (often for minor offenses), have been found to disproportionately impact students of color, resulting in the loss of valuable instruction time and undermining their educational outcomes. In particular, Black students and other students of color are disproportionately suspended or expelled compared to their white peers.¹⁵⁷ Discriminatory discipline practices emerged during the height of school segregation and have been used to push students of color out of the classroom and, often, into the juvenile justice system.¹⁵⁸ Ensuring that magnet schools apply discipline in a nondiscriminatory manner is vital for ensuring that they can maintain diversity.

Incorporation of these components found in diverse magnet schools is significant in the current political and social context, as magnet schools can become vulnerable to resegregation if school structures and supports like free transportation, desegregation goals, and targeted ongoing outreach are abandoned in favor of less-inclusive and less-supportive policies. These components ensure that students can reap the well-documented academic and social benefits of school diversity that effective magnet schools offer.

Magnet schools need support to effectively implement the evidence-based components described above. Some districts have found that one way to help foster this support is through the creation of magnet school resource teacher positions. These resource teachers provide expertise, support, and guidance to magnet school staff to aid in magnet program theme implementation, particularly in curriculum and in the planning and development of professional development activities.¹⁵⁹ For example, one study found that “fidelity of implementation and the breadth of support provided by magnet school resource teachers influenced magnet school effectiveness.”¹⁶⁰ It also found that “differences in school effect estimates between magnet schools were not due to chance, and that there is evidence that differences in program implementation could account for the heterogeneity in effects across school sites.”¹⁶¹ States and districts can provide magnet schools with resources, such as funding for magnet school resource teachers, needed to create and sustain high-quality and diverse schools. Other assistance to aid in implementation, such as the provision of technical assistance and support, is described in detail in the recommendations section.

Policy Strategies to Support Diverse and Effective Magnet Schools

There are a number of policy opportunities at the federal, state, and local levels to support desegregation through the use of diverse and effective magnet schools. Recommendations for taking advantage of these opportunities include:

1. Reinstate federal guidance to states and localities about how to support school diversity.
2. Expand federal investments in magnet schools and use them to leverage school diversity and student success.
3. Expand strategic state and local investments in magnet schools in ways that support school diversity.
4. Support school-level strategies that promote both integration and student success.

Recommendation #1: Reinstate federal guidance to states and localities about how to support school diversity.

To guide efforts at desegregation, it is critically important for the federal government, informed by recent evidence, to update and reissue the joint diversity guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice under the Obama administration.¹⁶² The guidance issued by the Obama administration outlining evidence-based approaches for advancing voluntary school integration efforts was rescinded by the Trump administration in July 2018. The guidance provided a useful interpretation of the *Parents Involved* ruling, including additional clarity regarding the extent that race can be used in policies and the kinds of voluntary programs that could be implemented. The guidance noted that districts should first consider race-neutral approaches that do not rely on individual student race and then consider generalized race-based approaches, such as neighborhood demographics. The guidance also provided recommendations for fostering diversity consistent with the law, including how to make strategic school siting decisions and how to design diverse magnet schools.

The guidance was a valuable resource for states and districts interested in accessing best practices for advancing voluntary integration efforts. To ensure that states and districts have access to evidence-based best practices, before it is reissued the guidance should be updated to include current research on magnet schools and other school integration efforts to help inform voluntary school diversity programs.

For example, since research underscores the importance of transportation for magnet schools to reduce racial isolation, the guidance can outline ways that states and districts can access funds to support within- and across-district magnet school transportation. And because advocacy efforts resulted in the removal of the prohibition on use of federal funds to aid in school transportation from the annual federal appropriations bills¹⁶³ and from Section 426 of the General Education Provisions Act,¹⁶⁴ these funds can now be accessed by non-MSAP programs, and MSAP grantees can be provided with increased flexibility, as well as guidance, about targeting the use of funds for transportation.

In addition, the guidance can outline support that the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights provides to states and districts to aid in program implementation and help ensure compliance with civil rights laws. Following passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the federal government provided technical assistance to states and districts to aid in implementation of desegregation programs and help ensure compliance with the law. This technical assistance can include outreach activities, such as on-site consultations, conference participation, training classes, workshops, and community meetings. In addition, the Department of Education can provide technical assistance in the form of helping districts to design and evaluate programs, advising districts about crafting enrollment strategies, and helping districts to develop strategies to support families as they apply for enrollment.

