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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of the magnet school program of the Duval County Public Schools, Florida, was studied. The magnet schools were established at approximately half of the district's 150 schools as part of a desegregation plan. The schools offered a variety of theme programs. In spring 1998, the program was evaluated by four subcommittees of a steering committee, focusing on: (1) the unique and innovative nature of the program; (2) the achievement of desegregation; (3) academic achievement; and (4) parent and community involvement. The committee found that the number of schools with the "magnet" designation should be reduced, and the focus of the remaining magnets be better defined. Academic achievement for magnet school students was found to exceed that of nonmagnet school students at all levels. Thirty-seven of the district's 78 schools with magnet programs met the minimum desegregation requirements of the court's mandate. Forty-two percent of the elementary magnet schools and 39% of the secondary magnet schools had above-average volunteer participation, and similar percentages had an above-average number of business partners. The obvious success of these programs in the areas of academic achievement and community and parent involvement indicate the benefits to students resulting from parent choice in school selection and assignment. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

Examining Indicators to Assess the Overall Effectiveness of Magnet Schools: A Study of Magnet Schools in Jacksonville, Florida

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Examining Indicators to Assess the Overall Effectiveness of Magnet Schools: A Study of Magnet Schools in Jacksonville, Florida

Almost fifty years after the historic Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka (1954) decision, desegregation efforts in the United States have changed dramatically. Desegregation plans developed in the 1960s relied primarily on school closings and busing plans that involved pairing and clustering of schools to achieve desegregation goals. In the late 1980s and during the 1990s, many large urban school districts turned to the implementation of magnet programs as a desegregation tool. As more and more school districts are being declared unitary and desegregation plans are being dismantled, it is important to look at the effectiveness of magnet schools in achieving their purposes.

In recent years, magnet schools have proliferated in urban areas, largely as a result of their role in desegregation efforts (Steel, Levine 1994). In addition to their desegregation role, magnet schools also serve to enhance the educational opportunities that are available to all students through parent and student choice. Special funding of magnet schools to create and develop programs as well as funding for marketing and recruitment of students has been provided through federal Magnet School Assistance Program (MSAP) grants and other state and local initiatives.

Nicholas Lemann (1987) asserted that what has kept magnet schools from suffering the same fate as other education innovations was that they acquired powerful allies in federal judges. Magnet schools offered a way to integrate school systems without the negative consequences of unpopular mandatory busing. The glamour of high school performing arts magnets and specialized vocational magnets such as the health

professions served to keep white students from defecting to private, parochial or suburban school districts.

In a study of national evidence on magnet schools, Robert Dentler (1991) identified four essential ingredients: 1) a distinctive curriculum; 2) a unique district purpose for voluntary desegregation; 3) an opportunity for school choice; and 4) access to students beyond a district attendance zone. Dentler concluded that well-developed and locally supported magnets can accomplish policy aims that include contributing to a district's attainment of full racial and ethnic equity.

Doyle and Levine (1984) heralded the positive outcomes found in magnet schools. Among these are 1) high levels of student and teacher motivation, 2) high levels of student achievement, 3) fewer behavioral problems, 4) greater job satisfaction among magnet school teachers and 5) reasonable school integration. Doyle and Levine posited that magnet schools do not represent a panacea, but are a powerful tool for educational change.

Most researchers question the effectiveness of magnet programs in meeting desegregation goals. A 1996 report that examined the impact of federally supported magnet schools on school desegregation indicated that only half of the schools targeted for desegregation impact were able to meet their objectives during the grant period (Steele, Eaton, 1996). An earlier study by Janet Schofield (1978) traced the history of a magnet school that, three years after opening, had reverted to an overcrowded, predominantly black institution. George Will (1995) determined that magnet schools in Kansas City had not only failed to increase the non-minority enrollment, but had experienced lower test scores and an increased dropout rate. A 1996 *Education Week*

article also suggested that federally subsidized magnet schools have been of little use in desegregating schools (Hendrie, 1996). All of these studies appear to indicate that magnet programs are of questionable value in meeting school desegregation goals.

