



Advancing Integration and Equity Through Magnet Schools

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Abstract

This brief describes the components found in magnet schools that are both racially diverse and educationally effective. It also outlines four evidence-based policy recommendations that can inform federal, state, and local efforts to help design, implement, and sustain effective magnet schools that foster integrated learning and positive student outcomes. These include:

1. Reinstating federal guidance to states and localities about evidence-based approaches to support school diversity.
2. Expanding federal investments in magnet schools and using them to leverage school diversity and student success.
3. Expanding strategic state, regional, and local investments in magnet schools in ways that support school diversity.
4. Supporting school-level strategies that promote both integration and student success.

This brief is based upon and updates an earlier report, which can be found online at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/advancing-integration-equity-magnet-schools-report>.

Introduction

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

The integrative mission at the heart of the original magnet school concept differentiates magnet schools from other forms of public school choice. However, in the face of legal challenges and uncertainty about the legality of race-based assignments following the Supreme Court's *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* decision, many school districts have retreated from their proactive diversity efforts. For example, Buffalo, NY; Charlotte, NC; and San Francisco, CA, retreated from their race-conscious integration goals and experienced growing school segregation as a result.

These legal and political influences need not undermine the original desegregative mission of magnet schools. Evidence shows that magnet school design and implementation strategies can influence their success. This brief describes the components found in magnet schools that are both racially diverse and educationally effective. It then outlines policy recommendations to create and foster integrated learning and positive student outcomes.

Why Integration Matters

Considerable evidence shows that students who attend racially segregated, high-poverty schools have lower achievement and less successful life outcomes than similar students in integrated settings. Several studies have found strong relationships between racial segregation and racial achievement gaps; indeed, the racial composition of a school has educational impacts for students even after accounting for socioeconomic status, often due to resource inequities characterizing racially isolated schools.¹

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

- higher achievement in math, science, language, and reading;
- school climates supportive of learning and studying;
- increased likelihood of graduating from high school and entering and graduating from college;
- higher income and educational attainment;
- increased access to highly qualified teachers and leaders who are less likely to transfer to other schools;
- enhanced classroom discussion; and
- more advanced social and historical thinking.²

The Impact of Legal and Political Shifts

Although the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision requiring school desegregation was met by massive resistance in much of the South, starting in the 1960s, the federal government undertook a number of efforts to enhance school integration. From 1964 until the early 1980s, court orders and executive actions strengthened enforcement and offered technical assistance to districts that were desegregating, while federal legislation provided desegregation assistance in the form of funding for transportation, magnet schools, and training for school staff. Racial achievement gaps declined substantially during the 1970s and early 1980s, showing that desegregation, in combination with school funding reforms also underway at that time, could promote improved educational outcomes. Most of these policies were halted during the 1980s, but if the pace of progress had continued, the Black–white achievement gap could have been fully closed by the beginning of the 21st century.³

Segregation Today

Despite the evidence of the harm of segregated schools, research shows that schools are more segregated today than they were 30 years ago. One study found that during the quarter century since the high point of integration in 1988, the share of intensely segregated non-white schools more than tripled, increasing from 6% to 19% of all public schools.⁴

Further, a 2016 study found that a growing percentage of k-12 public schools in the nation are hypersegregated, serving populations that are made up of more than 90% students of color and students from low-income families, typically Black and Latino/a.⁵ This is significant, as another study reviewing 8 years of data from all U.S. public school districts found that racial segregation appears to undermine achievement in part because it concentrates minoritized students in high-poverty schools, which are, on average, less effective than lower-poverty schools.⁶

Even when states seek to equalize disparities by providing more funding to districts serving concentrations of students in poverty, it has been difficult to counteract the effects of long-standing patterns of segregation and resource inequities between districts to completely mitigate the disparities. This is why a primary goal of desegregation is not just about changing the racial composition of schools, but also about expanding access to quality resources.

