

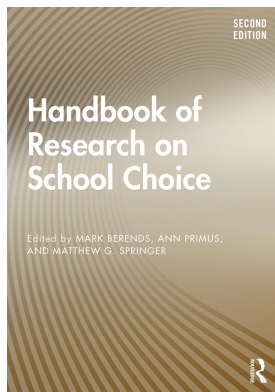
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 03 Oct 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Handbook of Research on School Choice

Mark Berends, Ann Primus, Matthew G. Springer

The Social Context of Magnet School Programs

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351210447-19>

Claire Smrekar

Published online on: 25 Jun 2019

How to cite :- Claire Smrekar. 25 Jun 2019, *The Social Context of Magnet School Programs from: Handbook of Research on School Choice* Routledge

Accessed on: 03 Oct 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351210447-19>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF MAGNET SCHOOL PROGRAMS

How Choosing Schools Intersects with District Policies to Influence Racial Integration

Claire Smrekar

Magnet schools were first established in the 1970s and flourished throughout the 1980s as a mechanism designed to improve racial balance in schools (Smrekar & Goldring, 2009). The idea was straightforward and later invoked in both voluntary and court-ordered desegregation plans: attract families from across an array of neighborhoods and racial backgrounds by developing a distinctive, thematic curriculum such as science and technology or the arts, or an instructional program such as Montessori or Paideia.

Federal aid for the development and operation of magnet schools was first created in 1976 as an amendment to the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA) and was designed to provide an additional or alternative tool (e.g., redrawn attendance zones and cross-town busing) for districts engaged in court-ordered or voluntary school desegregation efforts. The Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) was established in 1984 to more explicitly endorse magnet schools as a strategy that districts could invoke to further desegregation aims with the imprimatur to expand parental choice in education.

The most recent data from the United States Department of Education indicate that magnet schools enroll roughly 2.6 million students (compared to about 3 million enrolled in charter schools) in 3,237 schools (less than half the number of charter schools) across 600 school districts in 34 states (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). Magnet school data were not available in the 2016–2017 database from Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, and Washington, while other states did not designate magnet schools. A fine-grained, state-by-state analysis of magnet school data from the Urban Institute at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte (Gavarkavich, Hawn Nelson, Marcus, & Alvarado, 2016) reported that 3.5 million students (approximately one out of every 15 public school students) attend one of the 4,340 magnet schools that operate across 46 states and the District of Columbia. About half (51 percent) of these magnet schools are elementary schools, while 31 percent are high schools, with 18 percent classified as middle schools (though sometimes magnet schools serve a combination of grade levels, such as K–8 or 7–12). By far, the most common magnet school theme is STEM (science, technology, engineering, math), followed by an arts-focused curriculum. Only one-quarter of all magnet schools apply academic criteria to admission decisions (Gavarkavich et al., 2016). Over half (55 percent) of all magnet schools are located in urban areas, compared to just 23 percent of all traditional public schools (NCES, 2017).

This chapter examines the extant research literature on parents' choice patterns and school preferences in magnet and other school choice programs. The chapter has four distinct goals: 1) describe

magnet school parent choice patterns; 2) link choice practices to the social context of magnet schools; 3) explore policy values undergirding magnet schools as a distinct model of school choice; and, 4) situate magnet school choice patterns and contexts against an array of “checkpoint” assessments drawn from the research that are designed to sustain equity, address efficacy, and highlight authenticity in magnet school plans, practices, and ongoing programming. The chapter concludes with a note on the federal role in advancing the aims of magnet school policy.

Concepts and Assumptions: The Process of Choosing

Patterns of parent choice are embedded in assumptions regarding the role of parents as “citizen-consumers” in a market-like arrangement of school options (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Smith & Meier, 1995; Henig, 1996; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). Consistent with the principles of rational choice theory (Elster, 1986), parents apply pressure on the demand side of the education market, operating under a set of ideal conditions. These include specific value preferences about education and schools, reliable access to adequate and accurate information about schools, a capacity to weigh strengths and weaknesses of various options matched to preferences, and an ability to choose a school that best fits parents’ preferences (Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Schneider et al., 2000; Hamilton & Guin, 2005; Beal & Hendry, 2012; Roda & Wells, 2013). Theoretically, under these ideal conditions all parents can choose schools that maximize their preferences and utility.

This view, of course, has been scrutinized in light of claims that lower-income families may have fewer material and social resources to access reliable school information (e.g., limited knowledge of school systems or restricted social networks) and may be unable to exercise choice due to financial constraints (e.g., absence of reliable transportation). This lack of cultural capital (Lareau, 1989) and social capital (Coleman, 1987) may limit the choice options for lower-income parents and diminish their capacity to function in the same or equitable way as other citizen-consumers (Carnegie Foundation, 1992; Martinez, Godwin, & Kemerer, 1996; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Bell, 2005).

What constitutes “good” choices for parents and students? Given the particularities of students and preferences of parents, it may be hard to judge. To be sure, education is a complex and complicated “production process”; it is difficult to assess the relative “market value” of particular inputs and outputs. The interest rests with better understanding *how* and *why* parents choose schools. What do parents say and do? What patterns of educational preferences emerge from the studies of parent decision-making in programs of choice? How do these patterns inform our understanding of parent choice in the context of magnet schools? (For more on parent preferences, see Chapter 25 of this volume.)

