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ABSTRACT

A magnet school has four essential ingredients: a distinctive curriculum; a unique district purpose for voluntary desegregation; an opportunity for school choice; and access to students beyond a district attendance zone. Most magnet schools have one of five types of curricular themes: the fine, applied, or performing arts; the sciences; social studies occupations; general academics; and traditional and fundamental schools. In a 1983 study of 45 magnet schools, 2 out of 3 had enrollments that were racially and ethnically representative of their districts, while the third provided a substantial mix of students by minority subgroups. A 1990 study showed that only one-fifth of magnets practiced selectivity in their admission of students on criteria other than race or ethnicity. Reading achievement data gathered on 32 of the magnets in the 1983 study showed that 26 magnets equaled or exceeded the mean scores for their districts. Well-developed and locally supported magnets can accomplish policy aims that include contributing to a district's attainment of full racial and ethnic equity. If practitioners seek to start up or improve upon magnets in their districts, their considerations should include whether or not district decision makers are committed to quality desegregated education. Notes on studies selected for use in this report are provided. (10 references) (EJS)

O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R

The National Evidence On Magnet Schools

SWRL

Southwest Regional Laboratory

The Southwest Regional Laboratory is a public educational agency that exists to address challenges resulting from changing demographics and increasing numbers of at-risk children in the metropolitan Pacific Southwest. The Laboratory is governed by a board of directors selected in part by the state boards of education and the university systems in Arizona, California, and Nevada. The Laboratory addresses its mission by engaging in research, development, evaluation, training, technical assistance, and policy analysis. The bulk of the Laboratory's work is supported by competitively won federal and state contracts and grants.

The Laboratory publishes from time to time "occasional papers" that address issues relating to children who, for a variety of reasons, do not benefit from conventional schooling practices in the metropolitan Pacific Southwest. Inquiries are welcome; address them to E. Joseph Schneider, associate executive director, who edits the series.

The National Evidence On Magnet Schools

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Abstract

Magnet schools come in many sizes and shapes. In his paper, Robert A. Dentler summarizes and interprets the best available knowledge concerning magnet schools and adds a few ideas of his own. He suggests, for example, that magnets in practice perform at some point along a continuum that spans from the end point of quality desegregated learning environments to very poor segregated learning environments. Most, he says, hover somewhere around the midpoint on this continuum. His paper ends by citing examples of successful magnets and posing a set of questions that anyone interested in establishing a magnet should explore.

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Introduction

The magnet school, as a policy concept and a reality in public educational practice, is entering its third decade of evolution as an organizational and curricular innovation capable of contributing substantially to educational equity and improved teaching and learning. Specialty schools such as the Boston Latin School are as old as public education itself in America. From their existence as models on the one hand and from racial desegregation planning on the other, some of us began to design and evaluate the hybrid we called magnet schools in such cities as Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and Buffalo in the late 1960s. Congress passed a grant-giving program called the Emergency School Assistance Act (ESAA) in 1976, the centerpiece of which was magnet school development. With the exception of 1981-83, when the Reagan Administration stopped magnet grants, ESAA and its successor, the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP), have stimulated the multiplication of magnet schools and programs from 10 to more than 200 school districts between 1976 and 1990. More than 1,500 magnet schools and programs are operating today.

It was difficult during the first decade of magnet school development to distinguish between magnet, specialty, and alternative schools. It also was hard to separate restructuring proposals for open enrollment, freedom of choice, controlled choice, and vouchers, among others, from the terms and conditions peculiar to magnet schools. However, practical experience with magnets began to be combined with essays and empirical studies (Royster, Baltzell, & Simmons, 1979), so that by the second national study of magnets commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education in 1980 (Dentler, Baltzell, & Chabotar, 1983; Blank, Dentler, Baltzell, & Chabotar, 1983) it became feasible to define magnets with considerable precision.