Components of Effective Magnet Schools

Research shows that diverse magnet schools that support positive social and academic outcomes share common features. These components can be categorized as **“first door” components**, which help to bring students from different backgrounds to magnet schools, and **“second door” components**, which help to foster inclusive environments and promote shared success for students of color within diverse magnet schools.

In addition, whole school magnets in which all students in the school participate can be more diverse than in-school magnet programs, which can sometimes create separate tracks and programs for different student populations within the school. Although some in-school magnet programs strive to be diverse, data show that tracking can occur in these programs, particularly when in-school-magnet programs are designed to recruit white students, while non-magnet students in the school are served in different programs.

First Door Components

Integration embedded into school design, mission, structure, focus, and goals:

Magnet schools with integrative missions incorporated into their school design, structure, and goals have been found to be more diverse than magnet schools that fail to intentionally incorporate diversity into school design, structure, and goals.

Family outreach and engagement: Magnet schools cannot foster diversity unless diverse families are aware of their existence and are able to gain access through streamlined application processes, including support in completing the application and readily available transportation. Research finds that conducting outreach and disseminating information to a wide range of families is a critical component of recruiting diverse students. One study found that schools with outreach to prospective students were more likely to have experienced increasing integration over the past decade, while one quarter of those without special outreach were substantially segregated schools.⁷ Such outreach is most effective when conducted through multiple platforms, such as social media, print materials, television, and radio.

Inclusive enrollment practices: Evidence demonstrates that magnet schools with inclusive enrollment and student assignment practices, like lotteries, interviews, and essays, promote desegregation and equity more effectively than those with competitive enrollment practices based on grades or test scores, which have been associated with reduced integration.⁸ And weighted lotteries, such as those that consider neighborhood racial composition, can be employed to attract diverse students. While the federally funded Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) includes a preference for recipients to use inclusive enrollment approaches, many magnet schools do not implement inclusive practices, and there are not always local incentives for them to do so.

Provision of transportation: Without free and accessible transportation, magnet schools may be realistic only for families with the resources and flexibility to provide their children with transportation. Provision of transportation is particularly important for interdistrict magnet schools that may draw students from neighboring districts to attend schools. One study found that magnet schools that provided free transportation were less likely to be racially isolated than those that did not.⁹ Another found that, for parents of color, the availability of transportation was an important

consideration in choosing a magnet school.¹⁰ This is often the case due to inaccessible or unreliable public transportation, even though many magnet schools are in urban centers.

Second Door Components

Curriculum: Innovative school curricula, particularly those in which the magnet school theme is embedded and to which all students have access, attract diverse students and families to magnet schools. A curriculum that incorporates cultural diversity and is responsive to the unique cultural experiences and contexts that students may bring to the school is important to promote inclusiveness in magnet schools.

Competent, diverse, and stable teaching staff: In addition to the evidence that a well-prepared, stable teaching force boosts student achievement, especially for those historically furthest from opportunity, there is strong, growing evidence of the benefits of diverse educators, including improved student academic performance and attainment for all students. Research shows that staff from a variety of backgrounds can support connections with students who respond to different experiences and approaches to learning. Diverse staff can communicate with families of different backgrounds, offer leadership reflecting the importance of positive cross-racial relationships, and serve as role models for students. And for Black students, especially, evidence shows that having Black teachers can positively impact long-term educational achievement and outcomes.¹¹

Professional development opportunities: Professional development for magnet school educators on embedding the magnet school theme into curriculum and instruction, teaching in diverse classrooms, and fostering culturally responsive learning environments helps create conditions of inclusiveness. Such training should be ongoing so that educators continue to improve and new additions to the faculty gain the benefit of these learning experiences.

Culturally responsive learning environments: Research shows that students learn by building upon their prior knowledge, including their cultural and community contexts, and making connections between those contexts and what they are learning. In addition, students' ability to learn also depends on the presence of strong, positive relationships between and among teachers and students in identity-safe learning environments that eliminate the stereotype threats that undermine achievement for many students. Educators in diverse magnet schools can help address bias through

participating in ongoing training and working to foster strong, genuine, and trusting relationships with students. When educators receive training on how to deliver culturally responsive instruction, they are better prepared to connect to students' lived experiences and acknowledge students' cultural assets.

