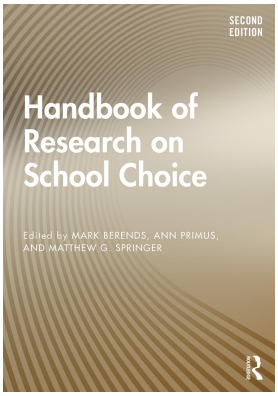

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Mark Berends, Ann Primus, Matthew G. Springer

Perspectives on Magnet Schools

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Ellen B. Goldring, Walker A. Swain
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PERSPECTIVES ON MAGNET SCHOOLS

Ellen B. Goldring and Walker A. Swain

Long before the first charter school opened, magnet schools were established in urban districts to promote desegregation by offering high-quality schooling options that would appeal to a diverse group of parents. Magnet schools, one of the most widespread forms of public school choice, share four characteristics: 1) a thematic curriculum (e.g., arts, technology) or unique method of instruction (e.g., Montessori); 2) admission policies designed to facilitate voluntary desegregation; 3) choice of school by families; and 4) access to pupils beyond neighborhood attendance zones.

Magnet schools gained popularity in the 1970s when the federal courts accepted them as a method of desegregation (see *Morgan v. Kerrigan*, 1976). They were developed in an effort to make desegregated schools more attractive to parents, educators, and students. By allowing parents to select among several desegregated school offerings, school districts hoped to present an alternative to mandatory reassignment that was usually accomplished through forced busing, and to help stop the flow of white flight.

Amidst substantial shifts in legal, social, and policy landscapes, magnet schools have continued to expand. Today they play an important role in the persistent debates about race, segregation, student assignment, and parent choice. They are largely ignored in the national agenda aimed at school improvement and closing the achievement gap in favor of an emphasis on charter schools and vouchers. However, they serve as microcosms of the many competing educational policy values in the United States today; values of choice, high standards, equity, diversity, and desegregation—all compete simultaneously at the doorsteps of magnet schools.

The purpose of this chapter is threefold: 1) to provide an overview of the magnet schools landscape; 2) to address the extent to which magnet schools serve as instruments of racial integration and diversity; and 3) to discuss the shifting roles of magnet schools as the nation continues to debate school choice and student assignment policies.

The Landscape of Magnet Schools

The first magnet school, established to reduce segregation in Tacoma, Washington, was founded in 1968 at the height of the civil rights era and sweeping court involvement in school desegregation. The term "magnet school" was coined in Houston, Texas to describe how the district attracted students from beyond a mandatory attendance zone (Kafer, 2005). Since then, magnet schools have become an important public school choice option across the nation.

While the number of magnet schools has leveled off in recent years, the percent of children attending them has continued to grow slightly, and was only marginally surpassed by charter school enrollment in 2015 (see Figure 18.1). Between 1997 and 2005, the number of magnet schools increased by 53 percent, from 1,161 operating in 16 states, to 1,774 in 29 states. Of those states, 24 reported increases in the percentages of students enrolled in magnet schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000; Dalton, Sable, & Hoffman, 2006). However, by 2010, the total number of magnets exceeded 3,000 and has held relatively stable since, though the number of students enrolled has continued to climb to roughly 2.5 million. Substantial variation remains in both the scale and the growth trajectory of magnet schools by state (see Table 18.1).

Similar numbers of students are enrolled in magnet schools as in charter schools throughout the U.S. (Polikoff & Hardaway, 2017), despite the emphases on charter schools in urban education policy circles. In the 2008–2009 school year, for example, 37 of the 50 largest school districts in the nation operated both types of schools (and reported data), and only 11 (about 29 percent) had a higher percent of students attending charter schools than magnet schools (see Table 18.2).

Magnet schools have historically been concentrated in urban school districts with large student enrollments (over 10,000) and more low-income, minority students. In the early 1990s, 53 percent of large urban school districts included magnet school programs as part of their desegregation plans (Steel & Levine, 1994). Over half of all magnet programs are located in low socioeconomic districts (Levine, 1997). In 2008–2009, 48 of the 100 largest districts reported running 1,364 magnet schools (Sable, Plotts, & Mitchell, 2010). The largest number of magnet schools was in Chicago with 288, with 46.7 percent of its schools enrolling 55 percent of its students (see Table 18.2).

Magnet school programs have generally been quite popular, measured not only in large enrollment numbers (see Figure 18.1), but also by the fact that over 75 percent of all districts with magnets have a greater demand for student slots in those schools than they can fill, often maintaining long waiting lists (Blank, Levine, & Steel, 1996). Most use a lottery format, while others rely upon a first-come, first-served arrangement. Only about one-third of all magnet programs use a selective admissions policy; these usually involve either a minimum test score requirement, or, in performing arts magnets, performance in an audition or portfolio.

Congress established the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) in 1976, and again in 1984, as an amendment to the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA). Its aim was to authorize grants that would support magnet school programs in districts that were attempting to desegregate. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the MSAP emphasized that the key purpose of magnet schools was reducing racial isolation and creating innovative programs. There was initially no mention of broadening school choice options, driving instructional innovation, or reducing the achievement gap, all of which are now stated goals of the MSAP as the landscape continues to change (United States Department of Education, 2018).

Magnet schools have played various roles in school district desegregation plans (see Rossell, 2003). The most prevalent is the *magnet voluntary* plan, under which districts that rely on mandatory assignment to attendance zone schools use optional magnet enrollment outside assigned zones to increase racial integration through voluntary means. Thus, magnet schools serve as mechanisms to prevent or reduce white flight from attendance zone schools that may no longer be attractive under mandatory assignment plans. Magnet schools are typically placed in minority neighborhoods to attract Whites to attend them.