A magnet school or program has four essential ingredients: a distinctive curriculum based on a special theme or instructional method; a unique district role and purpose for voluntary desegregation; voluntary school choice by the student and the parent, with variable criteria established for inclusion; and access to students beyond an attendance zone or single subdivision of a district. There are district administrators who say they operate

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magnets that do not have these ingredients, and there are even more administrators who cannot tell the difference between their own specialty schools, alternative schools, assignment plans, and magnets. But the commonality of these ingredients, given the newness of all of these ideas--save for elite specialty schools--is very extensive.

What is meant by a magnet school and what one is like in practice, if not on paper, also are quite well-known nationwide, especially in the districts hosting 20,000 or more students, where there are enough schools operating to differentiate among them. What is less available is the knowledge about the extent to which magnets accomplish the goals implied in their history and definition. This paper summarizes and interprets the best available knowledge on selected magnet issues and adds a few ideas drawn from the author's experiences with them in several districts. (The sources of the evidence and their strengths and limitations are summarized in the Appendix.) It concludes with some suggestions about how best to establish good magnet schools and programs.

Curricular Themes and Organization

There are enough exceptions to require the addition of a category called miscellaneous, but most magnet schools and programs have one of five types of curricular themes: the fine, applied, or performing arts; the sciences, including mathematics and computers; social studies occupations, such as health care or agribusiness; general academics, such as college preparation and honors courses; and traditional and fundamental schools. About one in five magnets combines two of these five themes and establishes a college preparatory school that also offers enhanced performing arts for example.

Very few districts are unable to develop their own curricular themes. Superintendents, principals, other staff, and board members usually visit a few well-known magnets and take home ideas for imitating while adding a few features of their own. Many districts use survey instruments for collecting parents' preferred themes and then ground their planning in the survey results.

This approach offers good documentation as well as early opportunities for parent and teacher involvement in magnet development. However, the survey results are often technically invalid. Many parental respondents know very little about the range of possibilities and tend to state theme preferences based on their limited knowledge. Also, frequency tabulations may obscure that a less widely preferred theme may nonetheless

attract strong enthusiasm and involvement from a subset of parents, teachers, and students. The latter factors are more pertinent to the magnet's long-term fate than its initial general popularity.

As with so many other innovations in American education, magnet themes are important for a magnet school's success and viability. Yet their development depends less on whether the theme is mandated from the top down, comes from a community survey, or is a product of a group of teachers and administrators, and more on whether there is a cluster of teachers, administrators, and board members who personally believe the thematic undertaking is worthwhile. Conviction, enthusiasm, and readiness to contribute are more important than the theme's popularity or origin.

Magnet schools and programs flourish under a variety of organizational arrangements. They can be built into any grade level from infant day care to senior high school. Full-time or dedicated magnet schools are easier in many ways to administer and operate than part-time programs because lines of authority get tangled in the latter and a program hosted in a school where it is disliked or opposed by the principal will face continuing challenges to survival. But different districts do well with every conceivable kind of arrangement, especially when it does not depart much from the district's general operating practices and traditions.

Desegregation

Two out of every three of the magnet schools and programs in the 1983 sample (Dentler et al., 1983) had student enrollments that were racially and ethnically representative of the white, black, and other minority enrollments in their districts. The remaining one in three provided a substantial mix of students by racial/ethnic subgroups, but fell short of districtwide representativeness.

In some districts, including many in the Pacific Southwest, white enrollments are kept as a statistical majority. Decisionmakers, in their historic ignorance of ethnic minorities, have mistakenly believed that integration is a concept upon the presence of a white majority. The same survey disclosed that magnet school staffs are generally not considered to be racially and ethnically congruent with the student mix, but they are the best desegregated staffs in their districts. In all districts sampled magnet schools and programs were hosted by well-mixed staffs. Rossell and Clarke (1987) did not study the

desegregation of staffs, but their survey confirmed the school by magnet school success in achieving and maintaining racial/ethnic student desegregation. In other words, at the school level, virtually all magnet schools and programs host a substantial student diversity. Some of them are mere islands of successful desegregation within their states and sometimes within their districts, while others are instrumental in bringing racial equity to whole districts.