Reasons for Choice: The Why Question

What constitutes the menu of reasons for choice? Conceptual sketches drawn during the early stages of school choice research in the 1980s provide a degree of consistency and constancy in answering this question. Embedded in both survey and case study research, the four broad categories of parents’ reasons for choosing schools are typically clustered by concerns related to: 1) academics and curriculum; 2) discipline and safety; 3) transportation, proximity, and convenience; and, 4) religious and moral values.

In one of the most comprehensive studies of parents’ preferences and school choice, Schneider and colleagues (2000) found that parents identified “academic” aspects of schooling as the most important attribute. The findings were based on extensive telephone surveys of 400 parents in each of four districts, two of which offered some form of choice, including magnet schools or thematically focused alternative schools under universal choice (District 4 middle schools, New York City),

controlled choice (Montclair, New Jersey), or option–demand choice (District 4 elementary schools, New York City). The academic aspect identified most frequently was “teacher quality,” followed by high test scores—notably a product or output as opposed to the teacher input element.

Importantly, and consistent with other studies, parents identified “safety” in almost equal numbers to the test scores attribute. Clearly, parents value “good” schools that provide a safe environment for students. In the comparison analyses of “choosers” (parents who choose magnet or alternative schools) and “nonchoosers” (those who select their zoned or neighborhood schools), few differences emerged; both groups identified academic issues as primary, though notably more nonchoosers selected safety and discipline while choosers focused on values and diversity in schools.

Other studies have suggested that parents’ reasons for choice pivot across both push (reasons for exit) and pull (reasons for entry) factors. Evidence in the Milwaukee voucher programs indicated that parent dissatisfaction with public schools persuaded families to apply for vouchers to private schools in the city (Witte, Bailey, & Thorn, 1993). Not surprisingly, parents who opted for choice schools, including those in the San Antonio multicultural alternative school program and the Minnesota open enrollment program, were more dissatisfied with their previous schools than were parents who chose not to leave their neighborhood schools (Martinez, Thomas, & Kemerer, 1994). This “push” explanation figures centrally in the reasons parents provided in a comparison study of magnet and nonmagnet school programs in St. Louis and Cincinnati. Dissatisfaction with neighborhood schools merged with a predictable set of academic reasons for choice among magnet school parents surveyed and interviewed (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). Proximity of home to school also figured prominently in the reasons parents in these districts—particularly White parents—selected schools.

Other research on parent preferences paints a similar picture. In one of the most widely cited studies of parents’ educational values and school choice, researchers surveyed 800 low-income parents (defined as parents in households with earnings less than \$50,000) across three “mature” choice districts (i.e., systems with a history of extensive choice options). Researchers focused on parents who “had considered schools other than the closest zoned public school” (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007, p. 17). In keeping with most studies of choice patterns, this research did not focus exclusively on magnet programs or magnet parents. The three districts (Denver, Milwaukee, and Washington, D.C.) included an array of choice options, such as charter schools, interdistrict transfer programs, vouchers, and magnet schools. Consistent with higher-income parents, academic quality assumed primacy among these low-income parents across each of the three districts, followed by curriculum/thematic focus, and location/proximity to home.

When reviewing the research on parent choice, does the level of parents’ schooling or income, or parents’ race, make a difference? Yes, but only in degrees of emphasis or ranking of second-tier preferences; all parents across all race and educational backgrounds show a preference for academic attributes in schools. The fine-grained differences, however, are important and worth noting. In studies conducted by Schneider and colleagues (Schneider, Teske, Roch, & Marschall, 1997; Schneider et al., 2000), parents with a college education and White parents were much more likely to emphasize the importance of teacher quality (an academic input) than were parents without a college degree and parents who were Latinx, Black, or Asian. The latter groups of parents tended to focus on test scores (an academic output) slightly more heavily than college-educated and White parents.

Perhaps reflecting the realities of disadvantaged neighborhoods, parents with less education and parents who are Black or Latinx are far more likely to emphasize the importance of safety and discipline in schools, while college-trained and White parents are more likely to mention values. Other scholars point to the institutional aspects of schooling that determine entry into higher education and other social organizations. For example, Lisa Delpit (1995) argued that racial minorities and parents without any college experience tended to place a higher priority on test scores as recognized

“gate-keeping points” through which students from lower-income households must pass to enter the ranks of middle-class American society.

Collectively, these findings are consistent with other studies that rely on survey data to assess patterns of parent preferences. In the Massachusetts interdistrict choice program, parents reported that high academic standards and curriculum represented their primary interests in selecting a choice school (Armor & Peiser, 1998). Academic quality was cited as the most important element for using vouchers among choosers in the Milwaukee program (Witte et al., 1993) and in Indianapolis (Heise, Colburn, & Lamberti, 1995), San Antonio (Martinez et al., 1996), and Cleveland (Greene, Howell, & Peterson, 1998).

Race and Choosing Schools: What We Know

Does the racial composition of schools influence the patterns of parent choices? This issue gains particular currency (and urgency) in debates around the racial integration aims of magnet schools and the degree of efficacy associated with using voluntary choice mechanisms to achieve racially diverse schools. The research on this topic raises compelling questions regarding the difference between parents' stated preferences and parents' actual behavior; in other words, what parents say or report to surveyors may not align with what parents do (Hamilton & Guin, 2005; Stein, 2015). Thus, despite the overwhelming evidence regarding parents' focus on academic quality, safety, and proximity of schools, the extant research on parent behavior indicates that the process of choosing schools is complex and contextually bound.

