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ABSTRACT

This paper explores issues related to magnet schools and racial diversity, reviewing research on magnet schools that underscores the importance of analyzing how effective magnets are in reducing racial isolation, how these data differ across districts, and what accounts for these differential effects. The paper also includes findings from a 3-year study of magnet schools in two major urban school districts (Saint Louis, Missouri, and Cincinnati, Ohio), examining the social context of school choice in order to highlight the interplay between choice policies and efforts aimed at school desegregation. It focuses specifically on issues of social class isolation in the context of magnet school systems that are designed to address racial diversity, arguing that these persistent patterns of socioeconomic segregation can be arrested under certain conditions. The paper concludes by discussing indications that the post-busing era of desegregation and litigation signals a heavy reliance upon magnet schools and parental choice without the commitment to diversity goals that marked earlier decades of social and educational reform. (Contains approximately 41 references.) (SM)

Social Class Isolation and Racial Diversity in Magnet Schools

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Abstract

Magnet schools provide school districts with an alternative to mandatory reassignment and busing by providing a choice for parents among several school options--each offering a different set of distinctive course offerings or instructional formats. In magnet schools, enrollments are often managed to ensure a racially balanced student population.

This paper explores magnet schools and racial diversity. We begin with a review of the research on magnet schools that underscores the importance of the unit of analysis. How effective are magnets in reducing racial isolation? How do these data differ across districts? What accounts for these differential effects?

We follow this macro-level analysis with findings from our three-year study of magnets in two major urban school districts: St. Louis and Cincinnati. This section examines the social context of school choice in-depth in order to understand the interplay between choice policies and efforts aimed at school desegregation. We focus specific attention upon issues of social class isolation in the context of magnet school systems that are designed to address racial diversity, and argue that these persistent patterns of socio-economic segregation can be arrested under certain conditions. We conclude with troubling indications that the post-busing era of desegregation and litigation signals a heavy reliance upon magnet schools and parental choice without the commitment to diversity goals that marked earlier decades of social and educational reform.

Introduction

Magnet schools are being established in more and more school systems in an attempt to promote racial diversity, improve scholastic standards, and provide a range of programs to satisfy individual talents and interests. Magnet schools, sometimes referred to as "alternative schools" or "schools of choice," are public schools that provide incentives to parents and students through specialized curricular themes or instructional methods. The term "magnet" gained popularity in the 1970s when policy makers were designing desegregation plans in an effort to make them more attractive to parents, educators, and students. Magnet schools provide school districts with an alternative to mandatory reassignment and forced busing by providing a choice for parents among several school options--each offering a different set of distinctive course offerings or instructional formats. In magnet schools, enrollments are often managed to ensure a racially balanced student population.

Since 1975, when federal courts accepted magnet schools as a method of desegregation (see *Morgan v. Kerrigan*, 421 US 963), their number has increased dramatically. Indeed, between 1982 and 1991, the number of individual schools offering magnet programs nearly doubled to over 2,400 and the number of students enrolled in these programs almost tripled. By the 1991-92 school year, more than 1.2 million students were enrolled in magnet schools in 230 school districts (Yu & Taylor, 1997). Distribution of magnet schools: 85% are located in large (>10,000 enrollment) urban districts; 72% are located in high (>50% minority) districts;

55% are located in low (<50% Free Lunch Eligible) SES districts (Steel & Eaton, 1996).

Magnet schools are typically established in urban school districts with large student enrollments (over 10,000). According to the U.S. Department of Education, 53% of large urban school districts include magnet school programs as part of their desegregation plans, as compared to only 10% of suburban districts. Over half of all magnet programs are located in low socio-economic districts (Levine, 1997).

Although they can involve all grade levels, more than half of the nation's magnet programs serve elementary school students; only 20% of magnets are located at the high school level (Yu & Taylor, 1997; Levine, 1997). The most common type of magnet school is one that emphasizes a particular subject matter, such as math and science, computers and technology, or a foreign language. Following subject matter in terms of popularity are programs that offer a unique instructional approach, such as a Montessori or Paideia.