A second type of desegregation plan utilizing magnet schools is *controlled choice*. The most prominent examples include the districts surrounding Louisville, Kentucky, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Raleigh, North Carolina. Controlled choice constrains choices and enrollments by setting racial or socioeconomic quotas and limiting the options for parents from specific geographic areas. Some controlled choice plans do have magnet schools "created intentionally to enhance the attractiveness of schools located in minority neighborhoods (e.g., Yonkers and San Jose)" (Rossell, 2003, p. 703).

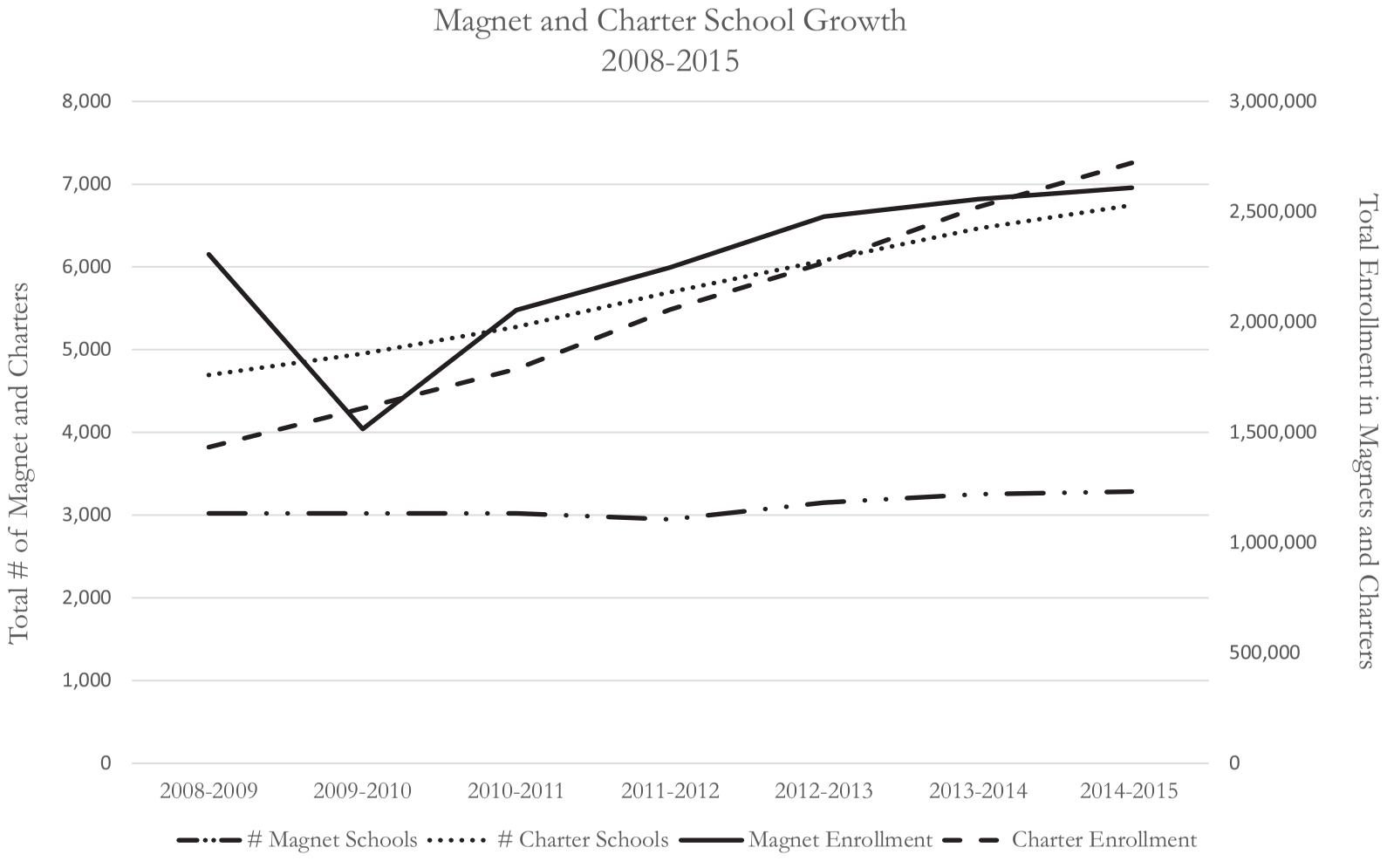

Figure 18.1 Tracking Magnet and Charter School Growth and Enrollment Over Time.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), Digest of Education Statistics, "Number and enrollment of public elementary and secondary schools, by school level, type, and charter and magnet status: Selected years, 2008–2009 through 2014–15." Note: Low response rate among magnet schools on enrollment figures in 2009–2010 school year does not necessarily reflect a drop in enrollment.