Outcomes based on survey data indicate that parents are unwilling or uncomfortable identifying the racial composition of schools as a variable in their decision-making process. In this sense, parents may operate under assumptions of “socially desirable” responses to survey items that indicate values associated with social equity (Teske et al., 2007). A few studies, however, have suggested that parents use the Internet to search for information about the racial composition of schools (Schneider & Buckley, 2002) and often act on information related to race in ways that indicate a preference for schools that reflect a majority population consistent with the parent's racial background (Henig, 1996).

In one of the most widely cited studies of its kind, Henig (1990) examined 450 parent transfer requests for admission into elementary magnet school programs in Montgomery County, Maryland, in 1985. At the time, the school district was operating a voluntary “managed choice” program designed to entice parents to transfer their children from neighborhood schools to thematically focused magnet schools in the predominantly minority section of the county. Transfers were approved (at a rate of 85 percent) unless the move would exacerbate racial isolation or overcrowding; transportation was provided to the magnet school. Henig (1990) found that transfer requests demonstrated a clear and consistent pattern across both White and minority families in the opposite direction of magnet school policy aims. White families were most likely to select magnet schools that were majority White and located in higher-income neighborhoods. Minority families were also likely to seek cultural familiarity and racial consistency: They tended to select schools that were majority minority and located in lower-income neighborhoods (Henig, 1990, 1996).

Research in other magnet school contexts suggests that “race is a primary consideration in school choices” (Saporito, 2003, p. 198). A study that examined magnet high school applications in Philadelphia compared the racial composition of neighborhood schools among Black families and White families who applied to magnets. The data demonstrated a clear pattern of “out-group avoidance” among White families; that is, Whites tended to exit neighborhood schools that were majority Black through an application door to a magnet school that had a higher proportion of White students. No such pattern emerged among Black families; application rates did not vary according to the racial composition of their neighborhood schools (Saporito, 2003).

In a study of magnet schools with findings that mirrored the results in Philadelphia, Smrekar and Goldring (1999) found that White parents in Cincinnati were significantly more likely to choose a magnet school located in their neighborhood or closer to home (51 percent of Whites compared to only 15 percent of Blacks). The researchers reported that this finding may have reflected the pattern of racial segregation across Cincinnati neighborhoods, coupled with a reluctance among White parents to select schools that required a longer bus ride to a neighborhood that was both unfamiliar and predominantly Black. Indeed, almost half of all magnet parents in Cincinnati reported “racial/ethnic mix” as a reason for choice (about one-third of the surveyed magnet parents in St. Louis selected this item as a reason for magnet school choice).

In sum, these findings suggest that parents are most attracted to schools with distinctive programs situated in familiar (to the parent) neighborhoods. Rossell (1990), however, argued that curricular theme and additional resources in a magnet school *may* be a tipping factor for some parents, particularly White parents who may be attracted to a distinctive magnet program in a predominantly Black neighborhood. Her early review of 20 magnet programs suggested that the context of the district, the school neighborhood, and the character of the magnet program matter and make parents’ decision-making somewhat more complicated.

Demography, Place, and Parent Choice

Recent studies (Bell, 2009; Grooms & Williams, 2015; Smrekar & Honey, 2015) have suggested that geography provides a pivot point in the school choice decision process. This research focused on parents’ perception of place and space (school location) to better understand how these elements shape school choice decisions. The perceived history and identity of the neighborhood as safe or unstable played a crucial part in parents’ choice sets, that is, the group of schools that parents even *consider* before making a choice. Whether negative or positive, such perceptions determined whether schools were included or excluded from parents’ lists (Bell, 2007, 2009). Geography emerged as an influential factor in parents’ school choice decisions—and one that coalesced with parents’ perceptions of school quality, safety, and proximity. Notably, the demographics of magnet schools are overwhelmingly urban (55 percent) and suburban (32 percent) compared to traditional public schools, which are 26 percent urban and 31 percent suburban (Polikoff & Hardaway, 2017).

Other school choice studies, including those focused on intradistrict high schools (Saporito & Lareau, 1999), charter schools (Stein, 2015; Weiher & Tedin, 2002), vouchers (Schneider & Buckley, 2002), and interdistrict elementary schools (Glazerman, 1997), found that race and class figured predominantly in parents’ choice patterns. All pointed to the fact that parents tend to choose schools that are both academically sound (using tangible measures such as test scores and perceptions of teacher quality and safety) and reflect their race in the student majority (using available demographic information). In one case, the majority of White families (but not Black families) in the choice program followed a two-tier process, first apparently deleting majority Black schools from their choice list, and then applying rules of academic quality and school safety to make a decision (Saporito & Lareau, 1999).

A consequential question for educators and policymakers is this: Are school demographics—race and class—a proxy measure for other (in)tangible school attributes unavailable to the parent-consumer, such as teacher quality? As Hamilton and Guin (2005) noted, parents may associate large minority student enrollments with the conditions often found in high-poverty, high-minority urban schools: fewer highly qualified teachers, high rates of teacher turnover, lack of academic focus, and high rates of suspensions and discipline problems (Jencks & Phillips, 1998).