Magnet school programs are extremely popular, as measured by the fact that over 75% of all districts with magnets have a greater demand for student slots than they can fill; half of these districts maintain long waiting lists (Blank, Levine & Steel, 1996). With this level of demand, and with a total of over 15% of all students in magnet districts already enrolled in magnet schools, school districts must limit entry into the specialized programs. Most accomplish this through an admissions process that uses a lottery format. Others rely upon a first-come, first-serve arrangement. Only about one-third of all magnet programs use a selective admissions policy; these usually involve either a minimum test score requirement,

or in a performing arts magnet, the admission may be based upon performance in an audition.

In many instances, districts have supported magnet schools with a considerable investment of resources. On average, expenditures per student are 10% higher in districts with magnets; almost three-fourths of magnet programs have additional staffing allowances as well. Some magnet programs are funded through state desegregation funds. Most are funded under two-year grants through the federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP). These funds are made available to districts that are either implementing magnets voluntarily or that are acting under court-ordered desegregation. The MSAP serves a critical role in magnet school creation and expansion efforts nationwide. The program provides about \$110 million annually to support magnet school programs; between 1985 and 1993, about \$750 million in MSAP funds were allocated to 117 different school districts (Steel & Eaton, 1996).

This paper explores magnet schools and racial diversity. We begin with a review of the research on magnet schools that underscores the importance of the unit of analysis. In terms of understanding the value and impact of magnet schools as a tool for reducing racial segregation, we first ask: compared to what? The analyses differentiate between within school and district-wide outcomes. How effective are magnets in reducing racial isolation? How do these data differ across districts? What accounts for these differential effects?

We follow this macro-level analysis with findings from our three-year study

of magnets in two major urban school districts: St. Louis and Cincinnati. This section examines the social context of school choice in-depth in order to understand the interplay between choice policies and efforts aimed at school desegregation. We focus specific attention upon issues of social class isolation in the context of magnet school systems that are designed to address racial diversity, and argue that these persistent patterns of socio-economic segregation can be arrested under certain conditions. We conclude with troubling indications that the post-busing era of desegregation and litigation signals a heavy reliance upon magnet schools and parental choice without the commitment to diversity goals that marked earlier decades of social and educational reform.

Magnet Schools and Desegregation

There are numerous evaluations of local school magnet plans that suggest a very complex set of conclusions regarding the utility of magnet schools in achieving racial desegregation. This is expected; districts vary largely in terms of the nature of their magnet school plans (such as types and numbers of options), transportation availability, and overall district enrollment patterns. Obviously, districts with larger proportions of minority students will find it harder to achieve racial desegregation irrespective of the type of desegregation options in place. Interestingly, these are precisely the districts most likely to have magnets as central components of their desegregation plans. Specifically, 78% of students in districts with magnets are in large urban districts, 66% of students are in high-minority districts, and 47% of

students are in low-income districts (Steel and Levine, 1994). It follows as Plank et. al. (1992) report, that choosing a magnet school for black middle school students is likely to racially segregate them from whites, while whites tend to integrate magnet schools. The effects of magnet schools will be very sensitive to the specific arrangements under which these schools operate.

An evaluation of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg magnet program in 1996 seemed to point to great success. After three years of operation, the magnet schools at all levels had racially mixed student bodies ranging from about 50% white to 44% black students in elementary schools, and 55% white and 38% black students in the magnet high schools. Of the newly admitted students to magnet schools, 40.4% were black. Non-magnet schools also remained racially balanced (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 1995). Other positive results emerged from evaluations of Montclair, N.J. and New York State. Black (1996) reviews these positive evaluation reports from Montclair, N.J. and New York State to "attribute significant and sustained improvement in desegregation to the implementation of magnet schools" (p. 35).

In contrast, in Kansas City, for example, a far larger and more complex environment, magnet schools did not have the intended impact on dramatically changing racial balance patterns. Minority enrollments from 1985 to 1993 remained a steady 73-75 percent of all students, and magnet schools did not meet their desegregation goals of 40/60 (Morrison, 1994). The district was largely unsuccessful in attracting non-minority students into its schools. Another example of an unsuccessful magnet school program is Prince George's County, Maryland.