Dentler et al. (1983) devised a Quality of Integration (QI) Index based on field staff ratings of magnet schools to measure the degree to which each magnet welcomed racial diversity, generated intergroup respect, made educative use of cultural differences, focused on equal access to school program participation, avoided stereotyping in the academic treatment of students, and exhibited firmness yet fairness in student promotion policies. Four variables among 34 magnets studied correlated highly with QI: QI scores increased as the proportion of black students enrolled increased beyond 20%; QI is a function of positive leadership from the school principal or program director; QI increases as a magnet is given relatively special attention or attention by the district central administration; and QI is powerfully associated with the degree to which a magnet runs true to its advertised curricular and thematic claims. Thus, the more a magnet is what its hosting system says it is, the higher its level of social integration is likely to be.

The evidence is solid that, nationwide, practitioners know how to develop and maintain racially and ethnically desegregated magnet schools. Rossell and Clarke (1987) found that such magnets were very significantly associated with location within their districts: white neighborhood locations offer the greatest likelihood of fostering desegregation within a magnet student body. Dentler et al. (1983) reported, to the contrary, that they found no statistically significant association between location and desegregative success within magnets. They used different measures and their analysis concluded that there is no significant correlation between magnet location and desegregative success within magnets.

Dentler et al. also found that local planners settle upon locations for a variety of reasons and cross-pressures on them often reduce the primacy given to desegregative potential. Planning decisions are too complex to be subordinated to a single research-based proposition, and it remains that a superintendent and school board committed to desegregation can achieve it using magnets under a wide range of locational considerations. There are districts in which decisionmakers and superintendents fail to understand that racial and ethnic equity do not mean that a magnet school must be one-half or majority

white and there are others that make similar if less egregious mistakes in magnet design. Generally, however, local capacity to make a soundly equitable magnet is sufficient and locational decisions in themselves also crop up if magnets are concentrated in white neighborhoods. When the most desirable magnets are located far from minority neighborhoods, a kind of one-way busing burden may develop, for instance, and when new magnets are built in white neighborhoods, dilapidated regular school facilities may be left to languish in black and other minority neighborhoods.

In the 1983 survey, seven of the 15 districts placed high reliance on their magnets to desegregate their systems overall. Some operated magnets to create an appearance of equity, but as shells in a shell game, played to preserve historic inequities. The big policy issue between 1975 and 1985 was whether magnets alone could desegregate school systems. Willie (1984) and Dentler and Scott (1981) and others argued that they could not, that magnets were effective desegregatively when they were part of a more complex series of remedial plans that included mandatory assignment of students.

Rossell and Clarke (1987) believe their findings are strong enough to end this debate. They identify the "white flight" effects of mandatory assignments and of cross-busing plans in general. They show how these effects can zap the prospects for quality desegregation schooling in many urban school districts, although they do not support the assumption made by the Reagan Administration that mandatory assignments are counterproductive. This policy proposition, while not supported by any systematic empirical evidence, was asserted very strongly in the actions initiated by the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice. Cross-busing plans in operation in some cities were discontinued with federal court permission; some city districts such as Houston were declared desegregated even as they continued to operate large numbers of all-minority schools; and Christine Rossell became the chief witness and planning expert for the Department of Justice in the one school desegregation case, in Yonkers, New York, that was prosecuted vigorously by the Reagan Administration from 1981 to 1988. Yonkers, a small industrial satellite adjacent to the Bronx, was successfully desegregated by the apparent use of magnets alone, although closer inspection reveals that a mandatory form of controlled choice was introduced to augment the magnet approach.

