

RUNNING HEADER: Magnet Programs

The Impact of Magnet Programs on Public Education

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In contemporary American politics, school choice has become a major issue as people debate the viability of public schools and the ability of the educational system to educate all children. Concepts such as vouchers and charter schools have become prominent pillars in this debate. Quietly standing in the midst of this fanfare are magnet programs. These are programs designed to allow students to attend a school outside their neighborhood on a voluntary basis. They are designed to attract certain students to a given magnet school based on a certain academic or non-academic ability.

School districts have employed magnet programs to accomplish a multitude of goals. The two most prominent of these goals would be academic specialization and racial integration. One of the many examples of a school district that has employed magnet programs for academic specialization would be the Cobb County Public School District in suburban Atlanta. The district has magnet programs in a range of fields (a math/technology program, a math/medical science program, a performing arts program, an international studies program, and a International Baccalaureate program) all hosted by different high schools. Other school districts have employed programs for career tracks and other pursuits. Meanwhile, other magnet programs were instituted as an integration device. This was especially true in school districts struggling with *Brown v. Board of Education* compliance during the 1960s and 1970s. They were designed to not only create a way for but to encourage parents to move their children into other schools without the imposition of forced busing and other controversial measures. In attempting to integrate schools, magnet programs were employed in one of three ways:

- 1) to draw white students to majority-minority schools
- 2) to draw minority students into majority-white schools

3) to draw both groups into new integrated schools

The decision on which of the three magnet program strategies the school district would employ were based on many elements, most importantly whether or not the magnet program was social or academic in its purpose. In a case study by Mary Haywood Metz (1986), she finds that the vast majority of the magnet program movement was from black children moving into white schools. The parents of the black children sought to give their children a better education by having them attend schools outside their neighborhood. As the focus of magnet programs shifted from a racial to academic, it appears that the traffic flow has reversed. White students are being lured to, and thus integrating, predominately minority schools by these academic programs.

Many of these magnet programs, by virtue of attempting to accomplish one or both of those first two methods, are have made created their magnet programs to be partial-site programs, meaning that program participants are only part of the schools population. Students in the program would be in a track separate from many of their peers, attending “special” classes and in many cases the two groups of students would have limited interaction.

In later decades, magnet programs would take on a new face as people sought ways to fix and cope with failing public schools. New programs shifted from being overtly integrationist to becoming a way for schools to give special attention to certain academic areas. In implementation, the programs also had the tendency to racially integrate schools but that was a side effect. This will be the type of magnet program primarily focused on in this paper.

Mary Q. Penta (2001) finds that the rhetoric of magnet programs put forward by many districts that that programs increase the flexibility of the district in meeting the needs of both students and parents. Students are able to have increased freedom to study an area of their interest and parents have increased control over their child's education and they school they attend. Penta cites the guiding principles of Wake County Public Schools Magnet Programs as follows:

- **Utilization of Schools** – optimal use of facilities,
- **Equity of Educational Opportunity** – accommodate growth and changing demographics in Wake County; make unique programs accessible to all students; discover and develop individual student's gifts and talents,
- **Diverse Student Population** – promote positive character traits; respect other cultures and beliefs, enrich learning experiences and achievements, provide learning opportunities for students considering socioeconomic status and achievement,
- **Program Involvement** – attract and retain high-quality personal; raise standards for the entire district; continue to search for excellent and innovative programs that meet the needs of all students, and
- **Parental Participation and Choice** – increase parental participation by providing opportunities for chose; provide a wide selection of top-quality programs

This approach to magnet programs has appeared to yield dividends for many declining schools districts. New Haven, for example, has employed a broad range of

magnet programs to reverse declining enrollment, more importantly bringing the most talented students into its schools (Perkins, Sullivan-DeCarlo, and Linehan 2003). The system contains several magnet schools entirely focused on certain academic areas and special skills.

Yet it remains to be seen if magnet programs actually are generating academic gains for the students in the programs. Banks and Spencer (1997) find that students attending partial-site magnet programs have superior academic results from those on a general college track. They speculate that it could be based on their higher expectations and a self-esteem boost from being a “special student in a special school”. Adcock and Williams (2000) attribute their increased academic results of students in magnet programs to the self-selected nature of the population, essentially stating that the students who want to do harder or more specialized work are more likely to be better at it. They find that, “when student ability is accounted for in the evaluation design, magnet school programs do not perform as well as students in non-magnet programs” (14). Both fail to agree with the notion that students in academic magnet programs have superior academic results due to the increased focus and rigor of their educations. As one looks at the academic effects of the magnet programs for the students that are inside the magnet program, one should look at the effects for those students that are not in the magnet program.

Annegret Staiger (2004) believes that magnet programs have a detrimental effect on the students not in the programs. This is especially true at partial-site schools where the general population at the schools is minority and the members of the magnet program are typically white. She cites Kimberley West (1994) who writes,

Racial segregation within partial-site magnet schools is particularly damaging to the minority students who constitute the non-magnet portion of the school, because it labels them as inferior to the white transfer students who constitute the bulk of the magnet students within the program.

By creating two different classes of students at the same school, they are effectively tracking (placement in classes and programs based on perceived ability as measured by tests and other indicators) the students. This is policy that has been historically implemented in ways that reflect low expectations for minority students and designed to funnel them into academically unchallenging environments. Objectives as set forward by districts (such as the aforementioned Wake County) reflect this tendency as they reserve the most innovative and most engaging education for students in the magnet programs while leaving other students with the leftovers.

Magnet schools are important ways to encourage innovation and growth within a school district while at the same time making the schools more diverse. Examples like New Haven suggest that a well deployed system of magnet programs can help revitalize a school district by attracting talented students who otherwise would not be in the public school system. It is also important for school districts to use these programs with caution. The research available suggests that partial-site magnet programs are problematic. Integration by simply throwing some magnet program students into a school is not going to have greatly advantageous effects for large groups of students. The policy goal is to find a middle ground that integrates schools without damaging the self-esteem of

minority students and that is able to spread the academic benefits and potential innovation of the programs immediately back to the students that need them the most.

References

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