These questions are probed in recent research (Billingham & Hunt, 2016) that employed an experimental design to examine how parents choose when given various hypothetical options—a list of schools with varying academic and sociodemographic characteristics—from which to choose.

After controlling for what the authors call “racial proxy measures” (safety, academic, and neighborhood characteristics), the results suggest that the racial composition of schools (what the authors call a “pure race” hypothesis) directly impacts White parents’ school selection (p. 111). In this study of hypothetical choices, White parents tended to avoid schools with Black student majorities.

The question of how school demographics function as proxy representatives for school quality measures is worthy of future research beyond hypotheticals, and will be more easily accomplished now that school characteristics disseminated through district websites and “school report cards” are more widely available via the Internet and local newspapers. How do parents sort through this information? Are some elements distorted between the district’s transmission and the parents’ reception? To the degree that these dissemination efforts are—or are not—keyed to various parent characteristics, such as education level and native language, the issues of equity and access in school choice and parent information grow more prominent and pressing.

The How Question

As noted earlier, school choice models assume that parents have access to adequate and accurate information on which to base their school selection decisions. This assumption is complicated by several factors, including variations among types of information districts collect and disseminate publicly; the variety of dissemination strategies districts utilize; the ways in which dissemination strategies influence the sources parents utilize, which may vary by social class and education backgrounds of parents; and the relative trust and value parents associate with various types and sources of information (Hamilton & Guin, 2005).

What do we know? The most widely cited research, as stated above, involved telephone surveys conducted with 400 parents in each of four districts, two of which included magnet schools or thematically focused alternative schools in New York City and Montclair, New Jersey (see Schneider et al., 2000). Parents’ sources of information were clustered into three broad categories: 1) social-based (e.g., friends, parents of other children in the same school); 2) school-based (e.g., teachers, staff, newsletters); and 3) formal (e.g., media, community centers, politicians).

Findings indicated that information sources varied by parents’ income and education levels. Higher-income parents and those with higher levels of education reported greater reliance on larger social networks; these informal networks created links to information-connected individuals, including professionals within the education field. Lower-income parents and parents with lower levels of education tended to have smaller social networks; these networks were far less likely to include the types of resources available to higher-income parents. Lower-income parents reported greater reliance on formal sources of information, including individual schools, newspapers, and television.

Does race matter? The researchers noted that the high degree of overlap between class and race underscored how race differentiated patterns of parents’ information sources: Black and Latinx parents were far more likely to use school-based and formal sources of information, and far less likely to find contacts with friends and other school parents useful. Schneider and his colleagues (2000) noted that:

highly educated individuals are surrounded by people with more reliable information about the schools. In this milieu, highly educated parents have access to an efficient pathway to information: in their daily contact with friends, neighbors, and other parents, they can gather reliable information about the schools relatively cheaply from the other highly educated people they meet. In contrast, less-educated individuals are tied to educational discussants with lower levels of education and with less reliable information. Given that this pathway to information does not produce reliable information, less-educated parents search for information more widely. (p. 115)

The survey findings and case studies of magnet school parents in St. Louis and Cincinnati indicated that information collection patterns ranged from predictable and stable sources to a more serendipitous or unguided search (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). Consistent with the studies noted above, more parents utilized social networks than any other source, including formal, school-linked outlets such as school newsletters and informational meetings, or the media (ranked exceptionally low). Interestingly, after social networks, parents rated “visits to the school” and “their fifth-grade child” highly. Perhaps policymakers underestimate the need for families to see firsthand the quality and condition of school facilities available and should focus efforts on ensuring access to these sites for families who are lower-income and may require district-provided transportation for school visits.

To be sure, this study clearly indicates vast differences between lower-income and higher-income families on this measure; twice as many upper-income magnet parents reported that they used visits to the school as a source of information, and a significantly higher rate reported the use of “talks with teachers” (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). This underscores the word-of-mouth channel as distinguishable from more deliberate district- and magnet school-level dissemination activities, including mailings, meetings, and media.

Other research reflects similar findings. Although lower-income families utilize friendship networks in the process of school choice, they do so less frequently and at lower rates (Schneider, Teske, Roch, & Marschall, 1997). One study of parent information collection patterns among low-income families (defined here as a household income up to \$50,000) focused on three mature choice districts that included charter schools, intradistrict choice programs, and voucher programs. This study found that parents utilized several types of information, but tended to trust and value information derived from social networks—however large or small—more than official or formal reports from schools and district officials (Teske et al., 2007).

These differences in the size and characteristics of social networks translate into information deficits for lower-income parents regarding the range and types of choice options available to them (Bell, 2005). As multiple studies have suggested, the nature and function of parents’ primary social networks are directly related to social class (Coleman, 1987; Lareau, 1989; Useem, 1991). That is, the development and utilization of parents’ social networks are linked to employment status, occupation, neighborhood stability and isolation, and membership in faith- and community-based organizations (Cochran & Brassard, 1979; Cochran, 1990; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

Simply stated, who you know and where you live matters in terms of the size and substance of your social network. Ultimately, these networks provide the primary channel for collecting information about school options for children. These findings reflect a consistent pattern of information stratification specifically linked to the size and character of parents’ social networks (Wilson, 1987; Glenn, McLaughlin, & Salganik, 1993; Witte et al., 1993). Accessible, efficient information channels provide some parents—those with higher-income and education levels—with broader access to larger social and professional networks of knowledge (Schneider et al., 2000).