The policy debate has outlived the Yonkers success and Rossell and Clarke's research findings (1987), however. Rossell and Clarke's research is flawed, some other experts judged, because it includes districts they classified as desegregated that were not

desegregated in 1985 and are not now. These include Houston, Milwaukee, and San Bernardino. Rossell, in turn, has labored to show there are serious flaws in the research of others. Nearly all of the research evidence produced within the last 10 years reaches a consensus, however, on the proposition that magnet schools and programs can and often do play a very positive and durable role in fostering the racial/ethnic desegregation of school districts. In playing that role, magnets are aided by other desegregative techniques ranging from minority to majority transfer provisions, pairings of schools or grades, school closings and consolidations, and backup provisions for mandatory assignments--if the district is indeed working to accomplish equity. Magnets may achieve desegregation in districts on their own, but so may court ordered, mandatory assignment plans; and one or both are successful to the extent that there is authentic local political commitment to the policy goal.

As Dentler et al. (1983) noted, "Any policy alternative can be adopted or used in ways that defeat one of its ostensible aims" (pp. 91-92). They identified from their national sample some of the inequitable uses they observed: a shell game that creates the appearance of remedial action; a stall or stop introduced in the course of court demands for a remedy; magnets used as havens for parents seeking to avoid interracial contact or seeking to preserve special educational advantages; magnets as schools that succeed internally but also draw off students, staff, or resources from regular schools struggling to achieve equality of opportunity; the smuggled insertion of selective criteria that foster socioeconomic and therefore ethnic elites; and magnets that admit minority students, but then fail them or counsel them out. School districts from San Diego to Cincinnati and from Buffalo to Boston show us, however, that districtwide desegregation is feasible and that the magnet strategy can contribute very powerfully to its achievement.

Choice of School by Parent and Student

Of the 45 schools studied in 1983, nearly two-thirds or 29 were selective in their admission of students on criteria other than race or ethnicity. Blank's more recent study (1990) showed a marked increase in the number and proportion of non-selective magnets. He found only about one-fifth of the magnets practiced selectivity. It appears that as the number of magnets developed increases, and as parental and student demand for admission grows, selectivity declines.

Others have shown that magnets generally are not composed of educationally representative subsets of students, however. There is the effect of competition for seats; there is self-selection by parents and students who believe the magnet is more challenging or superior in some other respect; and there is the effect of differential access to or use of information about magnets by parents and students, as higher-achieving and more upwardly mobile students may seek out magnet opportunities.

In the 1970s and early 1980s magnets tended to attract a disproportionate share of high and low achievers--low achievers because parents of students doing poorly were using opportunities to choose magnets as second- and third-chance schools where students might improve their learning or standing over time. Today, more and more magnets attract slightly above average achievers who have better than average attendance and conduct records and are interested in the program's curricular theme.

A more noteworthy trend is for magnets to evolve within a districtwide context of several kinds of parental and student choice options. The most recent and innovative of these is the controlled choice policy. Under this policy, parents may apply for one or two or three among all or many of the district's public schools and their children may be assigned to a school of choice, subject only to racial/ethnic composition controls and seat availability. Clinchy (1989) has described and interpreted controlled choice in detail. It offers maximum freedom of choice without resort to a voucher policy that would open choice to nonpublic schools as well, but whether it is workable in a district with more than 20,000 students remains untested. Where a magnet stands alone or is one among a small network of magnets in a context of mandatory assignments to other schools, selectivity and competition for admission are apt to be very different from those in a context of multiple and diverse options.

Educational Achievement Outcomes

Magnet schools and programs can exert positive effects on individual student achievement. Dentler et al. (1983) obtained reading and/or mathematics achievement scores for 32 of the 45 magnets included in their national survey. These data varied greatly in test types and in quality of administration or recording of the results because the project used results obtained and documented by the participating districts rather than burden students with new and separate tests. Reading achievement test data suggested that 26 of the 32 magnets equaled or exceeded the mean scores for their districts. Indeed, 14 of the 32 exceeded the

district average by 10 more points and 7 exceeded it by at least 30 points. Mathematics achievement scores were quite similar.

Six of the 32 magnets failed to equal their average district achievement scores in reading, however, and 7 failed to do so in mathematics. Some 12 of the magnets differed from their district averages by no more than five points in either direction, and only 9 of the 32 outstripped their district averages dramatically. Thus magnets can and do deliver high educational quality, but most of them, like most nonmagnets, vary tremendously in their actual performances as teaching and learning environments.

