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ABSTRACT

A case study of the magnet school program in an anonymous midwestern United States city provides insights on the types of organizational and political changes that result from this form of school desegregation. Organizationally, the normal life of school systems depends upon a delicate balance of two sets of contradictory elements: individual school and teacher autonomy, on the one hand, and the larger administrative structure of the entire system, on the other. The use of magnet schools to achieve desegregation changes the balance of authority by: (1) formalizing the existence of variation in school practice; (2) tightening the linkage between the school system and individual schools; and (3) giving increased power in the organization to parents as clients. In addition to these organizational changes, by contradicting the principle of equivalent education and facilities among different schools, the magnet system exacerbates political conflict, particularly with regard to competition for resources between minority and privileged goups. Elitism becomes a significant problem when white or wealthier students are disproportionately drawn to magnet schools. Given the changes described above, it is understandable that the magnet system has provoked resistance from teacher unions, office and instructional staff, parents and, at different times, the black and white communities. (Author/GC)

Magnet Schools in Their Organizational and Political Context

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A paper prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, April 23-28, 1981 in Toronto, Ontario.

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Magnet schools have stirred considerable political interest around the country as they offer a method for desegregation which escapes the taint of mandatory busing. At the same time, they seem to offer an opportunity to bring some fresh breezes of educational innovation into large city systems through the door pushed open by the courts' power to require desegregation. This paper is based on a study of magnet schools in a city where they are the keystone of a plan which has accomplished compliance with a court order for desegregation without mandatory assignment of students.

It will be the thesis of the paper that while magnets provide a surprisingly satisfactory solution to the short term problems of acceptance of desegregation, their use on a large scale sets up organizational and political processes with unsettling long term effects. The major argument of the paper analyzes two delicately poised sets of contradictory elements in the normal life of school systems and shows how magnet schools tend to upset the balance of forces in both cases. As a consequence, the magnet schools in the city under study are beginning to become the focus of opposition, yet at the same time they also gather strong adherents. They lessen conflict over desegregation but raise conflict over fundamental educational and political issues in the life of a school system.

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THE SETTING

The study is set in the city of "Heartland", a pseudonym for one of the twenty-five largest cities in the United States. Heartland is a midwestern city with a diversified industrial base and a higher than average proportion of blue collar workers. Its economy has remained reasonably healthy through the seventies. It still has ties to its ethnic heritage in settlement by waves of northern and eastern European immigrants. Its neighborhoods are stable and tightly knit, many of them with strong ethnic identities. It is often spoken of as an enlarged small town or a congery of small towns.

Its population was 23 percent black in the 1980 census, up from 15 percent in the 1970 census. Its public schools, which enroll approximately 100,000 students, reached approximately 50 percent black as the new decade began; with higher proportions of blacks in the younger grades than the older ones.[1] The city has not extended its friendly atmosphere to its black citizens. The sixties saw demonstrations over segregated schools and marches for open housing which sometimes drew violent white response. There was also an urban riot at the end of the decade. Several studies have rated the Heartland metropolitan area among the most segregated in the nation. Thus it is a city where the demographic picture suggests hope for successful stable desegregation, but the social atmosphere looks less promising.

The schools were ordered by a federal judge to desegregate early in 1976. With the leadership of a new superintendent the system decided to attempt moving students without mandatory reassignment. According to the rhetoric of the district this was to be accomplished by opening a series of "alternative" schools offering distinctive educational modes of instruction or areas of

instruction and by giving all children in the city the option to attend any school they liked, as long as seats were available and their choice allowed the school to fall within the racial quotas set by the court of 25 to 60 percent black. While the alternative schools were the centerpiece of the plan and received most of the publicity, it is important to understand that ninety percent of the children who were eventually bused out of their neighborhoods were black. Since almost all of the white children bused went to alternative schools and the numbers of blacks and nonblacks there were approximately equal, about eighty percent of the children riding the bus were black children traveling to empty seats in traditional white neighborhood schools.[2]

The school system sends all parents an annual circular announcing magnet programs at the time of the annual enrollment of students for the following fall. According to this circular for 1981-1982, the sixth year of the plan, there were fifteen elementary alternative programs (out of 117 total elementary schools). There were three alternative middle schools (out of nineteen schools overall). There were three high schools with total programs arranged as alternatives which draw students citywide without a neighborhood attendance area. All the other twelve high schools have special programs with a career emphasis which enroll part of the student body and are intended to draw students from outside the attendance area. These schools were built up for the most part during the first two years of the desegregation plan, with a few added in later years. 1981-1982 will be the sixth year.

The school board appealed the original decision to desegregate. The appeals court sent the case back to the original trial judge with an order to

re-evaluate it for proof of systemwide effects of intentional segregation in the light of the Dayton decision. A new trial was held and such systemwide effects were ruled by the judge to have occurred. But discouraged by the apparent direction of higher court decisions at that time, the plaintiffs decided to settle out of court, leaving twenty elementary schools and two middle schools majority black. The decree in the settlement was to last from 1979 to 1984. Thus complete desegregation was never accomplished in Heartland, and the binding formulas for desegregation have a five year life.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

The research for this paper was part of a larger project in which I studied both the internal organizational life of the three citywide magnet middle schools and the effects of their external environment upon them. To that end I spent a semester in each school observing in classes and the school at large and interviewing every one from sixth graders to the principal and the parents. To study the effects of the environment I not only talked to persons in the schools and to parents, but I engaged in observation and interviewing at the system level as well. I listened to most school board meetings and many board committee meetings on the radio from 1979 to the present writing in summer 1981.[3] I attended some meetings of the citywide committee of parents set up to advise on desegregation and many meetings of the subgroup of this committee composed of delegates from all citywide magnet schools. I interviewed supervising teachers and central office administrators and three board members. I talked informally at various times with several other board members and with members of the school of education faculty of the local branch of the state university who have had close and continuing ties

with the central office staff of the schools. I collected documents giving information about the individual schools and about the system as a whole.

THE POLITICAL BENEFITS OF MAGNET SCHOOLS IN HEARTLAND

At the time that the magnet school idea was introduced in Heartland, the most pressing political task was the prevention of vocal community resistance to desegregation. Heartland is a working class city with strong ethnic identities and strong neighborhood feeling. Citizens in some areas had met open housing marchers with bricks and broken bottles ten years earlier. And the memory of violence over school desegregation in Boston and in Louisville was very fresh in the winter and spring of 1976 when fundamental decisions were made.