Table 18.1 Number of Magnet Schools and Percent of Students Served by State, School Years 2005–2006, 2010–2011, and 2015–2016

State	*2005–2006*		*2010–2011*		*2015–2016*	
	Magnet Schools	*Pct. of All Students*	*Magnet Schools*	*Pct. of All Students*	*Magnet Schools*	*Pct. of All Students*
Alabama	35	2.6	30	2.0	40	2.7
Alaska	17	3.3	19	5.3	32	15.9
Arizona	100	3.1	—	—	0	—
Arkansas	12	1.5	38	4.5	30	3.3
California	519	9.9	282	4.6	504	8.4
Colorado	10	0.4	24	1.3	28	1.4
Connecticut	43	2.7	54	4.1	85	7.8
Delaware	2	1.0	3	1.6	3	2.1
D.C.	3	1.5	7	4.0	6	4.8
Florida	‡	‡	414	16.9	536	21.9
Georgia	62	3.7	78	4.3	80	4.2
Hawaii	†	†	†	†	†	†
Idaho	†	†	2	0.4	19	3.3
Illinois	347	11.6	104	3.6	105	3.7
Indiana	26	1.3	26	1.2	30	1.4
Iowa	†	†	†	†	0	—
Kansas	25	2.2	36	3.0	32	3.0
Kentucky	46	6.1	41	5.5	66	8.5
Louisiana	68	6.0	72	5.8	36	2.9
Maine	1	0.1	1	0.1	1	0.1
Maryland	—	—	90	9.5	97	10.1
Massachusetts	3	0.1	—	—	—	—
Michigan	402	10.7	464	13.7	386	12.6
Minnesota	65	3.5	73	4.4	80	5.1
Mississippi	17	0.9	20	0.9	17	0.7
Missouri	44	2.1	30	1.6	29	1.5
Montana	†	†	†	†	0	—
Nebraska	—	—	†	†	†	†
Nevada	—	—	24	8.2	44	11.6
New Hampshire	†	†	†	†	1	0.1
New Jersey	—	—	—	—	0	—
New Mexico	3	0.0	—	—	†	†
New York	181	4.0	‡	‡	‡	‡
North Carolina	144	7.5	106	4.7	123	5.3
North Dakota	†	†	†	†	†	†
Ohio	†	†	†	†	—	—
Oklahoma	†	†	†	†	†	†
Oregon	—	—	†	†	†	†
Pennsylvania	44	1.5	52	1.5	50	1.6
Rhode Island	—	—	†	†	†	†
South Carolina	26	2.7	104	11.0	111	10.9
South Dakota	†	†	†	†	†	†
Tennessee	32	1.7	32	1.9	126	8.4
Texas	†	†	219	3.9	258	4.3
Utah	11	0.5	24	1.9	22	1.8

State	2005–2006		2010–2011		2015–2016	
	Magnet Schools	Pct. of All Students	Magnet Schools	Pct. of All Students	Magnet Schools	Pct. of All Students
Vermont	†	†	†	†	2	0.6
Virginia	176	12.3	131	10.5	140	11.4
Washington	—	—	†	†	—	—
West Virginia	†	†	†	†	0	—
Wisconsin	5	0.2	4	0.2	8	0.3
Wyoming	†	†	†	†	0	—

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Selected Statistics From the Public Elementary and Secondary Education Universe: School Year, 2005–2006, 2010–2011, and 2015–2016."

—Not Available.
† Not applicable. Some states/jurisdictions do not designate magnet schools.

Table 18.2 Number and Percent of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools and Students in Magnet and Charter Schools among the 50 Largest School Districts that Reported Data in the United States and Jurisdictions, by School District, School Year 2008–2009★

Name of Reporting District	State	# Magnet Schools	Pct of All Students	# Charter Schools	Pct of All Students
New York City Public Schools	NY	141	14.1	0	0
Los Angeles Unified	CA	141	34.8	150	8.5
Puerto Rico Department of Education	PR	†	†	†	†
City of Chicago School District 299	IL	288	46.7	30	6.9
Dade	FL	83	30.1	77	6.9
Clark County School District	NV	0	0	13	1.3
Broward	FL	46	20.5	55	7.3
Houston Independent School District	TX	†	†	33	6.4
Hillsborough	FL	29	13.1	26	2.5
Hawaii Department of Education	HI	†	†	31	4.1
Orange	FL	0	0	20	1.7
Palm Beach	FL	28	20.1	34	4.3
Fairfax County Public Schools	VA	68	33.8	0	0
Philadelphia City School District	PZ	26	8.2	0	0
Dallas Independent School District	TX	†	†	1	0.4
Gwinnett County	GA	—	—	2	0.4
Montgomery County Public Schools	MD	18	10.8	0	0
Wake County Schools	NC	35	21.6	0	0
Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools	NC	53	32.3	0	0
San Diego Unified	CA	31	15.4	37	10.8
Prince George's County Public Schools	MD	25	18.5	4	0.9
Duval	FL	55	36.5	5	1
Memphis City School District	TN	1	0.6	9	2.2
Cobb County	GA	‡	‡	6	5.3
Pinellas	FL	26	25.1	9	1.9
Baltimore County Public Schools	MD	29	26	1	0.5

(*Continued*)

Table 18.2 (Continued)

Name of Reporting District	*State*	*# Magnet Schools*	*Pct of All Students*	*# Charter Schools*	*Pct of All Students*
Cypress Fairbanks Independent School District	TX	†	†	0	0
Dekalb County	GA	‡	‡	10	5.4
Jefferson County	KY	30	28	†	†
Detroit City School District	MI	1	0.4	0	0
Albuquerque Public Schools	NM	1	0	36	7.3
Polk	FL	8	4.8	24	11
Northside Independent School District	TX	†	†	0	0
Fulton County	GA	‡	‡	11	7.3
Long Beach Unified	CA	27	45.4	5	1.6
Jefferson County School District No R 1	CO	0	0	15	6.1
Milwaukee School District	WI	0	0	44	14.3
Austin Independent School District	TX	†	†	0	0
Baltimore City Public Schools	MD	0	0	25	9
Jordan District	UT	1	0.9	0	0
Lee	FL	9	15	20	11.2
Fort Worth Independent School District	TX	†	†	0	0
Fresno United	CA	1	0.2	11	4.7
Davidson County School District	TN	13	10.2	3	0.8
Denver County 1	CO	2	1.6	19	8.6
Prince Wm County Public Schools	VA	35	55.8	0	0
Anne Arundel County Public Schools	MD	0	0	1	0.3
Brevard	FL	6	5.7	8	4.2
Guilford County Schools	NC	15	11	0	0
VA Beach City Public Schools	VA	6	14.5	0	0

⋆ *Source*: Sables, Plotts, and Mitchell (2010). Several districts that list 0 charter schools have charter schools within their geographic area that are not authorized and operated by the LEA.