Although a majority of students, 72%, attended schools within new racial balance guidelines, these guidelines were so variable, being defined by the racial composition of the school system, that students often went to minority-isolated schools (Eaton & Crutcher, 1996).

Beyond individual district and local site evaluations, one of the major sources of information about the impact of magnet schools on school desegregation efforts is an evaluation of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (Steel & Eaton, 1996). The Magnet School Assistance Program (MSAP) provides federal dollars to "support the elimination, reduction, or prevention of minority isolation in elementary and secondary schools with substantial portions of minority group students" (Steel and Eaton, 1996, p. i). The data for the evaluation were collected from 119 districts and 1,043 magnet schools following grantees from 1989 until 1991. Data regarding desegregation in magnet schools were available from 615 schools (58% of the total school, and 93% of the districts).

Schools participating in MSAP declared one of three possible desegregation goals for their magnet schools. The first goal, to reduce isolation, pertains to minority isolated schools—those with more than 50 percent minority enrollments. "To *reduce* minority isolation is to reduce the percentage of minority students in a minority-isolated school" (Steel and Eaton, 1996, p. 20). To *eliminate* minority isolation, a second goal, is to reduce a school's percentage of minority students to less than 50 percent of enrollment, while the third goal, to *prevent* minority enrollment, is to keep a school's minority enrollment from rising above 50 percent

of enrollment.

Table 1, adapted from Steel and Eaton, presents the number of schools that specified and obtained each desegregation goal from the sample of 615 schools. The majority (85%) of schools (N=529), stated a desegregation goal of reducing minority isolation; that is, they wanted to either reduce their absolute numbers of minority enrollments, or prevent the minority enrollment at the particular magnet school from rising faster than the district-wide average rate. Less than half, 44% of magnet schools, were successful in meeting this objective. On average, of those schools meeting this goal, minority enrollment was decreased by 1.5%, with a range from 55% to .1 percent. Even less successful were schools that targeted the elimination of minority isolation. Although only a relatively small number of schools attempted to eliminate minority isolation, 2% (N=12), only four schools were successful in meeting this goal. The third, and most successful desegregation goal met by magnet schools was the prevention of minority isolation. Although relatively few magnet schools slated this goal, 13 (N=182), of those, 72% (N=60) were successful in preventing minority enrollment from rising above 50 percent. On average, minority enrollment was at 39% for schools successful in meeting this objective. It should be noted that these results were relatively similar regardless of whether the desegregation plan involving magnet schools were mandatory (court-ordered) or voluntary with one exception. Elimination of minority isolation was only achieved in mandatory desegregation plans. (A new federal study of MSAP grantees is currently underway.)

[Insert Table One Here]

Further analysis of the MSAP data reveals the importance of understanding the particular district context of any magnet school plan for evaluating the effectiveness of magnet schools in achieving racial desegregation. The MSAP data indicate that magnet school desegregation is greatly dependent upon the type of magnet program, the overall minority enrollment in the district, changes and trends in minority school enrollments, and the type of desegregation plan. Specifically, Steel and Eaton report those individual magnet schools with high proportions of minority students *relative* to their districts were more likely to meet desegregation goals. In contrast magnet schools that had "higher overall proportions of minority students initially and/or were experiencing higher rates of growth in minority enrollment levels were less likely to meet their objectives" (p.43). In addition, "dedicated", or whole school magnet programs, where all students must choose the school, were the most successful in meeting desegregation goals, as compared to programs within schools, or mixed models of magnet and attendance zone magnets.

How can we interpret these results? Do these findings suggest success, failure, or mere uncertainty? In order to fully assess the impact of magnet schools on school desegregation we argue that it is crucial to understand the local context of any given magnet school plan. A crucial question that must be considered, is "compared to what"? In other words, what else is happening in the school district? Are other schools becoming racially isolated? Is overall minority enrollment in the district

rising? What are the costs and benefits of magnet schools in terms of equity, community, and social isolation in these school districts? Does racial balance occur at the expense of social class segregation? In the next section we turn to these questions by providing an in-depth view of two large urban district magnet school plans.