Magnet schools provided an ingenious solution to the problem of political acceptability of the desegregation process. First, by emphasizing magnets in the district's rhetoric and its descriptions of the desegregation plan, system officials drew attention away from the process of desegregation itself. There was a large scale publicity campaign in the summer of 1976 as the first magnet schools were launched. In this the superintendent talked about the diverse learning needs of younger children and the diverse career training needs of high school students. In the new plan parents were to be given the opportunity to assess the style or needs of their own children as well as their own educational preferences and to choose a school which matched the child's needs and their preferences. This rhetoric said little about desegregation, though it was clear that all magnet schools would be filled according to racial quotas. Further it paid parents a compliment in assuming they were competent to assess their children's educational needs, and it gave them real power in being able

to select the kind of school they wanted. Thus by offering educational diversity, it was a desegregation plan which promised to enhance a family's control over its educational fate, rather than diminishing it as does mandatory reassignment.

The superintendent spoke also but at less length of the empty seats in the newer schools at the city's periphery and of overcrowding in the older schools in the city's center. The plan included encouraging students from these older schools to select seats in the newer schools at the periphery. And less visibly it closed and reduced enrollment in central city schools, so that many black children had to leave their neighborhood school.

Thus, the plan offered something for every one. The black community got the opportunity for desegregation it had sought. At the rhetorical level they were invited at the least to leave older, overcrowded buildings for newer ones with smaller enrollments. Whites who resisted desegregation were given the opportunity to remain in their neighborhood schools even though they would have to accept black children who were to be bused into them. And whites who were favorable or neutral to desegregation were rewarded with special educational opportunities if they were willing to have their children bused out of their neighborhoods. (An approximately equal number of black children were also so rewarded.) In practice, these children were rewarded not only with educational diversity, but with as much superiority as the system could muster. Many of the magnet buildings were attractively repainted and refurnished. Some got elaborate new equipment of various kinds. They were given extra teachers to make lower student-teacher ratios, extra materials, and resources such as field trips. On top of all of these privileges, especially at first, the parents were given pats on the back as volunteers for desegregation.

The plan had the desired political effects. Desegregation was accomplished

without demonstrations. There were some minor incidents in some of the high schools in areas most resistant to the acceptance of black students. But these were problems within the schools and not much publicized.[4]

CHANGES IN THE CHARACTER OF SCHOOL SYSTEM ORGANIZATION

The introduction of magnet schools on a sizable scale brought more changes to the Heartland Public School System than the increase in political palatability of desegregation for which they were designed. These changes were initially acceptable because of the perceived magnitude of the political problem. And for subordinates in the school system organization, they were accepted because the superintendent put the full weight of his office behind them. Once the plan was approved by the court, it carried the weight of that institution as well as that of the superintendent's office and his actively exercised hierarchical authority. Once the magnet schools and desegregation were well established, however, other changes which the magnets created had time to become evident. Unaccustomed strains were noted and a certain amount of resistance began to arise among those parties whose interests or accustomed patterns were dislodged.

To understand the changes magnets caused, it is first necessary to analyze the character of school systems as organizations. It is important that there is a disjunction between levels in schools and school systems which allows a good deal of de facto autonomy to subordinates. Recently labeled loose coupling, this phenomenon has long been noted in the relationship of principals and teachers (Corwin, 1981). Waller remarked upon it, even in the seemingly hierarchical schools of the small town United States in the 1920s ([1932] 1965). Several authors have connected teachers' autonomy to the technology of teaching

(Dreeben, 1973; Lortie, 1975; Metz, 1978). They argue that the variability of children and the lack of clearly effective methods of instruction require teachers to improvise or at the least vary their methods as situations arise.[5] Studies of a variety of kinds of organizations where the technology is also poorly specified and the raw material variable suggest that such situations consistently breed formal or informal autonomy for the persons low in the formal hierarchy who do the actual work of the organization (Lipsky, 1980; Perrow, 1967; Woodward, 1965). In schools the teacher's autonomy has little formal recognition, but it is well institutionalized in tradition.

More recent studies have focused attention on the same kind of loose coupling and de facto subordinate autonomy in the relationship of schools and school districts. Several studies of innovation have found schools resistant to edicts for change coming from above (Herriott and Gross, 1979; Wolcott, 1977; Sussmann, 1977). Superiors at the system level are often unaware of conditions required for effective implementation of innovations. They sometimes make no serious efforts either at enforcement of their proclamations or at intelligent design of strategies which will be effective in varied school settings. Schools can often respond with symbolic compliance and actual disregard of the orders they are given.

The mechanisms behind this process of only outward articulation of levels are shown in more ordinary times by Deal and Celotti (1980) and Meyer, Scott, Cole and Intili (1978). They suggest system level administrators may be poorly informed of practice in varied schools and school level administrators give varied, and therefore often inaccurate, accounts of even routine district policies. Such mutual ignorance of rules and practices at other levels implies

both a lack of contact between levels and an informal charter of autonomy for actors at the school level.

It is very significant, however, that this autonomy at both the classroom and the school level is always de facto and never de jure. Formally schools and school systems remain bureaucracies with very clear channels of line authority. A principal is within his or her formal rights to give many specific commands for teachers' behavior in the classroom. And system level administrators can legitimately make decisions and issue commands which fundamentally alter the character of an individual school's program. It is important also to remember that despite the broad informal control enjoyed by individual schools and teachers, generally speaking the similarity of activities between schools at the same age level and between classrooms at the same grade level is striking.

In this context, Meyer and Rowan (1978) have introduced an intriguing argument. They look at the loose coupling between the school and school system level and explain it as a response which allows maximal adaptation to an intrusive environment with minimal disruption to internal activities. They maintain that school systems are in fact co-ordinated by certification and by categorization of persons and activities. Thus school systems specify very exactly and enforce rather vigorously rules concerning who is qualified to teach and who to study the fourth grade or junior level English. But they specify very loosely and inspect rarely what happens in fourth grade or in English classes and what the students know when they finish with them. This pattern is based upon a shared presumption that a clear definition of the fourth grade curriculum or of high school English exists somewhere and that all

properly certified people have a grasp upon this definition and an attachment to its pursuit in the classroom. Thus formal units of study can be commonly assumed to be clearly defined, even standardized, activities which form building blocks in an educational career. The bureaucracy can therefore administer the offering of these standard units without even inspecting the daily agenda or the students' detailed skills and knowledge in particular schools and classrooms. Co-ordination occurs through certification, categorization, and a logic of confidence in other certified persons.