Recommendation #2: Expand federal investments in magnet schools and use them to leverage diversity and school success.

Federal investments are vital for support of voluntary state and district school diversity efforts like magnet schools. Particularly as states and districts face budget constraints, federal support enables diversity efforts to be sustained and increased.

- One important approach is to **better fund the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP)**, which has been seriously under-resourced and unable to respond to the demand from the field. Funded at \$107 million in 2020, the program estimated it would award seven to nine grants (of no more than \$15 million to each project) over the 5-year project period. This program provides a very modest level of support compared to the thousands of magnet schools in the country. Raising the funding level to at least \$450 million would allow an investment in magnet schools that is comparable to federal investment in charter schools.
- The federal government can also **expand the MSAP to enable more districts to receive funds**. Currently, districts or consortia of districts that are eligible for MSAP funds are those that are either under a final court desegregation order or are implementing a voluntary or mandatory desegregation plan approved by the Secretary of Education as adequate under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. To help reach a greater number of districts interested in implementing or sustaining diverse magnet schools, eligibility for MSAP funds should be expanded to include those districts that are not under court desegregation orders or desegregation plans approved under Title VI. This is particularly important as many federal and state courts have been lifting school desegregation orders, leaving districts that want to pursue integration with fewer resources to do so.
- An initiative to **allow states to apply for the MSAP or other school diversity funding** could serve to encourage more cooperative state and local school integration work. Such a program could support interdistrict programs, like the program in Hartford and other districts in Connecticut, or otherwise provide funding that could support strategies like family outreach and engagement. Funds could also support components like transportation and recruitment, training, and ongoing professional development of educators to teach in diverse magnet schools.

- Revisions to **incorporate evidence-based components within funding priorities for the MSAP** could require applicants to demonstrate how they plan to incorporate the evidence-based components of effective magnet schools outlined in this report, such as centering of integration in school design, mission, structure, focus, and goals; family outreach and engagement; inclusive enrollment practices; and provision of free transportation in their programs. Commitment to implementing the evidence-based components found in diverse magnet programs could be considered as part of applicant eligibility requirements. Requesting that applicants outline their initial plans for how they intend to allocate funds to promote the evidence-based components (e.g., targeting funds toward family outreach) can help to ensure that applicants think through these components and intentionally design their programs to foster diversity. In addition, the Department of Education can provide ongoing technical assistance once funds are awarded to help districts and schools finalize and implement their plans.

Recommendation #3: Expand strategic state and local investments in magnet schools in ways that support school diversity.

- States can **leverage federal funding** provided under ESSA Titles I and IV to support magnet schools and other school integration efforts. Under ESSA, the MSAP is funded under Title IV. Districts that are under a court-ordered or federally approved voluntary desegregation plan are eligible to apply for federal support under the MSAP. In addition, ESSA allows for 7% of Title I funding to be set aside to support evidence-based interventions for lower-performing schools serving high numbers of students from low-income families. Given the strong evidence summarized in this report on the effectiveness of diverse magnet schools in promoting positive outcomes for students, magnet schools should qualify as an evidence-based approach for school improvement funds under ESSA, especially for racially and socioeconomically isolated schools. This source of federal funds enables states to implement programs to advance voluntary integration. For example, New York state launched a Socioeconomic Integration Pilot Program drawing upon Title I funds to support districts in further developing interventions to support school integration.¹⁶⁵
- States can also **provide targeted grant funding to districts** to create and sustain magnet schools. A state program can replicate the MSAP and/or fund specific components like family outreach and transportation, such as that provided by the state to magnet schools in Omaha, NE. States can also provide funding for magnet school evaluation and oversight to aid districts and schools in implementing, sustaining, and adjusting diversity goals. Regular and consistent evaluation of progress in meeting diversity goals is important, as research shows that without regular evaluation and recommitment to diversity, magnets can stray from their historic integration purpose.¹⁶⁶ Analysis of administrative data coupled with surveys of students, faculty, and parents can shed light on the effectiveness of outreach as well as program efforts and help identify areas for improved communication and outreach, along with curriculum and professional development opportunities. State and district leaders can also provide ongoing technical assistance to schools regarding strategies for evaluating and improving programs.