Summary: How Social Contexts Matter

There are multiple reasons why contexts matter for magnet school programs. First, the policy context determines widely differing tools, goals, and guidelines, depending upon whether districts operate magnet schools under a court order versus a voluntary desegregation plan. In the past decade, legal rulings (e.g., *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 2007) have negated race-based admissions policies, even those once considered “narrowly tailored” to achieve “compelling state interests” of racial diversity (Welner & Spindler, 2009, p. 58).

But the focus of this chapter rests with the central thesis that *social context matters* in shaping and reaching the goals of racially and socioeconomically diverse magnet schools. In other words, location, location, location. Whether the address is in a predominantly White or predominantly Black

neighborhood, research suggests that cultural familiarity and racial consistency count in the choices parents make (Henig, 1996; Glazerman, 1997; Saporito & Lareau, 1999; Weiher & Tedin, 2002; Bell, 2007; Roda & Wells, 2013; Billingham & Hunt, 2016). Social context also matters in the degree to which White parents perceive the school to be “tipping” toward 40 percent or greater minority student population. As Rossell and Crain (1973) noted early in the magnet school and desegregation movement, this threshold could produce white flight from the school, exacerbating the intent of magnet schools as a voluntary choice mechanism for racial diversity. The decade-old legal landscape enveloping magnet schools makes this issue even more pressing for magnet school leaders, policymakers, and parents.

The power of social contexts that shape magnet school choices for parents raises questions for magnet school leaders, researchers, and policymakers. Given how and why parents choose, what principles and priorities should guide decisions regarding magnet school location and thematic focus?

A key takeaway from the school *choosing* research literature, and more specifically related to magnet school policy implementation, involves *access*. This element includes transportation to choice schools located outside of a student’s attendance zone. Access issues focus on the geographical location of choice programs within a district, and the consideration of a plan that distributes choice schools evenly across zones of a district. Transportation is a heavy burden for almost all parents, given resource constraints and work demands.

A second guiding principle associated with school choice implementation is *awareness*, anchored to the goal of *informed* choice. Social disadvantage creates barriers for families that translate into a lack of understanding and awareness of choice programs. Information that is disseminated where lower-income families live and work (e.g., public housing, community health centers and hospitals, fast food restaurants, neighborhood grocery stores, gas stations) provides a new channel of information. Despite districts’ efforts to disseminate information through mailings, information fairs, radio, television and print media, most families who are aware of choice options report that work and faith-based social networks provided the key information (see the checkpoints later in this chapter).

Moving forward, what research questions should guide scholarly evaluations related to practices, policies, and outcomes of magnet schools, including the racial and socioeconomic diversity (or lack thereof) in these public choice schools? The next section considers the extant research on design practices and program components against the backdrop of the social context of choosing schools. This work contemplates the interplay of choice patterns and priorities, and the plans and policies related to the racial integration goals of magnet schools.

Magnet School Designs and Structures: What Impact?

The extant research on magnet school success—in terms of integrative efficiency—underscores the importance of magnet school types, location, and programs in an effort to avoid racially and socially isolated schools scattered across a school district (Steel & Eaton, 1996; Goldring, 2009; Smrekar & Honey, 2015). In short, the most successful magnet programs in terms of high academic quality and robust diversity align demand structures (e.g., type of desegregation plan; scope of the program; neighborhood assignment option) with design components. Specifically, we know the following:

- Typically, districts operating magnets within a mandatory desegregation plan oversee dedicated magnet schools in which all students participate in the specialized curriculum or instructional model (magnet focus).
- Program Within School (PWS) models in which only a portion of students participate in the magnet program courses are more typically implemented in high schools than elementary or middle schools, and enroll far fewer students nationally than do dedicated magnet schools.
- The most successful dedicated magnet models in terms of desegregation impact do not include a neighborhood attendance zone (known as “whole school attendance zone” magnets).

- A dedicated magnet school in a minority neighborhood is more attractive to Whites than a PWS model (with a neighborhood school population assigned to the school).
- PWS models are more successful in meeting diversity goals if located in a predominantly White neighborhood.
- A whole school attendance zone model includes neighborhood students assigned to the dedicated magnet school; these models are more successful in terms of desegregation in predominantly White neighborhoods than in predominantly Black neighborhoods (Steel & Eaton, 1996; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999; Rossell, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Studies indicate that racially diverse and high-performing magnet school programs link these structural design components to an array of external and outward-facing strategies. In this way, they address issues of access and ensure that all families are aware of school options, application procedures, and program characteristics, and are working to achieve the diversity aims of magnet school policy.

Community Engagement

A well-known and repeated best practice from magnet school development literature involves linking public engagement and parent interests with local capacity, public interest, and contextual assets (U.S. Department of Education, 2008; Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity, 2013). This literature on planning and developing robust magnet programs is replete with the need to start early with broad public engagement, informative and responsive communication, and “connective tissue”—a corresponding asset map detailing the resources and potential interest of community/regional partners from higher education, science, engineering and aerospace, health/medical, finance, manufacturing, nonprofit, and governmental sectors. In sum, the magnet school development literature confirms the positive impact of the following community engagement strategies.

