

Magnet Schools

History, Description, and Effects

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Despite the rapid expansion of charter schools and their predominance in public policy debates, magnet schools continue to be the largest sector of choice schools in the United States (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Orfield, 2008; Goldring, 2009; Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2012), enrolling over 2.5 million students in the 2013-2014 academic year alone (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014) (see <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/pubschuniv.asp>). Initiated in the midst of the Civil Rights era as a response to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), magnet schools were to promote voluntary desegregation of schools by offering families school choices that would appeal to diverse racial populations (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2010; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Orfield, 2008; Goldring, 2009; Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2012; Smrekar, 2009a; Steel & Levine, 1994). As their name implies, magnet schools are public schools offering specialized curriculum or instructional programs that are intended to draw students across normal school boundaries.

The mission and reach of magnet schools has evolved in the nearly fifty years since they have been part of the educational landscape, as has the research base supporting them. In this chapter, we begin with a brief history and background of magnet schools, then a general introduction of magnet schools, followed by a description of the current status and demographics of their enrollment, based on the 2013–2014 Common Core of Data. After reviewing the literature on magnet schools, we share a meta-analysis study we recently completed to examine magnet school implementation and effects across 24 magnet schools in five districts. The chapter concludes with a summary of issues and challenges facing researchers in conducting magnet studies and identifies some of the research questions that are still to be explored and answered.

11.1 History and Background of Magnet Schools

In 1954, the Supreme Court ruling *Brown vs. Board of Education* declared racially segregated schools inherently unequal (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2010). In response to this landmark ruling, a county in Virginia instituted a “freedom of choice” plan that gave students the chance to choose which public school like they would like to go to (Mead, 2012). While the intention of this plan was to comply with court ordered requirements that schools be integrated (Mead, 2012), this and other similar plans were more of a perfunctory attempt than a genuine one at curtailing school desegregation and promoting integration (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2010(b)). Magnet schools emerged as a school option during this era that targeted widespread school desegregation (Goldring, 2009).

With the primary purpose of reducing segregation, McCarver Elementary School in Tacoma, Washington, was converted into a magnet school in 1968 and thus became the first school of its type in the United States (Flemming et al., 1979; Kafer, 2012; Rossell, 2005, 2009). McCarver Elementary was located in a predominantly minority neighborhood and was open to all district students who wanted to attend; giving automatic admission to those in the neighborhood. The school succeeded in reducing minority isolation, based on data prior to, and subsequent to, its conversion: Black student enrollment went from 86% in 1967 to just above 53% in 1969. Building on this momentum, the school established a new enrollment policy in 1969, which limited any minority group to only 40% of the student body (Flemming et al., 1979). The success of this school led to the establishment of two other magnet schools in Tacoma, Washington. These first magnet schools, established in the late 1960s and early 1970s, sought to attract an ethnically diverse student body by offering theme-based programs around science, math, and performance arts and, in the process, enabled cities like Tacoma to create a voluntary desegregation plan, as opposed to mandatory school busing (Blank, Dentler, Baltzell, & Chabotar, 1983; Kafer 2012; Rossell, 1979).

Spurred by rulings made by the federal district courts, the mid-1970s saw a wave of magnet school programs being established in the United States. For example, school districts in Boston in 1975, as part of a greater desegregation plan, as well as districts in Houston in 1975, Milwaukee in 1976, and Buffalo in 1976, as part of voluntary desegregation plans, were among the first wave to establish magnet schools (Rossell, 1979; Steel & Levine, 1994). In addition to court decisions, the federal government also played a vital role in the emergence of magnet schools by providing grants to create or convert new schools in these programs through an amendment in the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA), to school districts undertaking desegregation plans (Frankenberg & Le, 2008; Goldring, 2009; Steel & Levine, 1994). Between 1976 and 1980 the number of school districts applying for the ESAA grants increased from 14 to over 100 districts, with the ESAA grants providing up to \$30 million a year to magnet school programs (Steel & Levine, 1994).

Federal support came to a halt in 1981 when President Ronald Reagan cut funding for ESAA activities, including magnet school programs (Frankenberg & Le, 2008; Steel & Levine, 1994). From 1981–1984, support was limited to state and local funding and not until 1985, with the establishment of the Magnet School Assistance Program (MSAP) via the amended Elementary and Secondary Education Act, did federal funding for magnet schools resume (Goldring, 2009; Steel & Levine, 1994). The intent of MSAP was to fund magnet schools, which were defined as schools that provided special curriculum with the capability to attract students from diverse racial backgrounds. School districts were (and continue to be) eligible for MSAP grants if they are implementing a court or agency ordered desegregation plan or an approved voluntary desegregation plan (Steel & Levine, 1994; see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/magnet/eligibility.html>). To receive MSAP funding, voluntary desegregation plans must be approved by the Secretary of Education as meeting the standards set forth under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Steel & Eaton, 1996; Steel & Levine, 1994). MSAP magnet grants played a large role in the growth of magnet schools since the mid-1980s, supporting implementation in 117 different school districts between 1985 and 1993 with close to \$740 million in funds (Steel & Levine, 1994). The program has provided a stable source and generally increasing source of funding over the years for creating new magnet schools or significantly revising existing magnet schools.¹ Currently, MSAP funding provides up to \$4 million per year for a three-year cycle per individual grantee.

¹ MSAP limits individual awards to \$4,000,000 per year and offers grants in a three-year cycle instead of the two-year cycle in earlier years. Over the years, MSAP granted a total of \$75 million in 1984 for the fiscal year, \$108 million in 1994, \$108 million again in 2004 (Goldring, 2009; Rossell, 2005), and then jumped to \$100–\$110 million for the period from 2004–2010 annually (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2010; Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2012). In 2010, 36 school districts or consortia in 15 states received a total of \$100 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), and during the 2013 cycle 27 school districts or consortia in 12 states received a total of \$89.8 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

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