— Not available.
† Not applicable. Some states/jurisdictions do not designate magnet schools.
‡ Reporting standards not met. Information about whether or not a school was a magnet school was missing for 92.8 percent of schools.

Districts implement various other magnet programs to increase desegregation. Often, they use whole school or dedicated magnets, schools in which the entire student body is enrolled by choice through a formal application process, and there is no school attendance zone. Sometimes districts use program within school (PWS) magnets, programmatically distinct components of neighborhood schools with attendance zones that provide magnet program instruction to students who apply. A variation on the whole school or dedicated magnet is the school that has attendance zone students assigned to it who take part in the magnet alongside the choice students.

It is not unusual for a school district to have a mixture of magnet school program types. For example, during the 1993–1994 school year, the Cincinnati system used four types of structures: 1) *full or dedicated magnets* and 2) *PWS magnets*, both described above; 3) *mixed magnets*, in which all enrolled students participated but which enrolled a combination of neighborhood/zoned students and those outside the zone who formally applied; and 4) *mixed schools-within-schools*, a special version of PWS magnets, organized in a neighborhood school that reserves a percentage of its enrollment capacity for zoned children in addition to those living outside the zone (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999).

Magnet programs also differ substantially in terms of subject or theme focus, with no clear dominant model. Polikoff and Hardaway (2017) noted that of the roughly 500 California magnet schools,

the largest focus (roughly 20 percent) could be categorized as "gifted" or "high achieving," while other popular themes included STEM/STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, math), health/medicine, and visual or performing arts. Other themes range from Montessori, international, and multi-lingual education to agriculture, automotive, and hospitality.

Magnet Schools, Desegregation, and Achievement

Research has suggested that magnet schools experience mixed success at both integrating schools and promoting academic achievement (e.g., Smrekar & Goldring, 1999; Bifulco, Ladd, & Ross, 2009; Koedel, Betts, Rice, & Zau, 2009; Wang, Schweig, & Herman, 2017). They often attract students of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds with similar educational interests, provide unique sets of learning opportunities, encourage innovation, and promote academic gains for some students (Gamoran, 1996). But some research has also indicated that magnets tend to siphon off the most motivated and academically able students, as well as the most innovative and effective teachers; this often leads to socioeconomic segregation, as middle-class parents are more motivated and more informed regarding the availability of educational options and choices. Furthermore, magnets can divert resources that could be used for system-wide improvements (Moore & Davenport, 1990; Eaton & Crutcher, 1996). Other research has found that magnet schools provide enhanced opportunities for parent involvement and effective communication between home and school (Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999).

Studies of specific magnet schools have indicated that they tend be more innovative in terms of distinctive curricula and unique student–teacher relationships (Metz, 1986). However, larger-scale studies using national data have contradicted these findings, reporting that magnet and nonmagnet schools use similar curricula and modes of instruction (Sosniak & Ethington, 1992). Magnet schools do seem to offer teachers more autonomy and involvement in decision-making, as choice advocates predict (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). The 2003 MSAP evaluation indicated that magnet school teachers were more likely to use technology and teaching methods that elicit higher-order thinking skills than non-MSAP schools (Christenson et al., 2003).

Desegregation

Historically, the overarching purpose of magnet schools was to improve racial integration. However, numerous evaluations of local school magnet plans suggest a complex set of conclusions regarding magnet schools and desegregation. This is to be expected; districts vary largely in terms of the nature of their magnet school plans (such as types and numbers of options), transportation availability, and overall enrollment patterns. Without significant influxes of White students, districts with larger proportions of minority students will find it harder to achieve racial desegregation irrespective of the types of options in place. Interestingly, these are precisely the districts most likely to have magnets as central components of their desegregation plans. So it follows that choosing magnet schools for Black middle school students will likely racially segregate them from White students, while choosing magnet schools for White students will tend to integrate them (Plank, Schiller, Schneider, & Coleman, 1992).

Whether or not magnet schools operate within or outside court-ordered desegregation plans is another important contextual factor. Rossell (2003), relying on national data from 1991, concluded that:

> in districts greater than 5,000, magnet schools within a voluntary or mandatory desegregation plan are associated with less increase in interracial exposure compared to no plan at all than the same type of plan without them, although disparity is greatest for the voluntary plans. (p. 706)

In larger districts of more than 27,500, she noted that:

> Adding magnets to a desegregation plan appears to be more effective. Among voluntary plans, the increase in interracial exposure is almost the same for plans with and without magnets, and among mandatory plans, the magnets are associated with a greater increase in interracial exposure than the same plan without magnets when compared to no plan at all. (p. 707)

A 1996 evaluation of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg magnet program, while still under court-ordered desegregation, seemed to point to great success. After three years of operation, the magnet schools at all levels had racially mixed student bodies, ranging from about 50 percent White to 44 percent Black students in elementary schools, and 55 percent White and 38 percent Black students in the magnet high schools. Of the newly admitted students to magnet schools, 40 percent were Black. Non-magnet schools also remained racially balanced (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 1994). (Notably, however, after the district was granted unitary status, several studies [e.g., Billings, Deming, & Rockoff, 2013; Giersch, Bottia, Mickelson, & Stearns, 2016] documented substantial harm to outcomes for Black students who were re-segregated into racially isolated schools.) Other positive results emerged from evaluations of Montclair, New Jersey, and New York State, which attributed "significant and sustained improvement in desegregation to the implementation of magnet schools" (Black, 1996, p. 35).