The same study devised and used a Quality of Education (QED) Scale based on field staff ratings of each magnet. The five subscales were: (a) the degree to which teachers, administrators, and students interacted with one another; (b) the activity rates or ongoing task-based behavior among students and staff; (c) the degree to which the magnet projected a sense of community by staff and students; (d) the congruence between tasks and program aims; and (e) the degree to which material and symbolic features of the campus and program were fully used in the service of the magnet's mission. Most magnets obtained QED scores that clustered closely around the mean. These schools were found to be, in their day-to-day operations, much like good nonmagnet schools--that is, neither excellent nor poor. Some of the major correlates of QED across the study sample are discussed in the final section of this paper.

Blank's (1990) more recent study gathered achievement data on 12 districts nationwide. These data are more up-to-date and precise because 6 of the 12 districts conducted a few detailed local studies between 1986 and 1988 and Blank was able to review these reports. A number of them contained improved quasi-experimental design features such as measurement of the same students over time and use of one or more control groups. Nevertheless, the results are too fragmented to generalize. Many magnet students clearly outperform their local nonmagnet counterparts on achievement tests, others do not, some do not maintain these gains over time periods of more than a year, and some of the analyses are too imprecise to make a comparative conclusion.

Interpretive Synthesis

Magnet schools and programs are the offspring of matching the search for racial and ethnic equity in public education with the quest for improved teaching and learning. African-

American leaders and parents who risked so much between 1950 and 1970 in their struggle for equal protection and opportunity never doubted that equity and quality were two sides of a single policy vision. Yet as the Brown decision moved slowly and against intense, sustained opposition through the three decades that followed it, equity and quality often became disengaged. Magnet schools began as a conceptual tool in the kit of desegregation planners, a tool they hoped might improve access to educational opportunities while defusing local political conflicts over proposed uses of the tool of mandatory cross-busing.

Magnets matured in practice--or rather, some of them matured--between 1965 and 1985 to the point where they were much more than remedial tools. Well-developed and locally supported magnets today can and often do accomplish these larger policy aims: (a) they provide courses of study that barely existed locally before the magnet's establishment; (b) they draw together for improved multiethnic learning some of the most able teachers in a district and some of the best motivated students; (c) they offer districts local demonstrations of quality that may then be emulated by regular schools; and, above all (d), they contribute substantially to a district's attainment of full racial/ethnic equity.

Like other public education innovations, magnets perform at some point along a continuum that spans from the end point of quality desegregated learning environments to very poor segregated learning environments. Most of them today, judging from the evidence, hover somewhere around the midpoint on this continuum.

The 1983 national study found that quality (QED) and equity (QI) at the school level were significantly intercorrelated ($r = .62$) and that QED was most often a function of three organizational factors: definiteness, which was a measure of the program's cohesiveness, coherence, and internal consistency; special treatment, which was an indicator of the program support and attention a magnet receives from its district administration; and quality of principalship. Together, these variables produced a multiple R of .66 with the QED Scale.

Special treatment did not include magnet financing measures, but it surely might have. The cost evidence from Chabotar (1989) and Blank (1990) makes plain that magnets cost more than nonmagnets and that dollar investments usually improve quality and desegregation. The magnet school by school quality of racial/ethnic integration (QI), moreover, also correlated most significantly with definiteness and principalship. When

these variables were regressed together with the percentage of black students (e.g., the higher the percentage, the higher the quality of integration), the multiple $R = .60$.

All innovations embody some ironies. Foremost among those surrounding magnets is the logical point that what makes a magnet a success is what would make a nonmagnet a success if parental, teacher, and student hopes were fulfilled. An effective regular school is a fairly obvious one that usually attains high racial/ethnic equity and educational quality; therefore it will differ from a magnet only in the absence of a distinctive curricular theme.

Superintendent Jerome Jones of St. Louis, among others, has called for every school in his district to become a magnet. He is plainly responding to the policy irony just described; however, to call all of his schools magnets is to miss the point of the innovation. If all of the schools in a district became magnets, we would expect that some of them would become more magnetic than others.