Social Class and Racial Balance in Magnet Schools

The next section examines the social context of school choice in two major school districts -- Cincinnati and St. Louis -- in order to understand the impact of well established, robust magnet school programs on racial balance within elementary schools located in large urban districts.¹

Our major interest involves the conditions under which school choice systems operate. How does the context of decision-making for parents in a system of school choice influence the racial and socio-economic composition of magnet schools and non-magnet schools? Who chooses magnet schools? What sources of information do parents use when making choices? Why do parents make the choices they do? We relied upon extensive surveys with parents and teachers and intensive case studies of four magnet schools. First, we describe the two urban school districts in our study.²

Cincinnati

During the 1993-94 school year, the Cincinnati Public School District operated 61 elementary schools, 8 junior high/middle schools, 10 secondary schools, and 7

special schools. Magnet (or what the Cincinnati system calls alternative) program choices were offered to students at all grade levels (K-12).

In the Cincinnati system, magnet programs are differentiated by curriculum or special interest areas as well as by instructional approach (for example, Montessori, Paideia). Magnets in the alternative program are also differentiated by enrollment structure and program coverage. The Cincinnati system uses four types of structures: 1) full, or dedicated, magnets enroll students strictly on the basis of a formal application and admissions process (described below) and provide alternative instruction to all students enrolled at the school site; 2) mixed magnets provide alternative instruction to all students enrolled at the school but enroll a combination of neighborhood/zoned students (because a percentage of the enrollment is reserved for zoned students) and students who have formally applied to the school but live outside the school's attendance zone (city-wide application zone); 3) schools-within-schools are programmatically distinct components of a neighborhood school and provide alternative instruction only to those students who are enrolled in the magnet component based on their selection through the district's alternative school application process; 4) mixed schools-within-schools are a special version of schools-within-schools. They are organized within an existing neighborhood school and reserve a percentage of their enrollment capacity for zoned children, in addition to children living outside the attendance area. (Our study focused solely on the dedicated/full magnet schools).

At the time of our study, acceptance into magnet programs was based

primarily on the application date (first-come, first-served) and race. Transportation is provided for students in grades K-8 who live more than one mile from their alternative school. Transportation is provided for all students in grades 9-12.

Total district enrollment in 1993-94 was approximately 51,000 students (66% African American, 32% white, 2% other). The system enrolled 46% of its students in magnet programs in the 1993-94 school year. Of those enrolled in magnets, 61.7% were African American. More than 43% of the district's African American students were enrolled in magnet programs in 1993-94.

St. Louis

The St. Louis City District operates a total of 104 schools, including 73 elementary schools, 21 middle schools, 10 high schools, and 7 special schools. The St. Louis City District has 26 full-time and 2 part-time magnet programs within the city.

The district operates three different types of schools under the terms of its desegregation plan: 1) magnet schools; 2) non-integrated nonmagnet schools that are 98% African American and located in predominantly African American neighborhoods; and 3) integrated nonmagnet schools in or near "naturally integrated" or transitional neighborhoods or achieved by busing.³

Total enrollment in St. Louis City Schools is approximately 36,091 of whom 78% are African American. Any student who lives in St. Louis City (and white students who live in the 16 participating suburban county districts that are part of the voluntary interdistrict transfer program) may apply to magnet schools.

Assignments to magnets are made on the basis of a general lottery, held in the spring. In 1993-94, the district enrolled 10,087 students in city magnets: African American students comprised 58% of total magnet enrollment and whites comprised 42%. Approximately 15% of the city's African American students are enrolled in city magnets, while 40% of the city's white students attend city magnets.

Beyond the district-wide data, what do magnets look like in Cincinnati and St. Louis? The following are brief descriptive sketches of our case study sites.

Greenwood Paideia. (Cincinnati). Greenwood Paideia⁴ enrolls 378 students in grades kindergarten through 6th and is located near an industrial park in a racially mixed, middle-class section of the city about 20 minutes from downtown Cincinnati. Approximately 95% of the students are bussed to Greenwood from neighborhoods across the city. The student population is 52% African American and 48% white. Forty-five percent of the students at Greenwood qualify for free lunch.