- States and districts can **ensure that magnet school programs are designed to center school integration** within the school design, mission, structure, focus, and goals. A survey of hundreds of magnet school leaders found that schools that were racially isolated often did not have diversity goals, and district or school recruitment, transportation, and assignment policies may not have been designed to support such goals.¹⁶⁷ This may include developing a statement of principles defining the state, district, and school commitment to diversity and outlining strategies to achieve it—even absent the ability to use race as a factor in admissions—including taking into consideration factors like student neighborhood or socioeconomic status in student assignment decisions. Districts can also make strategic school siting decisions, engage in recruitment to attract diverse students to the school, and re-evaluate diversity goals and progress in meeting those goals on a consistent basis. In addition, as we have described, interdistrict programs, like Connecticut’s magnet program, are often needed to facilitate diversity since segregation often occurs between districts. State policymakers should modify state laws as needed to permit interdistrict transfers that facilitate the ability of students from surrounding districts to attend magnet schools and allocate funding, as Connecticut has, to support and incentivize student transfers to achieve diversity.

Recommendation #4: Support school-level strategies that promote both integration and student success.

To help promote diverse and effective magnet schools, additional recommendations are grouped under first door efforts, or those policies that will help to ensure that a diverse group of students walk through the front door of a magnet school together, and second door efforts that ensure that students within magnet schools are supported in positive, culturally affirming, and inclusive environments. These efforts can help to sustain diversity and inclusiveness within magnet schools.

Support first door features that promote diverse magnet schools

- At the district and school levels, **ensure that diverse families are aware of magnet schools and the application process.** Schools with outreach to prospective students were found to be more likely to have experienced increasing integration over the last decade, while many of those without special outreach were one-race schools.¹⁶⁸ Districts and schools can conduct outreach to diverse families through a variety of platforms (such as social media, print, television, and radio) in multiple languages and can target funding and assistance to help schools do the same. Sustained outreach through multiple means (online, in person, flyers, word of mouth through local community organizations, etc.) can help to identify and support diverse families in learning about magnet schools. Even with an innovative and attractive theme, a magnet school cannot attract diverse students if diverse families do not learn about the opportunity. This is especially important to attract families to magnet schools that draw students from surrounding districts—families who may not know about a magnet school and are unaware of their student’s eligibility to attend. These outreach efforts are most effective when there is a streamlined, easy-to-manage application process accompanied by application assistance. And schools can be intentional about ensuring that diverse family voices are incorporated into activities and decision-making once students are enrolled.

- **Implement open and inclusive enrollment practices** to help ensure that diverse families enroll in magnet schools. Research shows that magnet schools with inclusive—rather than competitive—enrollment practices, like lotteries, better promote desegregation and equity.¹⁶⁹ Research also shows that inclusive enrollment practices, like lotteries, interviews, and essays, are more likely to attract students of color, English learners, and students from low-income families. And weighted lotteries, such as those that consider neighborhood racial composition, can be employed to attract diverse students. Districts can support magnet schools in implementing inclusive enrollment practices to ensure that more students have the opportunity to attend magnet schools. Districts can prohibit magnet schools from implementing selective or exclusionary enrollment practices, and states can restrict special funding to those that are inclusive.
- **Make strategic decisions about school siting and feeder patterns** to optimize diversity and accessibility. Districts with larger proportions of students of color will encounter challenges in achieving diversity. Strategies for ensuring school diversity, such as consideration of neighborhood demographics and location relative to other neighborhoods and the availability of transportation, should be at the forefront of school siting and feeder decisions. Such strategies can include placing a magnet school near the border of a city and suburban school system or near the border of an inner suburb with a non-white population and an outer-ring suburb with a predominantly white population. It may also be important to consider current and changing demographics that may be impacted by gentrification. Research has found wide variation in the degree and nature of integration across magnet districts based both on districts’ existing demographics and how well-structured magnet school student assignment processes are designed.¹⁷⁰

Support second door features that enable inclusive, well-supported learning experiences