Nondiscriminatory and restorative discipline practices: Discriminatory discipline practices, like dress codes that prohibit natural hairstyles or zero-tolerance policies that impose suspensions or expulsions (often for minor offenses), have been found to impact students of color disproportionately, resulting in the loss of valuable instruction time and undermining their educational outcomes. Exclusionary discipline practices applied in a discriminatory manner emerged during the height of school segregation and have been used to push students of color out of the classroom and, often, into the juvenile justice system. Ensuring that magnet schools develop educative and restorative discipline practices that keep students in school by creating a strong community, teaching conflict resolution strategies, and supporting students to solve challenges can help magnet schools maintain diversity and student success within a healthy environment.

Policy Strategies to Support Diverse and Effective Magnet Schools

Magnet schools need support to effectively implement the evidence-based first and second door components. States and districts can provide magnet schools with resources—such as funding for magnet school resource teachers, transportation, technical assistance, and professional development—to create and sustain high-quality and diverse schools. In addition, policies at the federal, state, and school levels can help foster high-quality, diverse magnet schools.

At the federal level:

- 1. Reinstate federal guidance to states and localities about how to support school diversity.**
 - **Update and reissue the joint diversity guidance previously issued by the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice.** The Obama administration's guidance issued by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice outlining evidence-based approaches for advancing voluntary school integration efforts was rescinded by the Trump administration. The guidance provided a useful interpretation of the *Parents Involved in Community Schools*

v. Seattle School District No. 1 ruling, including additional clarity regarding the extent that race can be used in policies and the kinds of voluntary programs that can be implemented. The guidance noted that districts should first consider race-neutral approaches that do not rely on individual student race and then consider generalized race-based approaches, such as neighborhood demographics. The guidance also provided recommendations for fostering diversity consistent with the law, including how to make strategic decisions about where a school is located and how to design diverse magnet schools.

To ensure that states and districts have access to evidence-based best practices, the guidance should be updated before it is reissued to include current research on magnet schools and other school integration efforts. For example, since research underscores the importance of transportation to reduce racial isolation, the guidance can outline ways that states and districts can access funds to support within- and across-district transportation. Following the recent removal of provisions barring use of federal funds for transportation to support school integration, transportation funds are now available to programs that are not receiving MSAP funding, and MSAP grantees can be provided with increased flexibility in using their funds for this purpose.¹²

- **Update the guidance to outline the support that the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights provides to states and districts.** Following passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the federal government provided technical assistance to states and districts to implement desegregation programs and ensure compliance with the law. This technical assistance can include outreach activities, such as on-site consultations, conference participation, training classes, workshops, and community meetings. In addition, the Department of Education can provide technical assistance to help districts design and evaluate programs, craft enrollment strategies, and develop strategies to support families as they apply for enrollment.

2. **Expand federal investments in magnet schools and use them to leverage school diversity and student success.**

- **Increase funding for the Magnet Schools Assistance Program, which has been significantly under-resourced and unable to respond to demand.**

In 2023, the program was funded at \$139 million, a small \$15 million increase from 2022. This amount represents a decline in real dollar terms since 1984 and provides a very modest level of support given that there are thousands of magnet schools in the country. Raising the funding level to at least \$500 million would allow an investment in magnet schools that is comparable to the federal investment in charter schools.

- **Expand the MSAP to enable more districts to receive funds.** Currently, districts or consortia of districts that are eligible for MSAP funds are those that are either under a final court desegregation order or are implementing a voluntary or mandatory desegregation plan approved by the Secretary of Education as adequate under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. To help reach a greater number of districts interested in implementing or sustaining diverse magnet schools, eligibility for MSAP funds could be expanded to include districts that are not under court desegregation orders or desegregation plans approved under Title VI. This is particularly important as many federal and state courts have been lifting school desegregation orders, leaving districts that want to pursue integration with fewer resources to do so.