Mathematics and Science Academy of Cincinnati (MaSAC). MaSAC enrolls 575 students in grades kindergarten through 6th, and is located in a working-class, predominantly white neighborhood on the western edge of the city. Approximately 83% of the students are bussed to MaSAC from areas across the city. The school population is 51% African American and 49% white. Seventy percent of the students at MaSAC qualify for free lunch.

Overbrook Basic Academy (St. Louis). Student enrollment at Overbrook rests at 253 and includes grades pre-school through grade five. The student population is 60% African American and 40% white. Over 90% of the students who attend

Overbrook are bussed in from different neighborhoods across the city and county. Sixty four percent of the students at Overbrook qualify for free lunch.

Viking Basic Academy (St. Louis). Viking includes grades kindergarten through fifth and has a student enrollment of 298. The student population is 51% African American, 45% white, and 4% "other." More than 90% of the students are bussed from various neighborhoods across the city and county. Sixty eight percent of the students at Viking qualify for free lunch.

Magnet Schools as a Tool for Racial Balance

Without compromise, both St. Louis and Cincinnati use magnets effectively to create racially balanced schools in their respective school districts. Although the issue of racial desegregation tends to be muted by more vocal claims among educators regarding magnet program stability, excellence and instructional innovation, the evidence clearly indicates that the court-ordered desegregation guidelines from which these magnet school programs originated have been efficiently and explicitly addressed (Taylor and Yu, 1999). On average, African-American comprise about 60% of magnet school enrollments in St. Louis and about 50% in Cincinnati, with white students making up the difference (See Table 2).

The racial balance of the schools in St. Louis that participated in our study is consistent with the court decree. The racial balance of the 10 magnet schools in our study ranged from 62% to 51% African-American students, whereas the integrated nonmagnet schools ranged from 88% to 26% African-American students. The racial

balance of the Cincinnati magnet schools that participated in our study range from 57% to 46% African-American, while the nonmagnet schools ranged from a high of 85% African-American to a low of 30% African-American.

[Insert Table 2 Here]

It is important to note that in St. Louis, where African-American students comprise 78% of the school-age population, only 15% of the city's African-American students are enrolled in city magnets. The large proportion of African-American students in the city means that a significant and disproportionate number of African-American students who apply for admission to a magnet school are placed on a waiting list. A larger percentage of African American students in St. Louis choose suburban schools over magnets through the inter-district transfer plan (see Wells & Crain, 1997).

The Perceived Value of Racially Integrated Schools

Magnet school teachers in both cities described with insight and emotion the compelling rationale behind their school charter. Although some regard authentic racial understanding and integration as "beyond us" and belonging more appropriately to the values modeled in family life and in community arrangements, teachers expressed widespread regard for the racial balance represented in magnet classrooms and school corridors. Sarah Grant, a third grade teacher from Greenwood Paideia, punctuated the point:

I believe in integrated schools. I believe in as many kids together from

as many different backgrounds as possible. I think that is the richest education the kids are getting when they are going to school with so many different cultures. I think that is a very important thing for all kids, kids from different socio-economic backgrounds, too.

Teachers at Overbrook Academy in St. Louis voiced similar sentiments about the value of racially integrated schools and were equally impressed with the results of their racially balanced environments. While not a perfect solution to racially segregated neighborhoods -- a prominent feature of residential life in St. Louis, as it is in numerous U.S. cities (Orfield, Bachmeier, James, & Eitle, 1997) -- many view the central aims of the desegregation plan and the strategy of using magnet schools, as a viable and worthy enterprise. Bill Rogers, a 24-year veteran teacher at Overbrook, explained this viewpoint:

You can look out the window. . . And see black and white children playing together, which is why we were invented, and on that level for the children, it works. Now, of course when they get on the buses and go back to separate neighborhoods, it is hard to stay friends for life, but that is a community problem; it is not something we can solve in the schools.

Charlie Allen, the gym teacher at MaSAC for 12 years, concurred:

I wish all the neighborhoods were racially and economically integrated so children could grow up in a diverse culture because when they get out of school, they are going to have to deal with all kinds of other

people, rich and poor, black and white. And that is what schools have to provide. Neighborhoods don't do that. So you go to an alternative and you wind up busing.