Meyer and Rowan argue that this form of control allows a great deal of unofficial flexibility in activities which permits schools to adapt to pressures brought to bear upon them by their immediate environments. Since the adaptations are not changes in name but only in practice, adjustments at one school do not bring pressure on other schools or upon the system as a whole to make comparable changes elsewhere. At the same time, when pressures are brought at the level of the system as a whole, it may respond with changes in labeling and categorization which make it appear responsive to interested parties but which disturb established daily activities in the schools very little except for a rearrangement of language. The system is therefore doubly responsive to environmental demands, while the diverse activities of individual schools and the mostly ritualistic activities of the central administration mesh little enough so that inconsistent responses at one level or the other cause minimal friction.

It is possible to argue that Meyer and Rowan exaggerate their case. For example, in Heartland system curriculum guides for each grade and subject are quite explicit and both school level administrators and system level supervisors

note more than minor departures from their, fairly general, injunctions. Nonetheless, Meyer and Rowan have stated an important tendency in schools and school systems. Official labels on educational programs go far to define activities in the minds of both supervisors and the public. Every one assumes that the content of the elementary grades and of common high school courses is a standard entity, well understood and faithfully followed by teachers with little variation from school to school. Teachers and schools then have a good deal of freedom to ring changes on the basic themes of those standard educational units without sanction from above. Active parents can exert pressures and obtain changes at the classroom or sometimes the school level if they want modifications in the teaching approach for individuals or groups of children. But such changes are not made official, not announced. Sometimes teachers also make changes on their own initiative either out of their own predilections or in response to what they believe to be the requirements of particular kinds of children. These changes may or may not be in accord with patterns the parents would approve if they were fully cognizant of them.

But it is crucial that these variations are informal. Both parents and teachers can initiate modifications in standard curricula and methods as long as they do not call too much attention to them. Officially, any substantial modification has to be passed up the line for formal approval and then mandated back down the bureaucratic channels. Parents have no formal right to initiate such changes--except through the channel of electing and lobbying with school board members.

There is therefore a subtle, inexplicit, but real balancing of contradictory forces at work in the definition and operation of schools' organizational character. Formally they are bureaucracies with an unambiguous flow of directives

from top to bottom. But practically they can not be that because of the uncertainty of educational technology and the variability of the children found in different schools and classrooms. Therefore a compromise or balance is reached. Formal top down authority is proclaimed and certification of persons and categorization of activities are used to assign standardized labels to operations which can then be managed and reported at high levels. At the same time subordinates have informal latitude to alter the substance of their daily and yearly work within vague and traditionally defined limits.

Magnet schools in Heartland changed the balance of these conflicting tendencies. In establishing and advertising these schools, the superintendent proclaimed publicly and officially that children vary in their educational needs, that the curriculum and educational approach used with children should also vary, and that parents would have the right to choose among schools which explicitly and formally offer differing educational programs.

This policy made three changes. First, it formalized the existence of variation in school practice and in so doing broke down the unity and simplicity of concepts such as "fourth grade work". Second, it tightened the linkage between the school system and individual schools; it gave system level officials the right and the duty to require individual schools to behave in rather detailed distinctive ways and to oversee school performance closely as they did so. It was thus a system level change which was a good deal more than symbolic. Third, it gave increased power in the organization to parents as clients.

As the policy formalized educational diversity among the schools, it gave them the right to ask to diverge from systemwide policies on matters ranging from curriculum to scheduling. It also gave them grounds to ask for special

resources and special personnel best suited to the particular educational approach they were following. The schools thus gathered power vis-a-vis the district. They could argue for what they needed to be truly distinctive rather than quietly altering what they could without its being so visible as to attract attention. Of course, part of the reason was their mandate to do precisely that, to attract attention to their specialness in order to induce parents to send their children out of the neighborhood into a desegregated situation because that specialness promised educational benefits.

At the same time, however, the schools lost power in the form of informal autonomy and freedom from detailed inspection or direction. Their administrative and curricul supervisors now had a mandate to work with them to see that they became distinctive in the ways which were centrally planned and announced. In many cases the school's innovations were planned at the top and imposed rather than growing at the grass roots and being formalized. Supervisors in the central administration were responsible for the details of specialness, though they worked in significant part through the principal in affecting the teachers. Principals had more power to do distinctive things and to direct their teachers, but less discretion to depart from central office intentions and less chance to operate free of supervision than they had in ordinary times. Thus the system became simultaneously more diverse and more centralized. The old system of blending diversity and hierarchy by muting the visibility of the diversity and practicing the hierarchy more symbolically than actively had to be changed.

Finally, the use of magnet schools gave parents a new and much more powerful role as clients. Parents could now legitimately and officially interpret the educational needs of their children and go in search of a school to meet them.

Parents also could now exercise the crucial power of exit (Barry, 1974). When they did not like the educational approach of either their neighborhood school or a magnet school they had chosen, they could express their displeasure by taking their business elsewhere--and perhaps also that of some neighbors they had persuaded to a similar point of view. To the extent that individual schools needed to court parents in order to fill their quota of children for one race or another, parents also were given voice (Barry, 1974) at both the school and system level. They had political leverage behind them when they asked for changes in program in schools which needed to attract or to keep children of their color. As the system began to stabilize with steady desegregated clienteles for many schools, this power began to fade again, but the power of exit, especially when parents had the skills to recruit a group following, still gave parents far more say in the schools than in a system where the only escape was through the expense of private school or a family move.

Perhaps the most important effect of the introduction of magnet schools upon parents was its planting in the public mind the idea that variation in educational offerings and matching of children's learning styles with schools' teaching styles are not lucky accidents or privileges to be won by patient and persistent negotiation with classroom teachers. Rather they are rights, part of the appropriate offering of a public school system.

CHANGES IN THE CHARACTER OF SCHOOL SYSTEM POLITICS

The introduction of magnet schools disturbed a delicate balance among contradictory forces not only in school system organization, but also in school system politics. This becomes evident if one extends Meyer and Rowan's (1978)

analysis to the political arena. If, as they claim, there is a lively myth in the society at large as well as among educators that there are real and standardized entities known as "fourth grade work" and "junior level English", then this belief has political consequences as well as organizational ones.