In contrast, in Kansas City and Prince George's County, Maryland, both larger and more complex environments, magnet schools did not have the intended impact on racial balance patterns. Kansas City minority enrollments from 1985 to 1993 remained a steady 73–75 percent of all students, and magnet schools did not meet their desegregation goals of 40/60 (Morrison, 1996). The district was largely unsuccessful in attracting non-minority students into its schools. In Prince George's County, though 72 percent of students attended schools within new racial balance guidelines, the schools were often minority isolated (Eaton & Crutcher, 1996).

Several studies of large urban districts have highlighted the complex racial sorting effects of expanded magnet options. Smrekar and Goldring (1999) reported that both St. Louis and Cincinnati implemented magnets effectively in their respective school districts. On average, Black students comprised about 60 percent of magnet school enrollments in St. Louis and about 50 percent in Cincinnati, with White students making up the difference. Of the 10 magnet schools, the racial balance ranged from 62 percent to 51 percent Black students, whereas of the integrated non-magnet schools, the balance ranged from 88 percent to 26 percent Black students. Rickles, Ong, and Houston (2002), in a study of public elementary schools in five California Metropolitan areas, found that magnet schools on average did provide students with a more integrated environment than the local neighborhood. In Chicago, Allensworth and Rosenkranz (2000) found that wealthier students had access to more magnet schools than other area families, Black students had to travel farther than other students to attend the best schools, and few White students enrolled in predominantly Black magnet schools.

In Philadelphia, Saporito's (2003) study of magnets targeting White families in private schools found that the percent of "application rates among white students increases significantly as the percent of non-white students in their neighborhood school area increases," while "the application rates of non-white families *do not vary* with the racial compositions of their neighborhood school attendance zone" (p. 191). Furthermore, she found that "neighborhood high schools are in fact more racially segregated as a result of students actually moving to magnet schools" (p. 196).

Two more recent studies came to opposing conclusions with respect to whether the districts they examined would be more or less integrated in the absence of their magnet school-centered choice programs. Bifulco et al. (2009) examined the compositional effects of the school choice system in

Durham, North Carolina, and found that the consistent segregating school selections of White families outweighed the integrative decisions of Black and Latinx families, such that ultimately the district's schools would be more integrated relying solely on neighborhood attendance zones. They found even larger segregating patterns when comparing choices by parental education, where college-educated parents were much more concentrated in magnet middle schools. By contrast, Koedel and colleagues' (2009) study of a similar period in San Diego, California, found that the magnet program increased racial integration.

The success of magnet school desegregation greatly depends upon the type of magnet program, the overall minority enrollment in the district, changes and trends in minority school enrollments, and the type of desegregation plan. Specifically, Steel and Eaton (1996) reported that:

> higher initial levels of minority enrollment in the districts overall, as well as growth in minority enrollments within the district constrained opportunities for schools to attract sufficient "opposite-race" students to reduce, eliminate or prevent minority isolation. However, schools that were more minority-isolated relative to their districts were more likely than others to meet their objectives. (p. v)

In addition, whole school magnet programs, where all students must choose the school, are the most successful in meeting desegregation goals compared with PWS magnets or mixed models of magnet and attendance zone magnets. Polikoff and Hardaway (2017) found differences in demographic composition by magnet theme among California's 508 magnet schools, with lower poverty and higher White and Asian populations in gifted magnets, and slightly higher levels of poverty, Black, and Latinx students in STEM and health/medicine magnets.

West (1994) asked the important question about the relationship between *classroom level* segregation in magnet schools that at the *building level* may be racially balanced or mixed. She noted that within-school segregation can occur in racially integrated magnet schools through ability grouping and tracking or through disciplinary practices that adversely impact minority students. She also suggested that within-school segregation is most prevalent in PWS magnets.

Relatedly, Schofield (1995) and others suggested that desegregation in the 1970s through the early 1990s was associated with an increase in the disparity between Black and White student suspension rates. This was during a period when the public was outraged that Black students receive discipline at disproportionately high rates compared to White students (Hull, 1994). Morris and Goldring (1999) examined disciplinary practices in Cincinnati Public Schools and found that, throughout the school system, Black students were twice as likely to be disciplined as White students. In the same study, the scholars assessed whether magnet schools were associated with more equitable levels of disciplining than non-magnet schools and found no difference; disciplinary actions were consistently significantly higher for Black students than for White students.

Research has suggested the goals of desegregation and enhanced achievement are mutually reinforcing. That is, higher achievement promotes the reduction of racial and socioeconomic isolation by making the school attractive to a diverse clientele, while the reduction of isolation has beneficial effects on achievement—particularly for disadvantaged students—through positive peer effects. In addition to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg studies referenced above, research using longitudinal data from the state of Texas (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2002) found that a school's racial composition is crucial for understanding the achievement gap between Black and White students: "[A] higher percentage of Black schoolmates reduces achievement for Blacks . . . [with] a much smaller and generally insignificant effect on Whites" (p. 349).

By and large the research base does not address whether school systems are less segregated with magnet schools and programs than they would be in the absence of magnet programs. Although some studies suggest that magnet schools are better integrated than other schools in the same district,

it is often the case that these schools are drawing students who would have attended other district schools, rather than maintaining or attracting White parents who would otherwise flee the district or enroll their children in private schools.