Other studies examine the effect of magnet schools in addressing educational objectives. Adam Gamoran (1996) concluded that the achievement benefits of magnet schools were substantial when compared with other public comprehensive schools and secular and parochial private schools. Another study by Doug Archbald (1995) determined that elementary magnet students in an urban school district had higher achievement scores than their neighborhood school counterparts. Some researchers are concerned with the separation and tracking that occurs in some "school within a school" magnet programs as well as the "creaming" effect that occurs in some magnet schools. Clearly, these results are mixed.

In an article in the New York Times Educational Supplement, Anthony Green (1988) argued that most American magnet schools are about "social engineering, not excellence". Green contends that although there are descriptive studies of many excellent individual magnet schools, little research has been conducted on the effects of magnet schooling on the general level of educational attainment in a school district.

One such study was funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Rolf Blank (1984) reported on a two-year national study designed to assess the effects of magnet schools on both educational quality and desegregation. The study involved 15 school districts and 45 magnet schools. In his findings, Blank concluded:

1) Magnet schools can and do provide high-quality education in urban school districts.

2) High-quality education in magnet schools does not stem from highly selective methods of admitting students.

3) District and school leadership, community involvement, and small additional expenditures are important factors that produce high-quality education in magnet schools. (p.272)

Blank's study offers promise for school districts that look to magnet schools as a vehicle for improving education in their districts.

The effectiveness of the evaluation design of magnet schools is open to question. Most evaluations of magnet programs are objective-driven with primary emphasis on students' characteristics, recruitment and retention of students, parent and community involvement and other basic educational outcomes. Douzenis (1994) contends that both data sources and evaluation questions need to be expanded for better understanding of magnet schools. Bryant (1987) identified and discussed components of successful magnet programs with evaluation listed as one of the core components. Bryant states that an effective evaluation design should address both process (e.g., implementation of the program theme, etc.) and product (e.g., student achievement data, parental involvement, community perceptions, etc.). Further studies that incorporate both process and product evaluation are important to assessing the overall effectiveness of magnet schools.

Little is known about the magnet school experience and the benefit to students once they leave it. Bailey (1987) indicated that several areas have been left unexplored including: 1) the success of students after leaving magnet schools, 2) the success of the magnet experience in fulfilling educational and career aspirations of students, and 3) the progress of students over the period of time that they are enrolled in magnet schools.

Despite the considerable amount of research that has been done on magnet schools, the opportunities for further study still exists.

The Duval County Magnet School Study

In the spring of 1989, the Duval County Public Schools and the Jacksonville Branch of the NAACP entered into a Stipulation and Agreement that outlined a new plan for desegregating the Duval County (Jacksonville), Florida schools. Essentially, the agreement abolished a twenty year-old desegregation plan that relied on mandatory busing of students and replaced it with a voluntary plan built on an extensive system of magnet schools. The new plan created magnet programs at approximately half of the district's 150 schools with focus on a variety of themes. After almost ten years of implementation, some community members and school officials questioned the overall success of the programs. There was an expressed need to initiate an evaluation of the magnet school program and to assess the effectiveness of the programs on a site-by-site basis.

Methodology

In the Spring of 1998, the Magnet School Advisory Council for the school district established a steering committee to begin the task of evaluating Duval County's magnet programs. The Magnet Advisory Council is a cross-representative group of educators, parents and community members whose role is to serve as an advisory board to the district's magnet programs staff. The council, modeled after a similar one in Miami-Dade County, meets regularly to review and recommend programs, strengthen communication, review program evaluations and respond to current and future concerns that affect the

magnet programs. The steering committee included representation from each of the constituent groups on the council.

It was readily apparent that the task would be complex and that the evaluation would need to focus on certain identified components. The steering committee decided to adopt the Magnet Schools of America criteria for Magnet Schools of Merit as the measure for identifying and determining whether each magnet school was fulfilling its mission.

The evaluation addressed the following questions:

1. Is the program unique and innovative?
2. Does the program achieve desegregation?
3. Does the program result in higher academic achievement for all students in the school?
4. Does the program involve parents and community partners?

To answer these questions, a systematic approach for gathering and analyzing data was used.