Checkpoints

- ✓ District details how the selected magnet theme(s) will lead to furthering desegregation in the district and, more specifically, in the new magnet high school program (rationale).
- ✓ District identifies the explicit assumptions regarding why this magnet structure (PWS) will lead to student diversity in the targeted high school (that mirrors the racial composition of the district as a whole, plus/minus percentage points).
- ✓ District demonstrates how the public engagement process made clear that the *magnet theme and structure* (PWS with attendance zone) reflect widely shared interests and preferences among parents across racial groups and will further desegregation.
- ✓ District explains how the new magnet theme and structure will attract new students to the district and how student recruitment plans support diversity goals.
- ✓ District details how programs and policies at successful (in terms of desegregation goals and academic quality/authenticity) magnet schools inform magnet program design and diversity goals.
- ✓ District identifies how new (or current) magnet pathways inform the design of the new magnet plan.

Information Dissemination and Marketing

The magnet program design and implementation literatures underscore the “best practices” in this domain (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, 2008) and offer a clear and compelling rationale for

differentiating public engagement and information dissemination strategies across districts, communities, and neighborhood:

Many consider parent access to information the most critical variable in achieving diversity in and across magnet schools. The more aware parents are of options, the more likely they are to pursue them. Thus race-neutral recruitment targeted to those community sectors from which a magnet wants to draw students is absolutely key. (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, p. 15)

In addition to community-wide and targeted festivals and fairs, the reports from the U.S. Department of Education on successful magnet school practices highlight an array of community outreach and information dissemination portals:

- Organizations: public libraries, community health centers, childcare centers, grocery stores, places of worship such as churches and mosques, women's groups, mother's groups, Chamber of Commerce, Visitor's Bureau, realtors' association, education foundations.
- Media: district and community organizations' websites, social media (e.g., Facebook; Twitter), newspapers—citywide and ethnic neighborhood-specific, radio, television, text messages.
- District: face-to-face meetings, public forums, brochures, parent info sessions at collaborating workplaces and major city employers, open house events.

Checkpoints

- ✓ District identifies a clear, comprehensive, and diverse array of dissemination targets and marketing strategies tied to the new magnet PWS that recognize differential needs, knowledge, and access to information across the Huntsville community.
- ✓ District sufficiently describes how the marketing plan will “rebrand” the high school magnet PWS to attract a diverse student population and further desegregation.
- ✓ Dissemination plan articulated by the district includes a rationale and demonstrated capacity (organizational) to deliver each strategy.
- ✓ District includes a budget and financial plan to support ongoing information dissemination, rebranding, and marketing strategies.

Partnership Agreements

Cultivating partners is only the first step in developing a robust, authentic magnet school program; sustaining these relationships between districts and external organizations requires planning for specified roles and responsibilities at the district level to maintain a continuous and responsive flow of information, resources, cooperation, and trust. The magnet school design and implementation best practices literature (U.S. Department of Education, 2008; Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity, 2013) underscores the need to develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with each community partner—colleges and universities, museums, libraries, businesses, nonprofits, and local governmental agencies. The MOU provides documentation that specifies roles, reciprocity agreements, material/monetary/nonmonetary contributions, communication schedules, facility agreements, and human resource commitments.

Checkpoints

- ✓ District identifies partnership needs and potential community collaborators to further the authenticity and sustainability of the magnet program(s).

- ✓ District engages partners and secures cooperation for long-term material and in-kind support and collaboration, culminating in a clearly detailed MOU.
- ✓ District includes an ongoing plan of actionable steps to ensure cross-sector collaboration with multiple community partners.

Federal Role: MSAP and the Context of Choice

As noted earlier in this chapter, Congress established the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) in 1984 to enable school districts to launch new magnet programs in an effort to further desegregation aims. But the legal, fiscal, and policy landscapes have shifted dramatically over the past three decades, making the 1980s the peak period of interest and investment in magnet schools as a tool for desegregation (Frankenberg & Le, 2008). Over the past several years, funding levels for MSAP have been cut dramatically by the legislative committees in the Republican-controlled US House of Representatives but have been restored largely by the budget and appropriations committees in the US Senate. In fiscal year 2017–2018, the MSAP awarded 32 grants to school districts across 16 states for a total of \$91.7 million.

An array of policy priorities and legislative purposes attached to MSAP over a decade ago during the Bush Administration has altered the founding principles of the program to further “the elimination, reduction, or prevention of minority group isolation” (Code of Federal Regulations, 2016). Today, MSAP grantee obligations encompass broad federal mandates designed to support innovative classroom programs and teacher practices, promote systemic reform, and enable all students to meet challenging academic standards.

The extant research on magnet school choosing patterns suggests that this array of MSAP aims could be strengthened by mandating or incentivizing districts that institute universal choice mechanisms. Under an option-demand magnet program, only the parents with the most motivation and ability—those fleeing under-achieving schools equipped with knowledge of alternative programs—search broadly and utilize an array of school- and personal-based networks. A universal choice model, under which all parents must choose a school at the entry grade level (i.e., kindergarten; 5th or 6th grade for middle schools; 9th grade for high schools), and choices are all-inclusive (e.g., traditional public schools, charter, magnet, and other open enrollment or alternative schools), eliminates the two-step process associated with the option-demand model in which parents first must choose to choose, and then select a particular school. Cambridge (MA) school district was an early adopter of this choice arrangement (Armor & Peiser, 1998). The universal choice model imposes a “must choose” obligation on families to select a school—whether magnet, charter, or neighborhood.