- **Allow states to apply for the MSAP or other school diversity funding to encourage more cooperative state and local school integration work.**

Such a program could support interdistrict magnet school programs, like those in and around Boston, MA, and Hartford, CT, or provide funding for strategies like family outreach and engagement. Funds could also support components like transportation and recruitment, training, and ongoing professional development of educators to teach in diverse magnet schools.

- **Incorporate evidence-based components within funding priorities.** For example, commitment to implementing the evidence-based components found in diverse magnet programs—such as parental outreach, nonselective admissions, and whole school approaches—could become part of applicant eligibility requirements or a required element of applicant’s plans. The MSAP could also add incentives to address school segregation’s evolving nature,

for example, by introducing priorities as competitive priorities for the grant. In 2022, the MSAP notice inviting applications (NIA) included a competitive priority for applicants that propose to use grant funds to establish, expand, or strengthen interdistrict and regional magnet programs. The NIA also included an invitational priority to encourage applicants to establish whole school magnet programs. In the future, this emphasis could be strengthened by making this a competitive priority. In addition, the Department of Education can provide ongoing technical assistance once funds are awarded to help districts and schools finalize and implement their plans.

At the state level:

3. Expand strategic state, regional, and local investments in magnet schools in ways that support school diversity.

- **Leverage federal funding provided under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Titles I and IV to support magnet schools and other school integration efforts.** The MSAP is funded under Title IV of ESSA and provides funding for districts that are under a court-ordered or federally approved desegregation plan. In addition, ESSA allows for 7% of Title I funding to be set aside to support evidence-based interventions for lower-performing schools serving high numbers of students from low-income families. Given the strong evidence on the effectiveness of diverse magnet schools in promoting positive outcomes for students, magnet schools should qualify as an evidence-based approach for school improvement funds, especially for racially and socioeconomically isolated schools. This source of federal funds enables states to implement programs to advance voluntary integration. For example, New York launched a Socioeconomic Integration Pilot Program using Title I funds to support districts in developing interventions to support school integration. Further, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2022 directed the U.S. Department of Education to prioritize the reservation for technical assistance and capacity building under Title IV-A to support state education agencies' and local education agencies' diversity efforts across and within school districts.¹³
- **Leverage federal and state funding to implement interdistrict or regional approaches to increase diversity across districts.** Changing demographics, coupled with the drawing of district boundaries along racial

lines, have contributed to some districts becoming racially homogenous, underscoring the importance of policies and strategies designed to bridge district boundaries. Interdistrict desegregation plans in Boston, MA, and Hartford, CT, represent a variety of strategies to reduce racial and socioeconomic isolation in distinctive regional contexts. To encourage and sustain regional cooperation, it is important to create incentives for students to cross district lines and for schools to admit them, such as financial incentives to help receiving schools cover the cost of student transfers. States can replicate the MSAP and/or fund-specific components like family outreach and transportation, as Connecticut and Nebraska did. States can also provide funding for magnet school evaluation and oversight to aid districts and schools in implementing, sustaining, and adjusting diversity goals. Research shows that without regular evaluation and recommitment to diversity, magnets can stray from their historic integration purpose. State and district leaders can also provide ongoing technical assistance to schools regarding strategies for evaluating and improving programs.

- **Ensure that magnet school programs are designed to center integration within the school design, mission, structure, focus, and goals.** This may include developing a statement of principles defining the state, district, and school commitment to diversity and outlining strategies to achieve it, including taking into consideration factors like student neighborhood or socioeconomic status in student assignment decisions and school location decisions. Districts can also reevaluate diversity goals and progress in meeting those goals on a consistent basis. In addition, state policymakers should modify state laws as needed to permit interdistrict transfers that enable students from surrounding districts to attend magnet schools.

At the district and school levels:

4. **Support school-level strategies that promote both integration and student success.**
 - **Conduct outreach to diverse families to increase awareness of magnet schools and the application process.** Sustained outreach through multiple means can support diverse families in learning about magnet schools. This is especially important to attract families to magnet schools that draw students from surrounding districts—families who may not know about a magnet

school and are unaware of their student’s eligibility to attend. And schools can be intentional about ensuring that diverse family voices are incorporated into activities and decision-making once students are enrolled.