Achievement

In terms of student achievement, findings have been decidedly mixed (for a complete analysis, see Chapter 20 in this volume). Gamoran (1996) compared students in magnet schools with those in Catholic schools, nonreligious private schools, and public comprehensive schools by analyzing the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Survey. He found some advantages for magnet school students in achievement in reading, science, and history. Similarly, Crain, Heebner, & Si (1992) found that career magnet schools in New York City helped raise students' reading scores. However, in an early study using lottery data to address selection issues, Cullen, Jacob, and Levitt (2006) found that students who won admission to Chicago's high-achieving magnet schools had no better subsequent test scores than lottery losers, but reported increased parental engagement and lower levels of discipline and criminal behavior. Bifulco's (2012) assessment of magnet school effects using both within-student, fixed-effects variation and experimental data from oversubscribed schools in Hartford, Connecticut found positive test score effects. Most recently, Waddington and Berends (2018) assessed impacts of transferring to magnet schools, among other school choice options, in Indianapolis and found the initial move to magnet schools was associated with modest declines in math and reading achievement, though apparent losses leveled off in subsequent years.

Studies focusing specifically on the MSAP program did not find clear evidence of achievement benefits. The 2003 evaluation on MSAP-funded magnets found that magnet schools raised reading and mathematics scores of elementary students over time. However, progress was no greater than in a comparison set of regular public schools, once controls were introduced for changes in the demographic composition of schools (Christenson et al., 2003). A more recent MSAP evaluation, with a fuller set of control variables, found a modest overall test score benefit for magnet attendance, with highly varied effects by school with no clear trends by theme or school characteristics (Wang et al., 2017).

Future Trends: Unitary Status, Race Neutral Student Assignment, and the Road Ahead

The roles and purposes of magnet schools are at a crossroads in response to two trends: 1) the changing legal landscape, and 2) a return to neighborhood schools and the growth of urbanism.

Unitary Status and Race Neutral Student Assignment

School districts across the country are moving away from court-ordered desegregation at a rapid pace as they are declared "unitary." Although the use of the term has varied from case to case, unitary status typically permits local districts to free themselves from court oversight and from court-ordered desegregation mandates. For districts to achieve it, the Supreme Court identified in the *Green v. County School Board* decision of 1968 some six areas to be scrutinized. These would include whether a district selected sites for new schools that demonstrate intent to achieve racially balanced enrollments, whether gaps in achievement by race are narrowing, whether racial balance is achieved in faculty and staff hiring and assignment, and whether extracurricular programs achieve "maximum practicable desegregation."

Reardon, Grewal, Kaloridges, and Greenberg (2012) identified 602 school districts with more than 2,000 students that were bound by court orders to desegregate, and only 268 had not been

granted unitary status by 2009. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Justice was monitoring 395 school districts—down from 504—still covered by desegregation orders; in one five-month period, 10 school districts were declared unitary, "free of all vestiges of past discrimination" (Cobb, 2002, p. 1). There was a series of legal challenges to using race to assign students to schools, and in many of the cases, magnet schools were at the center of the controversy. In 1999, *Wessman v. Gittens* prohibited Boston Latin from the continuation of its desegregation goals, indicating that "Boston Public Schools had not adequately demonstrated a compelling interest that supported a race-sensitive admissions policy" (Kurlaender & Yun, 2001, p. 115).

Also in 1999, a series of other major federal court rulings (see *Capacchione v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*; *Eisenberg v. Montgomery County Public Schools*; *Tuttle v. Arlington County School Board*) repudiated school district efforts to maintain magnet school admission policies designed to promote and ensure racial diversity. These rulings indicated that districts declared unitary are forbidden in magnet school admissions from using separate race-based lotteries, formerly a well-established mechanism designed to achieve racially balanced enrollments in these schools (see Boger & Orfield, 2009). Weighted or separate lotteries were construed as unfair because they may deny special benefits—the unique curriculum offered by a magnet school program—to students based solely on their race. Legal challenges will continue. A 2018 case, *Robinson v. Wentzell*, claims that leaving unfilled seats empty for students of color in Hartford magnet schools to meet racial balance quotas violates the Equal Protection guarantees of the Fourteenth Amendment and violates the civil rights of Hartford's Black and Latinx students.

As a result of these landmark legal rulings, magnet schools in districts declared unitary faced difficult challenges to reproduce the racially balanced school populations attained under court-ordered desegregation. In fact, leading civil rights attorneys William Taylor and Edwin Darden (1999) wrote, "A school district with a student-assignment policy that includes race and ethnic factors should carefully explain the basis of its policy to be prepared for a legal challenge" (p. 2). It was therefore perhaps unsurprising that the Supreme Court ruled in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1, 05–908* and *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education, 05–915* that Seattle, which was never under a school desegregation order, and Louisville, which had been declared unitary, cannot use race when assigning children to schools to achieve integration or racial balances in enrollment.

In the wake of the Supreme Court decision and the rapid acceleration in lifting court orders involving desegregation, there is much debate regarding the future of racial diversity in the nation's schools in general and in magnet schools in particular. Frankenberg and Lee (2002) found that in Oklahoma City, the average Black student was exposed to 23 percent White students in their school; this percent dropped from 34 percent in 1988 to just 21 percent in 2000 after the district was declared unitary. This trend has been documented in five other districts that have been declared unitary. The aforementioned Charlotte-Mecklenburg magnet program is one such example. After it was granted unitary status, several studies (e.g., Billings et al., 2013; Giersch et al., 2016) documented substantial harm to outcomes for Black students who were re-segregated into racially isolated schools. Reardon and colleagues' 2012 study of districts across the country from 1987 to 2009 found substantial increases in a range of segregation metrics following unitary status rulings, especially in the South, where integration plans had been more robust.