I think most readers would assent that at one level such a myth has a very real existence in the public mind. There is a claim abroad that children who have finished the fourth grade should be ready to go into fifth grade in any other system in the country and be able to do the basic work, even if they might have missed state history or some specific skills in art or music. Textbook manufacturers and national test designers add to this understanding of educational units with their textbooks labeled by grade and their tests yielding grade level scores. This belief reflects a claim that standardized curricular building blocks exist and that schools everywhere are substantially similar.

Within a single district these claims become far stronger. There are many symbols intended to proclaim the interchangeability of work in similarly labeled courses and grades in all the schools of the district. Thus, the common supervisory bureaucracy, the standardized district curriculum guide, and reassuring statements of district administrators and board members affirm the equivalence of similarly labeled experiences throughout the system.

In a society which calls education the key to success and which claims that every child should have equal access to success, this standardization is an important symbol of such equal access. The myth of educational standardization is thus of considerable political significance.

At the same time, it is an open secret, well understood throughout the nation that both within and between districts, schools are anything but equivalent. They vary noticeably in their store of tangible resources such as

well built, well-equipped facilities, experienced faculties, low student-teacher ratios, supplies, and enriching experiences such as field trips, all of which can be bought with money. They vary also in the subtler resources of dedicated and skillful teachers, and of able and enthusiastic students as peers for one another. And they vary in intangible resources such as high morale, a sense of common academic purpose, and a feeling of mutual support and co-operation among staff and students. Schools develop reputations as good or bad on the basis of these differences. These reputations are so widely shared that realtors can advertise houses according to their school attendance area, confidently and accurately expecting adults to pay several thousand dollars more for a house which is superior only in allowing the children of the family to attend a standard fourth grade which is "more equal" than that at another school in the district.

The public thus holds two sets of contradictory political beliefs. They believe in the existence of standardized units of work in public schools which are appropriate at given ages and widely shared among schools over the whole nation. They also believe in significant differences in the work offered in schools within and across district lines. Murray Edelman (1977) has argued that our political life is shot through with such contradictory myths which virtually all of us hold side by side, pulling forth now one, now the other, as it suits our ideological and political purposes. We use both points of view according to convenience without a sense of contradiction. We do so both as individuals and as a polity.

The contradictory myths I have outlined in education serve the political purposes of the comparatively privileged very well indeed. The myth of standardization bolsters our claim that schooling is an open route to a

meritocracy based on recruitment of the able and hardworking who have demonstrated their capacities in school. At the same time, our belief in important differences between schools allows us to assuage our anxieties about our own children's future and to give them a headstart in competition for leading places in society. Individuals with resources can help their children by buying or renting housing in neighborhoods where the better schools are thought to be and by working with their children's teachers or school to make the school more to their model of the best possible education. At a social level politically powerful neighborhoods can demand more resources for their schools--especially where these are not strictly counted in money--and politically powerless neighborhoods can be left bereft of such resources. At the same time, the myth of standardization assures every one that an equal and fair education is evenhandedly meted out to every one.

This set of contradictory beliefs allows the practice of political competition for scarce resources in schooling yet supplies a shared set of beliefs which deny it. At the same time, the myth of standardization provides a justification for placing some limits on political competition for resources, especially within districts. If they so wish, board members or administrators can limit the resources allocated to favored schools in the name of standardization and equity. Representatives of less favored schools can demand resources equivalent to other schools if they can uncover and name them.

The contradictions of this system have been noted by representatives of the politically powerless, especially racial minorities. Over the last twenty years there has been an increasing outcry over the poor skills imparted to economically disadvantaged children and to racial minorities in the schools. It has been loudly and public stated that all fourth grade completers and all

high school graduates do not have anything approaching the same skills and have not been exposed to anything approaching the same set of stimulating and enriching experiences. Variations in both the tangible and intangible resources available to schools in more and less affluent or politically powerful neighborhoods and districts have been widely noted.

One important thrust behind desegregation addresses just this issue. It has in part been sought as a way to give black children access to the better educational facilities and programs which white parents use their influence to obtain for their own children. Desegregation by itself changes the political balance in a system as it requires children of different races and often different social classes to share the same schools and the same classes and thus access to the same privileges or lack of them. Resistance to desegregation must be understood partly in these terms as well as in terms of resistance to racial contact.

Magnet schools change this balance in special ways however. If they are to draw students out of neighborhood schools which they find generally satisfactory, they are likely to have to claim to be not only diverse in their educational approaches but better than neighborhood schools. Yet if they are formally designated as superior schools, they fly in the face of the myth of equal opportunity through the offering of standard programs. If they are formally superior, then neighborhood schools will become formally inferior, second class, by implication.

The implicit insult to neighborhood schools in magnets' superiority is a problem which can be foreseen early in the development of a large program of magnet schools (Felix and Jacobs, 1977). Heartland's officials foresaw it and attempted to avoid it by naming the schools "alternative" schools rather than

"magnet" schools. Their rhetoric in advertising them laid much more stress upon their educational diversity and the choice allowed than upon their superiority. But in practice they clearly felt they had to make them appear superior. They spent great efforts in refurbishing the old turn of the century buildings in which some of them were located. Decaying old buildings emerged as sterling examples of Victorian architecture. Extra equipment was ordered for many, and most at least initially had extra staff who offered special programs or lowered the ratio of students to teachers. There was money for extra supplies and for field trips without cost to the students.

Many of the resources supplied came from sizable federal grants which the district was able to obtain from funds set aside specifically for magnet schools. Thus differentials in local money were generally not great. But the visible amenities provided to the most favored schools in the most generous years when parents were being aggressively courted to get the plan started became associated in the public mind with the situation of the alternative schools on a permanent basis.

Therefore the magnet schools in Heartland did seem to violate the understanding that all schools should be standardized to offer equal opportunity to all children and equal service to all taxpayers. At first this inequality raised little resistance because the magnet schools seemed to make possible a voluntary desegregation plan. They seemed to be instrumental in avoiding vociferous white resistance to desegregation which neither officials nor black parents wanted. And they seemed to be instrumental in allowing white families who so desired to keep their children in the neighborhood school, something many very strongly wished to do. But as it became clear that voluntary desegregation would work, and that total desegregation of the system would never be required,

parents (and teachers) who were not part of the magnets began to compare the inconveniences involved in their part of desegregation to those imposed in the so visibly favored magnet schools. Both whites and blacks began to see their own burdens as substantial and the magnets as unfairly privileged. Political pressure began to emerge to lessen the differentials in visible resources between magnet and other schools. And some fairly strong rhetoric about the need for equity in the total system began to appear regularly in school board discussions.