The power to inform parents would theoretically expand under a universal choice model because information regarding magnet schools would need to appear side-by-side in all district information dissemination plans (rather than a special announcement, application, or brochure that could be ignored or discarded). The general problem of awareness is perhaps more salient than the more particularized problem of parent search modes. Many parents simply do not know what “magnet” or “charter” means, and as a consequence, choose *not* to choose. In case studies of lower-income families with children enrolled in inner-city schools in Nashville, for example, the overwhelming majority of parents—almost all of whom were familiar with the term “magnet school”—were nonetheless completely unfamiliar with application procedures or admissions policies, and almost all parents in the study thought that district magnet schools were choice schools exclusive to academically gifted students (Smrekar, 2009).

This lack of parents’ awareness or understanding of magnet schools may confound policymakers interested in large and diverse applicant pools. The universal choice approach can produce a positive trickle-down impact on the type, quality, and availability of information. It may also broaden the

pool of applicants among both White and minority families in districts like Charlotte now struggling to produce racial balance in magnet schools under an option demand model (Mickelson, Southworth, & Smith, 2009). Evidence from the health care sector documents the productive elements that inform and expand the “culture of choice” under a must-choose model (Ball, 1993). MSAP provides an appropriate and potentially powerful tool to leverage monetary support for districts that pursue universal choice arrangements designed to produce diverse student enrollments.

This chapter highlights the design and intent of magnet schools as distinctive among the array of choice options offered in a portfolio of district offerings. These research findings suggest that merging urban demography, demand-driven policy components, and parent choice patterns provides a new pivot point for attaining educational equity, racial diversity, and strong student performance in magnet schools.

References

- Armor, D., & Peiser, B. (1998). Inter-district choice in Massachusetts. In P. Peterson & B. Hassel (Eds.), *Learning from school choice* (pp.157–187). Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Ball, S. (1993). Education markets, choice, and social class: The market as a class strategy in the UK and the USA. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 14(1), 3–19.
- Beal, H.K., & Hendry, P.M. (2012). The ironies of school choice: Empowering parents and reconceptualizing public education. *American Journal of Education*, 118, 521–550.
- Bell, C. (2005). *All choices created equal? How good parents select “failing” schools* (Working Paper). New York, NY: National Center for the Study of Privatization.
- Bell, C. (2007). Space and place: Urban parents’ geographical preferences for schools. *The Urban Review*, 39(4), 375–404.
- Bell, C. (2009). All choices created equal? The role of choice sets in the selection of schools. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 84(2), 191–208.
- Billingham, C., & Hunt, M. (2016). School racial composition and parental choice: No evidence on the preferences of white parents in the United States. *Sociology of Education*, 89(2), 99–117.
- Carnegie Foundation. (1992). *School choice*. Menlo Park, CA: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Chubb, J., & Moe, T. (1990). *Politics, markets, and America’s schools*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Cochran, M. (1990). *Extending families: The social networks of parents and their children*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Cochran, M., & Brassard, J. (1979). Child development and personal social networks. *Child Development*, 50, 601–616.
- Code of Federal Regulations (2016). Magnet Schools Assistance Program, Title 34 § 280, 1. Washington, D.C.: Government Publishing Office. Retrieved from <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CFR-2016-title34-vol1/xml/CFR-2016-title34-vol1-part280.xml>
- Coleman, J. (1987). Families and schools. *Educational Researcher*, 16(6), 32–38.
- Coons, J., & Sugarman, S. (1978). *Education by choice: The case for family control*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people’s children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York, NY: New Press.
- Elster, J. (1986). *Rational choice*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Frankenberg, E., & Le, C.Q. (2008). The post-Parents Involved challenge: Confronting extralegal obstacles to integration. *Ohio State Law Journal*, 69(5), 1015–1072.
- Gavarkavich, D., Hawn Nelson, A., Marcus, A., & Alvarado, L. (2016). *Magnet school identification by state*. Charlotte, NC: UNC Charlotte Urban Institute.
- Glazerman, S. (1997). *A conditional logit model of elementary school choice: What do parents value?* Chicago, IL: Harris School of Public Policy.
- Glenn, C., McLaughlin, K., & Salganik, L. (1993). *Parent information for school choice*. Boston, MA: Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children’s Learning.
- Goldring, E.B. (2009). Perspectives on magnet schools. In M. Berends, M.G. Springer, D. Ballou & H.J. Walberg (Eds.), *Handbook of research on school choice* (pp. 361–378). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Greene, J., Howell, W., & Peterson, P. (1998). Lessons from the Cleveland scholarship program. In P. Peterson & B. Hassel (Eds.), *Learning from school choice* (pp. 357–392). Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.