In contrast, some scholars suggest the Supreme Court decision will not have much of an impact. Michael Klarman, a law professor at University of Virginia, stated in the *New York Times* after the decision that:

> This affects only the tiny percentage of school districts that use race to assign students, and even in those districts, like Louisville and Seattle, it won't be consequential because there are so many opportunities for committed school boards to circumvent it. (Rosen, 2007, p. 5)

That is, the mechanisms often suggested to meet diversity goals include using proxies for race in student assignment, such as socioeconomic status (see Kahlenberg, 2001). Perhaps the operative words here are "committed school boards." Without court oversight and without the specific use of race can magnet schools still achieve voluntary racial diversity? As noted, the evidence suggests that they cannot; magnet schools, as well as other schools, resegregate (see Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield, Bachmeier, James, & Eitle, 1997).

An in-depth case study of one school district in the southeastern U.S. documented the difficulty of maintaining racial diversity in magnet schools when there is no longer court oversight (see Goldring & Smrekar, 2002). The researchers followed enrollment trends for five years after the lifting of the desegregation court order. This particular district immediately implemented a new student assignment plan that included neighborhood schools—schools that were closer to home and thus a shorter bus ride away than during the court order. The school board reaffirmed its commitment to diversity in the unitary status agreement. The plan did not include any "specific ratios" for schools, although new attendance zones reflected "a consideration given to demographic diversity" (from Board of Education Minutes, June 23, 1998). The overall results of the enrollment patterns in these schools point toward resegregation and a reduction of racial diversity in the district.

Gamoran and An (2016) examined changes in the indices of dissimilarity and segregation for regular attendance zone schools, academically selective, and non-selective magnet schools of a southeastern school district after unitary status. The dissimilarity index represents the proportion of students from one group or another that would need to change schools to bring about an even allocation of Blacks and Whites. The authors reported an increase of nearly 25 percent in six years. The segregation index is the percentage divergence between the rate of exposure and the percentage of non-Blacks in the district as a whole. That index nearly doubled, from 12 percent to 19 percent, in the same period. Most of the increase was between the various types of schools. In 1998–1999, when there were only three types of schools, virtually none of the segregation was between types. That is, the three types had similar racial compositions because of the courts' enforcement of racial balance. That changed over time. The academically selective magnet schools became increasingly racially isolated White schools, while the nonselective magnet schools became increasingly racially isolated Black schools.

With a reduction of cross-town busing, magnet schools in inner-city neighborhoods provide inner-city parents with a close-by choice option. Much of the appeal stems from the outstanding reputation and track record of academically selective magnet schools (see Goldring & Smrekar, 2000; Goldring, Hoover-Dempsey, & Rowley, 2004).

Districts now need to rethink the whole notion of how magnet schools can attract students of various ethnic and racial backgrounds under unitary status and voluntary integration without specifically using race. As noted, the placement of magnet schools needs to be reconsidered. Justice Kennedy, for example, wrote in his Supreme Court opinion that districts can redraw attendance boundaries or direct resources to special programs as examples of how to meet diversity goals without labeling and sorting individual students by race (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1, 05–908*, and *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education, 05–915*). In the aftermath of that decision, Jefferson County Public Schools in Kentucky did just that. The school system shifted to a residential cluster-based, controlled-choice model, where the parents rank preferred magnet school selections and then the district assigns students to insure diverse representation of neighborhood socioeconomic characteristics—including racial concentrations (Semuels, 2015).

While the reduction of racial isolation remains an important goal, magnet schools are increasingly part of the move toward "market-based" school choice options, which are based on two suppositions: the effectiveness of market theories, and the importance of parent autonomy (Goldring, Hawley, Saffold, & Smrekar, 1997). The *market* perspective for magnet schools suggests that the competitive dynamic will ratchet up the overall quality and efficiency of the educational system.

The *parent autonomy* perspective suggests that parents should have the right and individual freedom to choose schools for their children. Welner (2006) summed up the result of this shift when he wrote, "In general, school districts with choice plans have given priority to the parental–autonomy (free market) justification, making diversity a secondary goal at best" (p. 365).

Return to Neighborhood Schools and New Urbanism

The removal of mandatory desegregation strictures and unitary status agreements are often associated with a return to neighborhood schools, "encouraging racial diversity within a neighborhood school philosophy" (Johnson, 2000, p. 3). Goldring, Cohen-Vogel, and Smrekar (2006) noted that the end of decades-old, court-ordered desegregation plans typically involved a retreat from closely controlled diversity targets and the reduction of cross-town busing intended to integrate public schools in residentially segregated urban systems. As stated above, unitary status allows a district to largely reassign students to schools that are closer to home. Consequently, the length of time spent on a bus ride to school decreases for most students, though the implications for school integration are concerning.

Although parents tend to espouse appreciation for the value of diverse schools, the return to neighborhood schools has in general been met with public enthusiasm. Parents, both Black and White, have continuously expressed the desire for their children to be schooled closer to home even if it means they attend more segregated schools. For example, in a 1999 poll, 82 percent of respondents opposed busing, although there were significant racial differences. Eighty-seven percent of White parents, compared to 48 percent of Black parents, said that students should go to their local schools even if it means that most would be the same race (Public Agenda, 1999). Similar results arose from a public opinion poll conducted in a southern city that was declared unitary (Pride & May, 1999). More recently, a 2017 nationally representative PDK poll found that, while 70 percent of respondents of all racial groups said that "all else equal" they preferred racially diverse schools, the numbers dropped radically when asked if their initial preference for diversity would supersede a longer commute. Only 23 percent of White respondents said they would accept a longer commute for more diverse schools, compared with 41 percent and 17 percent for Black and Latinx respondents, respectively (Richardson, 2017).