There is an irony, and a significant one, in the conflict which the magnet schools are slowly stirring. Resistance to them is based upon their violation of the political myth of standardized programs as a vehicle for equal educational resources for all children and so all sectors of the population. Since school systems routinely tolerate considerable inequities in resource allocation which is widely enough seen so that realtors can use it in their pricing policy, magnet schools draw resistance not because they are privileged but because they are formally privileged. The irony lies in their recruitment policies which broaden access to superior schools.

In Heartland any child in the city can apply to the magnet schools with citywide attendance areas. During an initial winter round of applications, places are filled up to the limit for quotas of race and gender. If there is oversubscription places are filled by lottery.[6] The application forms are very simple and publicity for enrollment periods is quite extensive. Thus, it is easy for children from all over the city to sign up for these schools. They are all provided free and increasingly well run bus transportation from corners close to their homes.

As a result even the schools most attractive to elites do enroll a sizable

number of white and black working class children whose parents could not afford housing in the neighborhoods of the formerly unofficial elite schools. Therefore, while magnets have made differences of quality formal or semi-formal in the Heartland system, they have also made the highest quality schools genuinely available to children regardless of background--as long as their parents are willing to send them out of the neighborhood. Further 25 to 60 percent of the seats in such schools are reserved for black children. These schools do not receive all children who want to attend them, however, as most have waiting lists. But in principle, at least, children are rejected by chance and not by their parents' capacity to buy or rent in certain, generally exclusive neighborhoods.[7]

CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT FOR MAGNET SCHOOLS' CHANGES IN SCHOOL SYSTEM ORGANIZATION

As the magnet schools changed the balance of contradictory tendencies in school system organization and politics they were bound to elicit fairly strong responses from persons with an interest in maintenance or change in the status quo. Though it is in some cases difficult to disentangle responses to organizational change from those to political change, I shall try to separate them. I will treat responses to organizational change first.

The Union

The teachers' union was the most important actor to have a stake in the changes in the organizational character of the school system brought about by magnet schools. The Heartland teachers' union is a powerful force in school affairs. Like most unions, it has thrown its weight behind control through certification and categorization. Teachers are transferred according to their legal certification and their seniority. Once tenured they can be involuntarily transferred or terminated only after the presentation of thorough

documentation of incompetence or moral turpitude. And they can only be "excessed", moved from school to school because of declining enrollment, on the basis of fields that they are certified to teach and of seniority.

The establishment of alternative schools offering distinctive modes of education was immediately perceived by the union as a threat to this system of teacher placement. They feared that the establishment of distinctive modes of teaching would provide the administration with grounds for selecting teachers for the alternative schools on grounds other than seniority and licensure. While such selection might be called selection according to (vaguely defined) expertise in a special educational mode it could easily become a covert form of selection according to merit. It would, therefore, establish two classes of teachers in alternative and ordinary schools. The union therefore held fast for selection of teachers for these schools according to ordinary licensure and seniority. The school administration insisted on picking the teachers according to skill in the special mode of education. In the summer before the first year, the court stepped in to impose a compromise. It gave the administration a small number of slots it might fill any way it chose and left the rest to be filled according to the routine formula. The next spring, in the first year of desegregation, a teachers' strike of several weeks duration was fought in large part over this issue. As the contract was written, the system was obligated to keep teachers who had taught in the buildings converted to magnets for the new program, if they wished to stay and would take courses in the special educational approach. Otherwise openings were to be filled by seniority and licensure and possession of one of the following qualifications:

"1) Previous experience in the particular alternative mode of education.
2) [The teacher] has taken, or completes before the beginning of the next

> semester, college courses in the alternative mode of education or vocational-technical courses where applicable, or inservice training in the particular alternative mode of education. When the necessary college course.... or inservice training are not reasonably available to the teachers wishing to participate, the school administration will establish inservice programs that fulfill the training requirements." (From the Heartland Public Schools Teachers' Contract, 1980)

In practice then, the alternative schools, except for a few in the first year, were staffed with teachers who had previously occupied the buildings in which they were housed and with replacements chosen predominantly by seniority from among those who applied. Since the magnets offered attractions such as low student-teacher ratios, supportive services, and few discipline-problems to teachers, those teachers who applied were not always those most interested in the special educational approach of the school. From the very beginning, then, the response of the teachers' union to the changes magnets could potentially bring to the organization limited the changes they actually did bring.

Central Office Staff

There was also pressure from members of the central administration staff in response to the changes brought by the magnets. As the alternative schools formalized variations in educational approach, they also formalized varied degrees of departure from established curricular definitions of work at each grade level. As I interviewed supervising teachers for the middle schools in the central office department of curriculum and instruction, it became clear that they tended to favor those schools which made the least alteration in traditional curriculum and teaching methods and to be critical of those which were most distinctive in making substantial changes. The more the programs offered genuine alternatives or diversity, the less the supervisors--who after all wrote and supervised the standard curriculum--favored them. Not only were their ideas being rejected by some of these schools, but their ability

to supervise as they understood it was also diminished.

One supervisor described their feelings about the most distinctive of the three schools I studied:

> "Now I don't know if you know that that school is a real sore point school among the supervisors. They really feel frustrated, that they can't work there. I've reached the point where I'm objective; I'm just an observer. I figure I do what I can and I try, and if they won't take it, well that's the way it is. There's nothing I can do....The way you have to operate in that school [is that] you have to wait until they ask you for help. [When the supervisors came out for a visit] I think probably [the curriculum co-ordinator] thought that the supervisors were going to be more critical of the school, but really they're just frustrated. We're all in content areas and that's our concentration, our interest. And for us it was just devastating to see the whole sequence that we had worked on thrown out."