A second irony is that the most successful magnets cost more to operate per pupil, at least in their start-up years, than do nonmagnets. Thus, it might follow that what a district adopting magnets is doing is sequestering critically scarce resources and investing them in some schools, but not others in the name of equality.

Informed and careful planning may eliminate these ironies. A magnet should be designed to become desegregated, distinctive, and educationally effective, but not to be selective in an elite sense. Its treatment by its district may require special support during its formation, for there are no worthwhile innovations that do not call out for this sort of institutional investment. Yet this essential favoritism should be given a close-out date by which treatment is restored to a more universalistic standard. And, good magnets should become something other than islands of multiethnic integration and good learning in a statewide or districtwide sea of segregation and programmatic deprivation. They need not become oases of patronage, and planning genuinely motivated by the ideal of equity can surmount these tendencies.

The best available national evidence and the outstanding success in many urban districts including San Diego, Kansas City, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Louisville, Buffalo, and Boston, suggest that magnet schools and programs will continue to endure and multiply in the United States. The same evidence tells us what should be seriously considered during planning and implementation, if practitioners seek to start up or to improve magnets in their

districts. The list of such considerations could be framed as questions such as these, each of them in search of an affirmative answer:

1. Are there decisionmakers in the district who are strongly committed to the attainment of quality desegregated education?

2. Are there principals, assistant principals, teachers, and parents who want to co-plan and later to work in one or more magnets? Are these individuals strongly committed to the attainment of quality desegregated learning environments? And are they willing and able to call for technical assistance from outside experts and agencies?

3. Is the curricular theme as developed one that can be made definite and that can be "delivered upon" in practice?

4. Will the magnet be open to all interested students and composed of an enrollment that is racially and ethnically representative of the district?

5. Can start-up funds and goods and services in kind be secured locally or from the state that will support the magnet in its first stage of development?

Sometimes a magnet can be established when only a few of these questions can be answered affirmatively; these are magnets that improve as they evolve and acquire local understanding and popularity. As with other prospectively worthwhile innovations, magnets need not stand by indefinitely until all dispositions and trends are favorable. The pragmatic and practical features of American school culture are part of the magnet development tradition. Whether they come later or sooner, however, the answers to these questions will need to be affirmed over time if the magnet effort is to prove worthwhile.

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Notes on Selected Studies

In 1977, the U. S. Office of Education commissioned Royster et al. (1979) to conduct a field survey of a sample of 18 districts receiving grants from the ESAA Office. That study, called by Rossell and Clarke (1987) "still the finest comparative analysis of magnet schools as desegregation tools," was, according to Baltzell (one of its senior authors), flawed in many respects, including serious flaws in its connection between field evidence and verbal exposition. Rossell, who admires the Royster report greatly and who based much of her NIE study on its approach, does not note she was its senior consultant.

Blank et al. (1983) were commissioned by the Office of Planning, Budget and Evaluation of the U. S. Department of Education to study the educational quality and desegregative features of magnets during the Carter Administration's final months. The design was to include comparisons between magnets and nonmagnets at the district and school levels. Under the Reagan Administration, the directions changed substantially and the study was supposed to limit itself to magnets and their districts as well as to de-emphasize the collection and analysis of desegregation data. This project was co-conducted by James H. Lowry and Associates, where Blank was employed, and by Abt Associates, where Dentler, Baltzell, and Chabotar were employed. Lowry was the prime contractor, but Abt provided the design and directed most of the field work and the data analysis. Field teams that included the senior researchers themselves visited all participating districts and magnet schools.

As the project ripened, Lowry made changes that attempted to bring the study into rhetorical line with the "excellence policies" of the Reagan Administration. The Abt group decided to complete and file a separate report to avoid this attempt. As a result, there is a Blank et al. report and a Dentler et al. report. They differ in several respects. The Blank report creates the impression that magnets are a subset of the "excellent schools" policy process, when that process did not begin nationally until after the magnet study's field work was one year old. The Blank report also stresses the educational achievement outcomes of magnets. The Dentler report used the same data to conclude that a few magnets were exemplary, but most did not differ in their educational effects from good nonmagnet schools.