- **Implement open and inclusive enrollment practices to encourage diverse families to enroll in magnet schools.** Districts can support magnet schools in implementing inclusive enrollment practices, such as lotteries, rather than practices that are designed to select students on a competitive basis, to ensure that schools can recruit and admit a more diverse student body. Further, states can restrict special funding to schools that are inclusive in their admissions.
- **Make strategic decisions about school siting and feeder patterns to optimize diversity and accessibility.** Considerations that affect school diversity—such as neighborhood demographics, location relative to other neighborhoods, and the availability of transportation—should be at the forefront of school siting and feeder decisions. Strategies can include placing a magnet school near the border of a city and suburban school system or near the border of an inner suburb with a non-white population and an outer-ring suburb with a predominantly white population. It is also important to consider current and changing demographics that may be impacted by gentrification. Research has found wide variation in the degree and nature of integration across magnet districts based both on districts’ existing demographics and how magnet school student assignment processes are designed.
- **Focus on “whole school” magnet programs.** States and districts can be intentional about supporting the creation of whole school magnet programs and making sure the magnet school theme is embedded within the curriculum throughout the entire school. To support this approach, teachers should be prepared to deliver instruction aligned with the school theme. Teachers should also be provided with the resources needed, including ongoing professional development opportunities, to support diverse learning environments and the mission of the school across all curricular programs. This support may include designating magnet resource teachers who can receive preparation and work with teachers and school leaders to embed the theme into the curriculum and foster inclusive classrooms, as well as inform new staff about the school’s theme and approach to learning.

- **Provide innovative and culturally responsive curriculum to all students.** Magnet school teachers can incorporate evidence-based strategies, such as including content about diverse cultures into curriculum and encouraging students to study multiple points of view, to help foster inclusiveness, student engagement, and achievement. For example, magnet schools serving Hmong students in the Minneapolis–St. Paul area incorporate Hmong culture and language in the curriculum of dual language immersion schools.
- **Implement nonexclusionary and restorative school discipline policies.** Magnet schools should implement approaches to school discipline found to foster inclusive environments, like restorative practices, social and emotional learning, and mental health services and supports. States and districts can also support schools in providing ongoing training on implicit bias and anti-racism to support educators in addressing bias and understanding how it may manifest in the school and classroom.

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

Conclusion

Given the profound consequences associated with segregated education and the re-entrenchment of segregation in too many of the nation's public schools, well-designed magnet schools that incorporate components outlined in this brief present a compelling evidence-based option for promoting school diversity and positive student outcomes. Magnet schools certainly cannot remedy school segregation on their own; they are only one component of necessary broader systemic and structural changes needed to mitigate contemporary forms of segregation. The work to achieve integration is long term, as the efforts to re-entrench racial segregation are persistent, but magnet schools provide a viable strategy for advancing school integration and improving the nation's schools.

Endnotes

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13. “Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants Technical Assistance and Capacity Building—The reservation for technical assistance (TA) and capacity building should be used to support state educational agencies (SEAs) and LEAs in carrying out authorized activities under this program identified by SEAs and LEAs, which may include support for fostering school diversity efforts across and within school districts. The Department is directed to prioritize its TA and capacity building support for SEAs and LEAs seeking to address such school diversity needs. In future Congressional Justifications, the Department shall continue to provide current and planned expenditures for this reservation and include a plan for how resources will be spent to provide TA and to build the capacity of SEAs and LEAs.” Explanatory Statement Division H—Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2022. (p. 123). https://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20220307/BILLS-117RCP35-JES-DIVISION-H_Part1.pdf. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023 again directed the Department to use Title IV-A funds to support school diversity efforts. Explanatory Statement Division H—Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2023. (p. 148). <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Division%20H%20-%20LHHS%20Statement%20FY23.pdf>.

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