Sometimes curriculum supervisors and teachers who had found a distinctive educational approach imposed on them from above agreed in questioning its departure from the traditional and re-enforced one another in a return to the traditional which was as informal and unrecognized as earlier departures from it might have been. Thus one supervisor spoke to me enthusiastically of another of the study schools as a place with a hard working dedicated principal and set of teachers which got good results in students' achievement. But then he talked about his principled disagreement with the school's official educational approach and argued that the research showed it to be ineffective. He then went on to say that the teachers in his subject depart significantly from the requirements of the approach--using a more traditional one he believes to be to the children's benefit. He thus praised this school for displaying traditional virtues of hard work and high achievement given its population--and also for allowing its officially distinctive educational style to slip

away in favor of a more standardized one.

When I studied this school there clearly was resistance on the part of the teachers to many of the concepts, changes, and demands of the special educational approach. But this supervisor, speaking over a year after I had finished field work in the school, suggested the process had progressed. One has to ask how much of a part he--as a new supervisor in this field for this school--had a part in that progression, or even whether the teachers pretended more erosion of the special approach than in fact existed in order to please their supervisor.

At the same time, however, there were other people in the central office department for curriculum and instruction who had participated in inventing the special programs and in some cases in forging the details of their design. These people had a stake in the successful distinctiveness of the alternative programs as signs of their own creativity, skill, and contact with the educational needs and desires of the community. They were strong defenders of the specialty programs and their continued distinctiveness. Yet others saw the new programs and found them pedagogically interesting or apparently effective and so--seeing themselves as advisors more than supervisors--supported them.

School Staffs

In the schools principals and teachers were affected in several ways by the magnets. Some rejoiced in the opportunity to do what they had long wanted to do, and to be able formally to request the freedom and resources with which to do it. Often though, this rejoicing was mingled with frustration over not being able to get as much in resources or freedom as seemed to be needed Principals were frustrated by being unable to choose teachers with training in and active desire for the specialty. And even in the third and fourth year of the study, the withdrawal of federal funds was beginning to cut into special

programming in the schools I studied in depth.

Other persons in the schools felt the hand of centralized control to lie heavy on their efforts. Especially when the educational approach had been imposed on faculties who were not already moving toward it or where individual teachers had been assigned to the school though they had not listed it among their choices, teachers often experienced the mandate for a special educational approach as an infringement on their professional autonomy. Teachers in one study school, especially in two subjects, complained of the imposition of a very specific curriculum guide with required materials which they found inappropriate both to the program as they understood it and to the children's needs and abilities. The supervisors in these fields were active in follow up; so the teachers felt constrained to teach in a way which violated their best judgment, and they were actively resentful. As the linkages between the school and the central administration were tightened, such conflict over the interpretation of the meaning of an alternative educational program became likely even where all parties considered themselves enthusiasts in its cause.

Finally, teachers and principals in the neighborhood schools were often jealous of the attention, the reputations for success and the resources possessed by the alternative schools. Some of them grumbled that they also could do a much better job given similar conditions. Some tried to even up those conditions by encouraging their most difficult students to transfer to magnet schools or to go there after completing work at one age level.

Some central office personnel shared the feelings and perspective of the staffs in these schools. Whether out of loyalty to these staffs developed over years of association, out of annoyance at departures from standard curricular patterns they had labored to build, or out of frugality and traditionalism

they considered the specialty schools to have more resources than they needed. The most outspoken of these persons put the case very directly.

> Supervisor: Those [magnet] schools have more than their share whether you are talking about money or [work] assignments [or class size]....And there have been some pressures. Other schools have asked that they get the same kind of thing. There has been pressure from the community and from the court ruling to some degree. And I think it's evening out now....
>
> Interviewer:...When I went to a traditional school --perhaps because I was studying magnets--they talked about how the alternative schools had a lot more resources than they did. Do you pick up anything like that [when you go to those schools]?
>
> Supervisor: Oh there's grumbling like hell from other teachers. They're not dumb. I'll tell you what they do. They go through the roster [of system employees] and this is what they show me. [He shows lists of aides in middle schools which indicate more at specific specialty schools--and one school on the edge of the central city--than at specific white neighborhood schools, though the student bodies are larger at the latter.] So the teachers go to this and they count. They're no dumb bunnies. But the teachers' organization has to be very careful. They stay off this because they don't want to alienate one part of their constituency. But the teachers show us this kind of thing.
>
> Interviewer: Is it going to make problems for the staffs in the alternative schools in doing what they are supposed to if the resources are evened out and they have less staff and supply money?
>
> Supervisor: Some will complain that it does. They've gotten spoiled and they've gotten lazy. When you take it away they're going to complain. The others don't complain because they never had it.

Parents

Children and through them their parents were directly affected by the introduction of magnet schools. Both surveys commissioned by the school system and reports of the local paper, as well as my own conversations with parents in specialty schools, suggested that the large majority found them

an improvement over ordinary schools and were well satisfied with them.[8] The development of waiting lists for most programs by 1980 also confirms this impression.

But the development of waiting lists provided a problem as well. Parents who could not get their children into alternative schools began to feel that they were deprived by the system. Parents who did not want their children to leave the neighborhood also began to want the special programs offered in the alternative schools and to ask aloud why such programs could not be offered in neighborhood schools as well.

The alternative schools gave parents the right to make a choice about the mode of education their children would experience if they were willing to be bused for desegregation. This rider, which was never very heavily emphasized in the rhetoric, began to be forgotten as the desegregation plan settled down into a fairly stable pattern and one which desegregated all formerly white schools, if in a one way direction. The right of choice then was remembered only in its main clause. Parents began to embrace the principal of choosing educational approaches and to ask for it more widely.[9]

CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT FOR MAGNET SCHOOLS' EFFECT ON SCHOOL SYSTEM POLITICS

The magnet schools' effects on the political balance of school system affairs drew stronger attacks than their effect on organizational issues.

Black Resistance

The black community was understandably somewhat distrustful of the desegregation plan from the outset, in response to the proof in court of the board's intentionally segregative policies and its denial of these intentions and decision to appeal. Many blacks viewed the plan even less favorably as its details revealed a pattern placing more burden on black than on white children.

Thus black children constituted ninety percent of the bus riders from the beginning. And in the early years especially there were widespread problems with buses and incompetent drivers. Most of these children traveled to white neighborhood schools where white students' families did not welcome them. Teachers, also often displeased with their arrival, were given only minimal training in dealing with their social needs and with the diversity which their presence and new rules against academic tracking introduced into classes.