Sub-committees were formed to answer each of the questions listed above. The four sub-committees were named: 1) Unique and Innovative; 2) Desegregation; 3) Academic Achievement; and 4) Parent and Community Involvement. The committees began meeting in October 1998 and concluded their reports in February 1999. Reports from peer review committees, district enrollment reports, academic data for each school including achievement test data, and reports of parent and community involvement were analyzed. Magnet Advisory Council volunteers spent over 350 hours in the evaluation process with the assistance of several support personnel from the school district. The

result was a summary report from each sub-committee with supporting data that included conclusions and recommendations.

Summaries of the Sub-committees

Unique and Innovative – This sub-committee reviewed data collected previously by the magnet office. Specifically, it examined peer review reports and school magnet brochures noting the unique and innovative features that were identified. Because the data did not completely address the questions raised by the sub-committee, a new questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire, titled Magnet Data Sheet (Attachment 1), was sent to each magnet principal to complete. School visits and interviews were also conducted as follow-up to the questionnaires. The committee analyzed the data and developed a report of the findings which were in turn reported to the full Magnet Advisory Council.

Desegregation – This sub-committee analyzed magnet enrollment data to determine the number of magnet schools that had met the minimum court-ordered desegregation requirements and the extent to which magnet programs had effectively furthered school desegregation in the district.

Academic Achievement – This sub-committee reviewed and analyzed the results of the district's 1997-98 norm-referenced achievement test for grades 4, 5, 8 and 10. These grades were selected for review because consistent test data over multiple years were available. At each grade level, standardized test scores were reviewed and comparisons made for both magnet and non-magnet students at each magnet school site. Several factors, including principal mobility, student mobility, teacher mobility and transportation were identified as considerations that impact academic achievement and warranted further analysis.

Parent and Community Participation – This sub-committee collected and analyzed data on volunteer participation, numbers of business partners and PTA membership in the magnet schools. The results of the data from magnet schools were compared to those of non-magnet schools. The findings were disaggregated for elementary, middle and high schools. Findings of the four sub-committees were presented to the Magnet Advisory Council as a whole and the council deliberated and reached consensus on nine basic statements that crossed all magnet programs.

Findings and Recommendations

Each sub-committee drew conclusions from their study and made several recommendations based on their findings. Those findings and recommendations included:

Unique and Innovative –

1. The selection of names of magnet themes should better describe the focus of the magnet program. (i.e. "Electronic School" deals with technology and not electronics.)
2. Elementary magnet themes should be sufficiently broad in scope to assure that students acquire a solid foundation in all basic academic disciplines.
3. All schools with magnet programs should receive funding that is designated for such purpose…even if this is limited to funding for planning time for school level staff to develop and market their program.
4. Priority should be given to selecting and assigning faculty and staff with appropriate qualifications to implement the school's magnet theme.
5. Magnet themes should be "infused" and available for all children who attend the school. Avoid school-within-a-school magnet programs.

6. Magnet schools would be encouraged to set a goal of securing/establishing at least one partnership related directly to the educational goals of the magnet program/theme.

7. School staff should be encouraged to identify a small number of performance outcome advantages of student participation in their magnet program.

8. The number of schools that bear the designation of magnet school should be significantly reduced.

Academic Achievement

1. Academic achievement for magnet students exceeds non-magnet academic achievement at all levels -- elementary, middle and high schools.

2. In the dedicated academic magnet schools, academic achievement exceeds the district average.

3. Academic achievement for disadvantaged magnet students, those eligible for free or reduced lunch, exceeds that of disadvantaged non-magnet students.

Desegregation

1. Thirty-seven of the district's seventy-eight schools with magnet programs (47%) met the minimum desegregation requirements of the court-ordered Stipulation and Agreement.

Parent and Community Involvement

1. Forty-two percent of elementary magnet schools and thirty-nine percent of secondary magnet schools had above average volunteer participation.

2. Forty-five percent of elementary magnet schools and thirty-nine percent of secondary magnet schools had an above average number of business partners.
3. Forty percent of the elementary magnet schools and thirty-three percent of the secondary magnet schools had commendable or superior levels of PTA membership.
4. Both elementary and secondary magnet schools had greater volunteer participation than non-magnet schools.
5. Both elementary and secondary magnet schools averaged more business partners than non-magnet schools.
6. Both elementary and secondary magnet schools averaged a higher percentage of PTA membership than non-magnet schools.