The chief flaw in the project, which began in 1980 and concluded in 1983, is the absence of data adequate for comparisons between magnet and nonmagnet districts and schools. This is a serious compromise; however, the sample is national in character and goes well beyond ESAA-funded magnet districts. Moreover, the project team labored successfully if a bit covertly, with the help of valiant specialists in the U. S. Department of Education, to retain its focus on racial/ethnic desegregation.

Rossell et al. provide the single best national study of the magnets' role in school desegregation. Their sampling is superior except that some districts are classified as desegregated when there is abundant contradictory evidence and their measures of student desegregation levels are the best available in research literature. Both versions of this study--the 1987 one and the extended one in 1990--are substantial contributions to knowledge about the conditions under which magnets contribute to student racial/ethnic desegregation.

The Rossell project has design flaws, however, that reduce its validity and utility. It is based primarily on secondary data rather than from direct field observation. Therefore, neither desegregation processes nor magnet program particulars can be considered qualitatively or reliably. The project does not pause to digest the Blank et al. and Dentler et al. evidence on the location of magnets; it merely dismisses their findings as "wrong." Its own findings on location do not take the existing range of local considerations into close or precise account. Its own conclusion also discloses the penultimate emptiness of a stress on location decisions: "This is not a very policy relevant finding for most school districts, however, since they cannot exclude all minority schools from desegregation nor can they simply close all of them" (Rossell & Clarke, 1987, p. 58). Their work on curriculum themes is, finally, even less well-grounded in firsthand data than is their work on locations. While they find that "overall they [the magnet themes] are equally popular," (1987, p. 59), they also assert that white student percentages in minority-neighborhood magnets are highest where the theme is "basic skills/individualized and...fundamental" (1987, p. 59).

These flaws would not matter much for planning or implementing magnets if it were not that Rossell and Clarke assert in their Executive Summary, the section most likely to be read by practitioners, that "There are only two school factors that are consistently important in predicting a magnet school's success when other variables are controlled for: LOCATION. Magnet schools in minority locations have the lowest percentage white and the greatest deviation from racial balance. CURRICULUM. Magnet schools with

individualized curriculum have a higher percentage white than other types of curriculum" (1987, p. i). These are not very helpful conclusions.

Blank's (1990) report is grounded in the secondary analysis of local school district study reports and data he collected during 1987 and 1988 as a researcher in the State Education Assessment Center at the Council of Chief State School Officers. This study is based on a seriously flawed sampling design in that its findings are not representative of urban school districts or even magnet-using districts, but what it lacks in sampling it more than makes up for in substantive detail. This study provides a valuable and systematic overview of student selection criteria and of school achievement effects of magnets. It also identifies probable trends in the spread of magnets nationwide, in enrollments, and in changing practices. Where Rossell and Clarke offer almost no findings or interpretations of magnet educational effects, Blank's study offers no information about desegregation or racial equity.

Blank's (1990) report and Chabotar's (1989) report based on the 1983 survey together provide the only national information on dollar costs of magnet development. This factor has tremendous local, state, and federal significance in decisionmaking and implementation, and it merits much more intensive study in the future. Costs, like magnet programs and educational effects, as well as racial/ethnic equity implications, should be studied directly through firsthand data collection from schools and school districts. Rossell has demonstrated how much can be learned secondhand, to be sure, and Blank notes that the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) initiated in 1988 by the National Center for Education Statistics will eventually provide vital information on the magnet's long-term effects on students.

approaches will thus contribute to widening and deepening our knowledge about magnets in the future. But there are so many variations in local practices and so many discrepancies between what state and local administrators say or claim and what is in fact happening, that there is no substitute for research projects that take researchers into firsthand contact with districts, schools, and local records. Among the national studies done since 1977 on magnets, only the Blank et al. and Dentler et al. project carried out such an inquiry.

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