Further, black children riding buses were not volunteers in the same sense as white children going to magnet schools. Black schools were closed and reduced in attendance; so that only a fraction of the children in a school's attendance area could actually be served. While very few children were administratively reassigned to white schools, families knew that most children would have to choose a distant desegregated school. Black children were thus pushed out of their neighborhood schools, even though they had a choice of desegregated schools to which they could go. At almost all the magnet schools waiting lists of black children were longer than waiting lists of white children, indicating that many black children who would have liked to attend magnet schools could not.

Black discontent with this total pattern of desegregation, of which the magnets were a part, came to a head over one school. East High School lies in one of the poorer parts of the black area of the city. In 1976 when the order for desegregation came down, it was an old school, dilapidated and infested by rodents. The community had been asking to have it replaced for over a decade and now it was finally slated for replacement. The court stepped in and indicated its location would encourage segregation. The district won approval of construction on the old site with a promise that it would be opened as a desegregated facility. It was given a career specialty in preparation for medical and dental careers, one of the occupational programs expected

to be most popular. But in the fall of 1979 the new building was opened with a student body over 90 percent black. The board decided during that year that to desegregate the school they would have to close it as a neighborhood school and reopen it as a citywide specialty school.

Here the community surrounding the school took its stand. Community leaders, many of them graduates of the school, argued that when they had finally received a good building they had a right to attend it. It was wrong, they said, for children to have to be on the street corners near the school at 5:30 AM in freezing weather to catch the city buses which through transfers would get them to outlying high schools in time for the 7:30 beginning of the day. The board stood firm and ordered vigorous efforts to recruit for the new citywide school, but these produced a small, lopsidedly black student pre-enrollment in the spring of 1980. The board then decided to yield and East was restored to neighborhood attendance. That conflict quite certainly slowed or ended the closing of black neighborhood schools to use their buildings for citywide alternative schools. It also dramatized for the board, the central administration, and the media the current of dislike in the black community for the combination of alternative schools and one way busing as a desegregation plan.

White Resistance

Many whites also began to grow restless with the plan, once the out of court settlement and the success of the initial efforts to desegregate the required number of schools had removed the threat of mandatory assignment of their children to schools in black areas. Both parents and teachers in outlying white schools began to look at the amenities given to the magnets and to ask why they could not receive such help in their own schools. Especially as

the schools received enough black children to put them within the 25 percent to 60 percent guidelines, they began to argue that the extra resources given to the magnets were unfair. They argued their schools were also desegregated, and they too could be successful with such resources--which they often perceived in exaggerated terms.

School Board Resistance

These feelings of both black and white parents and of white teachers in white neigbhorhood schools were reflected by various school board members. One black board member spoke frequently and articulately for "equity" among all schools and voted consistently for programs which would build up schools which were not alternative schools. White board members criticized "elitism" and questioned appropriations for alternative schools. One said very explicitly in 1980 that so long as these schools continued to attract the required number of parents of both races they should be given no further resources above the standard formulas. Some of these board members considered desegregation a mistake forced from without which might fade with the court settlement after 1984. They hoped both phenomena will fade away together. Others are concerned more with magnet schools' visible violation of the claim to give standard and therefore equal resources to all schools, and thus all children.

School Board Support

But the board members are restrained by the success of the overall desegregation plan in bringing about technically voluntary desegregation in what is after all a large system under a court order. They are also restrained by national attention brought to the district by both its success in voluntary desegregation and some of the alternative programs it has set up. This attention has been expressed in and fed by generous shares of federal funds for

magnet schools and for desegregation in general.

Thus there are external reputations for the district and for its individual leaders to be fed by support for the alternative programs. And--if all federal support for desegregation is not compressed into block grants--there are also funds to be won if the district continues on the path it has started. At the same time, as that money gradually diminishes, there are very hard decisions to be made as magnets look to the local budget to pick up the costs of staffing and program for successful special efforts, while significant political constituencies are angr over the existence of such programs even under federal funding.

Central Office Support

The magnet schools are much more the creation of the superintendent and some of the central office administrators and curriculum personnel who worked closely on them than they are those of the board. These high administrators with careers ahead of them in education have even more reason than the board members to support and protect the system they have put in place. They also think the magnets remain important to high morale in response to desegregation, despite the pockets of resistance. These schools continue to provide rewards for desegregation to those parents willing to seek them. And of course they provide a reasonable alternative to parents who are unhappy with the situation in their local school, whether that is a central city school which remains majority black or a white school desegregated by receiving black children bused in.

School Staff Support

The staffs of the alternative schools generally like their schools, even though some teachers may not agree with the details of the special approach if it was imposed from above. Few transfer out. One might expect then, that

they would organize at least informally to support the concept of alternative schools. But that has not happened among staffs or among principals. The principals of the three middle schools I studied had no special contacts of even the most informal sort with one another. If anything, they seemed to feel they were pitted in competition for good reputation, for resources, and for good students. They then eyed one another as jealously as the neighborhood schools eyed them.

Their sense of rivalry was not altogether unrealistic. They shared the privilege of the magnet label and of some extra staffing and money for program, but they also shared a precarious existence which depended upon a continued flow of volunteering students and continued respectable results. These results were measured heavily, though not exclusively, in test scores. And the abilities of students each school took in had a significant effect on that. System administrators were learning some sophistication in looking at changes in test scores, but the public was more likely to look at the simple cross-sectional statement published each spring. Thus reputation and resources, including able students, tended to have a circular relationship, building upon one another or depressing one another. And inevitably both administrators and the public tended implicitly to compare and rank the magnet schools at each age level.