- **Focus on “whole school” magnet programs.** Whole school magnet programs are found to better foster diversity than in-school programs in otherwise diverse schools. States and districts can be intentional about supporting creation of whole school magnet programs that involve all students in the magnet programming, rather than instituting separate tracks and programs within the school. Ensuring that all students can participate in the whole school program fosters inclusiveness. The magnet school theme should be embedded within the curriculum throughout the entire school. To support this approach, magnet school teachers should be prepared to deliver instruction aligned with the school theme. Magnet school teachers should also be provided with the resources needed, including ongoing professional development opportunities, to support diverse learning environments and the mission of the school across all curricular programs. This support may include designating magnet resource teachers who can be prepared to help work with teachers and school leaders to embed the theme into curriculum and foster inclusive classrooms, as well as onboard new staff about the school’s theme and approach to learning.
- **Provide innovative and culturally responsive curriculum to all students.** Research shows that students learn by building upon their prior knowledge and making connections between the material they are learning and their own culture and community.¹⁷¹ In diverse magnet schools, it is important for educators to help students make connections between their cultural context and community and the materials they are learning. Magnet school

teachers can incorporate evidence-based strategies, such as including stories and content about diverse cultures into curriculum and encouraging students to study multiple points of view, to help foster inclusiveness, student engagement, and achievement. For example, magnet schools serving Hmong students in the Minneapolis–St. Paul area incorporate Hmong culture and language in the curriculum of dual language immersion schools.¹⁷² Teachers should be prepared and supported to foster culturally responsive learning environments that center student voice and help students connect what they are learning in school with their lives.

- **Implement nonexclusionary and restorative school discipline policies.** Discriminatory discipline practices, like dress codes that prohibit natural hairstyles or so-called zero-tolerance policies that impose suspensions or expulsions (often for minor offenses), disproportionately impact students of color, resulting in the loss of valuable instruction time and undermining their educational outcomes.¹⁷³ Implementation of inclusive school discipline practices that are educative and restorative, rather than exclusionary, is important for ensuring that diverse students develop a strong community and sense of belonging and do not lose valuable instruction time or otherwise suffer the consequences of exclusionary school discipline practices. Magnet schools should be supported to implement inclusive approaches to school discipline found to foster inclusive environments, like restorative practices, social and emotional learning, and mental health services and supports. States and districts can also support schools in providing ongoing training on implicit bias and anti-racism to support educators in addressing bias and understanding how it may manifest in the school and classroom.

In addition to focusing their program guidelines and funding priorities on these strategies for success, states and districts can develop communities of practice to support and share best practices across schools to aid in implementing and maintaining these second door efforts.

Conclusion

Given the profound consequences associated with segregated education and the re-entrenchment of segregation in too many of the nation's public schools, well-designed magnet schools that incorporate components outlined in this report present a compelling evidence-based option for promoting school diversity and positive student outcomes. Magnet schools certainly cannot remedy school segregation on their own; they are only one component of necessary broader systemic and structural changes needed to mitigate contemporary forms of segregation. The work to achieve integration is long term, as the efforts to re-entrench racial segregation are persistent, but magnet schools provide a viable strategy for advancing school integration and improving the nation's schools. Evidence shows that these schools present an approach that is consistent with legal interpretations of permissible approaches to supporting school diversity, as recognized in Justice Kennedy's concurrence in the *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* case. These approaches can promote stronger social and academic outcomes.

Reversing the resegregation that betrays *Brown v. Board of Education's* promise of equal access to educational opportunities will require sustained and cooperative action at the federal, state, and local levels. But the historical context outlined in this report demonstrates that it has been done before and can be done again. This coordinated action includes leveraging funding sources to invest in diversity efforts and re-evaluating and changing course when necessary to ensure that more students have access to diverse and equitable educational opportunities. We cannot risk complacency as the current trends of resegregation deepen. Depriving students of the numerous benefits of integrated educational experiences impacts their personal and social development and threatens the ability of the nation to produce adults equipped to participate in a diverse global economy. The educational future of many of our nation's students depends upon acting affirmatively to achieve integration. As one researcher observed, "The students magnet schools serve, and the American education system as a whole, are all the better for this approach."¹⁷⁴

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