- Grooms, A., & Williams, S. (2015). The reversed role of magnets in St. Louis: Implications for black student outcomes. *Urban Education, 50*(4), 454–473.
- Hamilton, L., & Guin, K. (2005). Understanding how families choose schools. In J. Betts and T. Loveless (Eds.), *Getting choice right* (pp. 40–60). Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Heise, M., Colburn, K., & Lamberti, J. (1995). Private vouchers in Indianapolis: The golden rule program. In T. Moe (Ed.), *Private vouchers* (pp. 100–119). Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press.
- Henig, J. (1990). Choice in public schools: An analysis of transfer requests among magnet schools. *Social Science Quarterly, 71*(1), 69–82.
- Henig, J. (1996). The local dynamics of choice: Ethnic preferences and institutional responses. In B. Fuller, R. Elmore, & G. Orfield (Eds.), *Who chooses? Who loses?* (pp. 95–117). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity. (2013). *Integrated magnet schools: Outcomes and best practices*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Law School.
- Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. (1998). *The black-white achievement gap*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Lareau, A. (1989). *Home advantage*. New York: Falmer Press.
- Martinez, V., Godwin, R., & Kemerer, F. (1996). Public school choice in San Antonio: Who chooses and with what effects. In B. Fuller, R. Elmore, & G. Orfield (Eds.), *Who chooses? Who loses?* (pp. 50–69). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Martinez, V., Thomas, K., & Kemerer, F. (1994). Who chooses and why: A look at five school choice plans. *Phi Delta Kappan, 75*(9), 678–681.
- Mickelson, R., Southworth, S., & Smith, S. (2009). Resegregation, achievement, and the chimera of choice in post-unitary Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools. In C. Smrekar & E. Goldring (Eds.), *From the courtroom to the classroom: The shifting landscape of school desegregation* (pp. 129–156). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2017). *Number and enrollment of public elementary and secondary schools*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_216.20.asp
- Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* 127 S. Ct. 2738 (2007).
- Polikoff, M., & Hardaway, T. (2017, March). *Don't forget magnet schools when thinking about school choice*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/dont-forget-magnet-schools-when-thinking-about-school-choice/>
- Roda, A., & Wells, A.S. (2013). School choice and racial segregation: Where white parents' good intentions, anxiety, and privilege collide. *American Journal of Education, 119*, 261–293.
- Rossell, C. (1990). *The carrot or the stick for school desegregation policy: Magnet schools or forced busing*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Rossell, C. (2003). The desegregation efficiency of magnet schools. *Urban Affairs Review, 38*(5), 697–725.
- Rossell, C., & Crain, R.L. (1973). *The political and social determinants of school desegregation policy* (Unpublished Paper). College Park, MD and Washington, D.C.: University of Maryland and Rand Corporation. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED102263.pdf>
- Saporito, S. (2003). Private choices, public consequences: Magnet school choice and segregation by race and poverty. *Social Problems, 50*(2), 181–203.
- Saporito, S., & Lareau, A. (1999). School selection as a process: The multiple dimensions of race in framing educational choice. *Social Problems, 46*(3), 418–439.
- Schneider, M., & Buckley, J. (2002). What do parents want from schools? Evidence from the Internet. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 24*(2), 133–144.
- Schneider, M., Teske, P., & Marschall, M. (2000). *Choosing schools*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Schneider, M., Teske, P., Roch, C., & Marschall, M. (1997). Networks to nowhere: Segregation and stratification in networks of information about schools. *American Journal of Political Science, 41*(4), 1201–1223.
- Smith, K., & Meier, K. (1995). *The case against school choice: Politics, markets, and fools*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Smrekar, C. (2009). Beyond the tipping point in magnet school enrollment: Issues of racial diversity after unitary status. *Peabody Journal of Education, 84*, 1–18.
- Smrekar, C., & Goldring, E. (1999). *School choice in urban America: Magnet schools and the pursuit of equity*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Smrekar, C., & Goldring, E. (2009). Unitary status, neighborhood schools, and resegregation. In C. Smrekar & E. Goldring (Eds.), *From the courtroom to the classroom: The shifting landscape of school desegregation* (Introduction). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Smrekar, C., & Honey, N. (2015). The desegregation aims and demographic contexts of magnet schools: How parents choose and why siting policies matter. *Peabody Journal of Education, 90*, 128–155.

- Stanton-Salazar, R., & Dornbusch, S. (1995). Social capital and the reproduction of inequality: Information networks among Mexican-origin high school students. *Sociology of Education*, 68, 116–135.
- Steel, L., & Eaton, M. (1996). *Reducing, eliminating, and preventing minority isolation in American schools: The impact of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program*. Washington, DC: Department of Education
- Stein, M.L. (2015). Public school choice and racial sorting: An examination of charter schools in Indianapolis. *American Journal of Education*, 121, 597–627.
- Teske, P., Fitzpatrick, J., & Kaplan, G. (2007). *Open doors: How low-income parents search for the right school*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2004). *Creating successful magnet schools programs*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Innovation and Improvement.
- U.S. Department of Education (2008). *Creating and sustaining successful K–8 magnet schools*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Innovation and Improvement.
- Useem, E. (1991). Student selection into course sequences in mathematics: The impact of parent involvement and school policies. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 1(3), 231–250.
- Weihner, G., & Tedin, K. (2002). Does choice lead to racially distinctive schools? Charter schools and household preferences. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 21(1), 79–92.
- Welner, K., & Spindler, E. (2009). The post-PICS picture: Examining school districts' options for mitigating racial segregation. In C. Smrekar & E. Goldring (Eds.), *From the courtroom to the classroom: The shifting landscape of school desegregation* (pp. 49–70). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Wilson, W.J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Witte, J., Bailey, A., & Thorn, C. (1993). *Third year report: The Milwaukee parental choice program*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.