Organized Parental Support

Parents possessed an organizational vehicle for unified support of the magnet schools. But they made little use of it. The board, at the advice of the administration, set up a committee of over 100 citizens to advise them on desegregation a few months after the court order came down. This committee was constituted through election of delegates in every school. These delegates

then went to the high school into which their schools fed and elected delegates from among their own number to serve on the citywide committee. Those delegates reported back to the group at the high school level. In the second year of desegregation the citywide schools were organized with the citywide high schools as a single "cluster" of this sort. So parents from all the citywide magnets had a chance to send delegates to meet together. Attendance was reasonably good at the monthly meetings of this group in the second and third years. But it gradually became clear that the larger committee through which it had to approach the board was flagging under a highly bureaucratized structure and domination by a few activists. Little seemed to eventuate from the citywide cluster efforts and interest fell off. Parents returned to monitoring the careers of their individual schools or to inactivity.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROGNOSTICATIONS

I have suggested that magnet schools as they were developed in Heartland provided an effective solution to the short term problem of resistance to desegregation. But they introduced changes into the organizational and political life of the school system which were bound to generate resistance to them in the longer run. Some of these changes were straightforward. Magnets lost their appeal as a solution to community resistance to mandatory busing once the threat of mandatory busing had subsided and once the fact of desegregated schools as they experienced it was seen to be acceptable by large portions of the community. Similarly the magnet schools naturally drew support from those who benefited directly from them--the staff who invented and ran them and the families who sent their children to them. They also naturally were viewed with a jaundiced eye by those who lost power, status, or resources because of them, either absolutely or in the light of subjective assessments of relative amounts

of these scarce goods.

But magnets also introduced changes which alter a delicate balance of contradictory tendencies in school systems as organizations and as political systems. In so doing they create paradoxes of their own. They tighten the relationship between schools and the system as a whole at the same time that they give broader and more formal license for diverse practice to individual schools. Similarly, they constitute a series of schools which claim semi-formal superiority in the name of greater equ. , in the opportunities provided to children of different races.

It is always an uncertain matter to predict the future with social science data, but I will venture some hypotheses about the future of Heartland's magnets. The forces both purposeful and impersonal which push for standardization of resources seem strong. On the other hand, the appeal of the rhetoric of educational diversity is wide and there are few effective arguments to be made for a return to curricular standardization. Consequently, it seems likely that most of the magnet schools will survive in name, but that they will gradually lose the funds for special staffing formulas and extra materials and programs along with many of their rights to exceptions from district policies of various sorts. In other words, they will gradually lose most support for their distinctiveness from the district except the symbolic power of their names. The situation will become much like that described by Meyer and Rowan (1978) as common; they will constitute a symbolic effort at the system level which has little impact in practice at the school level.

However, the effect of these changes on school practice will vary. Some schools may be able to muster internal resources to generate a good deal of distinctiveness even without outside support. Whether they can will depend

upon the kind of alternative program they offer--some require more extra resources than others--and on the interest and willingness of the staff to generate such a program with only symbolic external support. In addition to their internal resources they will have the one added advantage of a symbolic label.[11]

It seems likely that the loss of systemwide financial resources and the right to exceptions from system policies will also not occur uniformly. The magnets have increased parental power and have created a devoted parental following at many schools. Probably those schools with the most politically weighty and skilled parents (and the most adept principals to advise them) will retain more distinctiveness and more privileges than will others. Similarly, schools that can support their case with good test scores are more likely to continue to receive privileges. But since board members, the public, and some administrators are likely to look at test scores in the absolute rather than longitudinally, schools with more select student bodies will have an advantage.

In the political context, this prediction is an ironic one. I have suggested that magnets are under political attack in part because they are perceived as violating a norm that all schools should be formally equal in their resources and offerings. If the schools with the most powerful parents and most skilled students are able to escape, or partially escape, these pressures while the rest succumb, the magnet schools will lose much of their saving grace with regard to equity, the democratization of access to the better schools of the system. The few formally better schools which survive may indeed serve mostly the elite, just as the informally better schools did before them.

Notes

[1]Details about the city and the school system may be slightly altered to mask their identity.

[2]This picture is confused by the establishment of some special labels for many neighborhood schools. For example, every middle school has a name as a special kind of school. Three have no neighborhood attendance area and draw citywide. These are clearly alternative, or magnet, schools with distinctive programs. Possibly as many as three others have a significant special emphasis, at least in some of their offerings. The rest are ordinary schools, whatever their label. But the existence of these labels and of schools with modest special programming but attendance based on residence for one race confuses the definition of magnet versus ordinary schools.

[3]I started less systematic monitoring of school board meetings and of public information about the schools in the fall of 1977 when I wrote the first version of a research proposal and continued this attention between that time and the formal beginning of the research in 1979.

[4]In the third fall, there were two well publicized incidents, one of them a collective conflict between white and black students, but this occurred in the year that the high schools received the ninth grade for the first time. Consequently, they were overcrowded, filled with students half or more of whom were new to the school, and subject to a good deal of disorganization in scheduling. Without these added burdens racial relations remained below the flash point.

[5]Diverse and vague educational goals also leave them with the practical necessity of setting classroom priorities.

[6]The gifted and talented schools require teacher recommendation. And there are rumors of occasional exceptions to the lottery procedure--though sometimes to move difficult children out of other schools as well as to admit children with political influence.

[7]A second irony can be found in the disproportionate move of families from the schools which had earlier had strong reputations into the magnets. The phenomenon can be attributed in part to the alertness of the relatively well educated, affluent, and active parents who populated the attendance areas of these schools. Such parents were ready to take advantage of new opportunities and less sentimentally attached to their neighborhoods than others. But they were also dissatisfied in many ways with the neighborhood schools which had such strong reputations. It is possible that the superior reputations of such schools are as much myths in the sense of social fabrications as are the statements of standardization among schools.

[8]In my conversations I found the most educated parents, who used the alternative schools out of proportion to their numbers, were the most critical because they compared the alternative schools to their ideal of a school. Less educated parents compared the schools to their children's earlier experiences and were sometimes ecstatic in their expressions of gratitude and relief over the disappearance of various problems ranging from boredom to acting out.

[9]However, it is important that the parents I spoke with whose children were in alternative programs spoke more of the general atmosphere of the school, the style of relationships and the quality or flexibility of the curriculum, than of the specific alternative approach--with the exception of those in open education, the most distinctive program. Therefore it is not at all clear that parents who desired a choice were as much interested in being able to choose a

special program as they were in the availability of choice. They also looked for the extra perquisites in teachers, facilities, and enriching activities possessed by most of the magnets.

[10] I spent a week in one outlying neighborhood middle school for comparative purposes. When teachers in the lounge learned I was studying alternative schools they began to discuss them among themselves, sharing such 'facts' as their universal possession of an aid for every teacher, a gross exaggeration.

[11] Citywide attendance and the genuine voluntary enrollment it brings with it are also a substantial resource. Currently the busing necessary to this plan is funded primarily by the state. If state funds are withdrawn, the schools are likely to become gradually segregated and more parochial in their style ess legal pressures make them necessary to desegregation after 1984.

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