Consensus Statements

There was a common perception in advance of the Magnet Advisory Council's study that magnet programs were not working to accomplish the stated goals. The large number of magnet programs in the school district detracted from the feeling of uniqueness that is one of the essential magnet program elements. However, at the conclusion of the study, the council was able to make some broad statements as to the overall effectiveness of the programs.

Several consensus statements were reached from the research reports of the sub-committees. The council agreed to the following:

- Magnet schools **provide choice** for parents and children.
- There tends to be a **higher** level of **support from parents and the community** in magnet schools.

- Magnet schools have **improved integration** of the student population in the school district.
- Magnet schools **alone cannot provide integration** for the entire school system.
- Magnet school can provide **cultural diversity**.
- A **small number** of magnet programs appear to be well known and successful.
- The **large number** of magnet programs causes **problems** with:
    - Public awareness
    - Public understanding
    - Management of magnet programs
    - Marketing of magnet programs
    - Allocation of resources among magnet programs
- **Barriers** to the success of magnet programs include:
    - Transportation
    - Distance
    - Funding
- Magnet schools are a **valuable resource** for the district.
- Magnet programs build **dedicated staff** with a **common mission** and philosophical approach to learning.
- Magnet programs **explore and develop** different ways to engage students in learning.
- Magnet programs should be a solid resource for **demonstrating and modeling "best practices."**

A few general recommendations were also agreed upon including: 1) reducing the number of magnet programs, and 2) conducting additional research including implementing a survey of school effectiveness. It was generally concluded that magnet schools in Duval County reflected many of the positive elements identified in other research studies of magnet schools. It was also evident that many of the concerns identified by other magnet schools researchers were confirmed as concerns or issues in the Duval County magnet schools.

This study of the effectiveness of magnet schools in achieving the goals of excellence and equity offers much food for thought. The obvious success of these programs in the areas of academic achievement and community and parent involvement indicates that when parental choice is involved in school selection and assignment, there are observable and measurable benefits to students. What is also clear in Jacksonville, as is true in other urban school districts, is the questionable value in achieving desegregation goals. In any respect, school choice within the public school domain through magnet program options is a viable and credible strategy for school districts.

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MAGNET PROGRAM DATA SHEET

To assess if
The magnet program is "fulfilling its mission."

School name: _____ Level: _____

Magnet Theme (Note: One theme per page) _____

Possible Data Sources: 98-99 School Improvement Plan, School Goals, Principal, Lead Teacher, Magnet Office

A. PLANNING/INPUTS:

1. Specific 98-99 goals relevant to the magnet theme:

2. Relevant staff qualifications/experience/expertise and training *(e.g. Degrees, certificates, licenses, etc.):*

NAI: yes___ no___ Source:

Possible Data Sources: Principal's Report re: "Unique and Innovative", brochure, Lead Teachers, Principals

B. PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION:

1. ***Relevant curriculum and student experiences*** *(e.g. courses, activities, projects, teaching strategies, co-op arrangements and other experiences)* ***which reflect the magnet theme:***

2. ***Relevant partnerships/ community projects or service*** *(companies, agencies, professional groups, other schools, etc.):*

NAI: yes___ no___ Source:

Possible Data Sources: Principal's "Unique and Innovative", testing office, Principal, Guidance, Lead Teacher

C. PROGRAM OUTPUTS/OUTCOMES:

1. ***Specific indicators of student performance related to magnet theme*** *(e.g. Standardized or professional test scores, other):*

2. ***External recognition related to the magnet theme*** *(recognize program, students, staff &/or school – not grants or gifts):*

NAI: yes___ no___ Source:

Possible Data Sources: **Conclusions from data above;** Peer Review Commendations/Recommendations, Effective Schools Criteria, Survey results, Special internal/external studies)

D. CONCLUSIONS re: OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS OF MAGNET

1.
2.
3.
4.

Reviewed by: _____ phone _____ date _____

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