The return to neighborhood schools is embedded in widespread assumptions about the power of the neighborhood as a potential source of school improvement and school quality. Neighborhood schools are expected to boost community attachment to schools, encourage resource sharing, and increase parent involvement and social capital (Goldring, Crowson, Laird, & Berk, 2003). In theory, closer-to-home schools should provide more time and opportunities for extra-curricular and after-school activities. The schools might become more knowledgeable about their students and parents, and thus more effectively target social services through community outreach. These conditions are viewed as much-needed reversals to a set of troubling trends linked to the loss of community in the era of school desegregation.

However, Goldring and colleagues (2006) found that proximity does not necessarily equate to structurally supportive community contexts for children, especially as Black children were much more likely to be reassigned to schools in disinvested high-poverty neighborhoods as busing is eliminated. Certainly, under earlier court-ordered cross-town busing arrangements, poor neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty and limited community capacity existed. But busing moved and merged groups of students so that racial and socioeconomic diversity was situated in these community contexts. Now, with new student assignment plans and the reduction of cross-town busing, that is no longer the case. Poor minority students are more likely to go to schools located in impoverished neighborhoods as generationally disinvested neighborhoods are closer to the students' homes (de Souza Briggs, 2005; Tate, 2008; Sharkey, 2013; Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014).

In some states, legislatures have enacted laws that require districts to devise student assignment plans that are based upon neighborhood schools, further weakening the prospects for magnet schools. The State of Delaware passed the *Neighborhood Schools Act of 2000*, stating that districts:

> shall develop a Neighborhood School Plan . . . that assigns every student within the district to the grade-appropriate school closest to the student's residence without regard to any consideration other than geographic distance and the natural boundaries of the neighborhoods . . . no student shall be assigned to any school on the basis of race and school assignments shall be made without regard to the racial composition of the schools. (Delaware Code, Chapter 287, 2000)

The law, pertaining to four districts, dismantled a court-ordered desegregation plan that had been in place since 1978.

Similarly, South Carolina enacted the *South Carolina Neighborhood and Community Schools Act of 2003*, which defined neighborhood schools in terms of size rather than geographic location. The General Assembly asserted that:

> Rather than walking or biking to a neighborhood school, many students spend more time on a bus than they do with their families. One of the keys to improving education is a sense of community where teachers, students and parents feel a sense of ownership in their school. (State of South Carolina Bill 3863, 2003–04)

Certainly, these new policies on neighborhood schools are in line with student assignment that does not use race, and they raise further questions about the role of magnet schools in light of neighborhood schooling.

In an important complement to the broader trend toward a resurgence of the neighborhood school, recent research on urban school districts has documented the interactive role of expanded choice options, including magnet schools, in the move of educated White families back to city centers (Hwang & Lin, 2016). Several such studies and reports have noted the potential for the influx of resourced White families to facilitate more integrated neighborhood schools (e.g., Stillman, 2012; Siegel-Hawley, Thachik, & Bridges, 2017). However, others have documented the phenomenon of magnet schools and other choice options driving influxes of White, college educated households to previously racially and economically isolated neighborhoods, while allowing separate schooling to persist (e.g., Mordechay, Ayscue, & Orfield, 2017; Pearman & Swain, 2017). As a whole, this body of research points to the vital intersection of rapid changes in urban residential patterns and school choice policy. It represents an important focus for future study, as magnet schools draw wealthier White families into urban centers from the suburbs, providing public options for sophisticated families to opt out of the less White neighborhood schools near their new homes.

Conclusion

Magnet schools began as a significant part of our nation's efforts to increase racial diversity. They played an important role in integrating schools, especially in districts with mandatory busing and court-ordered desegregation plans. Now magnet schools face a different set of purposes in the wake of the trend toward unitary status and the culmination of years of litigation with the Supreme Court ruling against using race in student assignment. They have become part of the overall landscape of public school choice, now slightly lagging charters as the largest non-traditional choice option, and they operate within rapidly evolving patterns of urban residential segregation. Future research should document and analyze changes in magnet school policies, programs, and outcomes in light

of the emerging and changing landscapes surrounding school choice and racial diversity, particularly as less-regulated charter schools grow and demographic changes in urban centers alter some of the conventional ideas around housing and school integration.

More specifically, research should address magnet school policies in districts that remain committed to racial integration after the *Parents Involved* decisions, exploring the use of strategically placed and marketed magnet schools as tools for promoting voluntary integration, and the effects of those decisions on both enrollments and outcomes. Research could also use new variation spurred by unitary status agreements and race-neutral integration plans to examine the relative effectiveness of magnet schools in alternate legal and policy contexts.

Furthermore, as the number of public school choices for parents expands in the form of privately managed charter schools and vouchers, researchers and policymakers should pay attention to how magnet schools operate within the broader choice landscape and the comparative effectiveness of choice options in the same locale. This area of scholarship is of particular interest as magnets now sit at the nexus of debates around market reforms, school segregation, selectivity and access, amongst others. New research is needed to better understand parent choices, preferences, and actions as parents confront multiple sources and avenues of school information in a complex set of ever-increasing choices.

Finally, a return to neighborhood schools and the movement of White households back to city centers has changed the geographic underpinnings in which magnet schools operate. With households increasingly mobile and neighborhoods changing rapidly in many urban areas, it is an important time to examine magnet schools as a policy that can influence the makeup of communities themselves. Scholarship into the new relationships between magnet schools and their influence on a set of broader community outcomes is a promising area of research.

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