Many teachers spoke specifically to the value of children "exposed to other cultures," the importance of "learning that they are just the same as you and me," and the goal of "kids learning to get along better" across racial/ethnic groups. They observed with pride the pervasive patterns of children mixing across racial groups socially and academically -- in the classroom and out on the playground.

The Cost of Integration

Most teachers were quick to point out that the racial integration in magnets comes with a cost; when school systems transport children so far away from their neighborhoods, the social distance between schools and families grows to reflect the geographical space that separates them. This point was made repeatedly. But the justification for these policies and the willingness to sacrifice a sense of community for a manifest commitment to integration, is a constant reminder to teachers of a collective goal tied to improved racial understanding. And although there is a sense of doing battle with influences beyond their control, there is an unwavering belief that promoting racially integrated schools is an important contribution to larger efforts. As first grade teacher Shanika Taylor at Viking Academy in St. Louis noted:

You need to learn the cultures of others. There are students who hear things at home and they never would know the difference. They believe that until they are around another race and then they discover

that these people aren't so bad after all. It is that sort of thing that I think about when I think about doing away with the busing.

In a similar vein, sixth grade teacher Bill Rogers at Overbrook lamented the cavalcade of buses—eleven in all—that transport children for up to one hour away from school to their neighborhoods across St. Louis. Is it worth it?

In a perfect world, I guess what they would have done is integrate the neighborhoods, then children could go to their neighborhood schools. But I wouldn't know how to do that. Maybe if they could magnetize neighborhoods.

Magnet Schools and the Social Context of Choice

The importance of magnet schools reaches far beyond their utility as a tool for improving racial balance. The central debate regarding the conduct and character of magnet schools is framed by concerns related to equity and fairness. Controlled choice arrangements such as magnet schools may be assessed in terms of the degree to which they address the educational needs and interests of all students. A central mechanism in this "test of equity" involves providing information that is both accessible and understandable to all parents, and which allows parents (not just the most sophisticated or well-educated) to make informed decisions about where their children will go to school. The standard and acceptable measure of equity, then, seeks to serve and benefit all students, regardless of racial, ethnic, or socio-economic status (Glenn, McLaughlin & Salganik, 1993; Moore and Davenport, 1989).

Information of this character advises parents regarding the supply of educational options, such as the content of specific programs, and is crucial to the demand side of magnet school choice and the way in which parents exercise and express their choices (Salganik & Carver, 1992).

Critics of school choice plans often point to the issue of access to information as one of the major sources of inequity under magnet school programs. These analysts suggest that economically disadvantaged families do not have adequate access to information, may not be aware of their options for choice, and may not have the formal and informal networks to learn about alternatives (Moore and Davenport, 1989).

The major questions concerning choice addressed in our next section include: Who chooses magnet schools? How are choices made? What sources of information do parents use when choosing schools? How does social class position influence the source, nature and quality of information parents utilize in this context? How does neighborhood stability and isolation, limited access to transportation and civic organizations, and occupations which disallow workplace associations, impact low-income parents' primary social networks? Our results suggest that the context of parental decision making is complex and part of a social process influenced by salient properties of social class position.

Who Chooses Magnet Schools?

Cincinnati's magnet school parents, across both white and African-American groups, have higher income levels than do parents in nonmagnet schools (see Table

3). According to our surveys, over one-third of the magnet school parents have annual incomes above \$50,000, compared to just 18% of the nonmagnet school parents. Conversely, one-fourth of the magnet school parents have general household incomes below \$15,000, compared to 44% of the nonmagnet school parents.⁵ Information obtained from principals about their schools indicate that, on average, 49% of the students enrolled in magnet schools receive free or reduced lunch, compared to 80% of the students in nonmagnet schools (see Table 3).

[Insert Table 3 Here]

Similar trends are evident in regard to the educational level of parents. Parents in Cincinnati's magnet schools, across all racial groups, are more likely to have higher educational levels than their counterparts in nonmagnet schools. For example, 21% of the magnet school parents in our survey are college graduates, compared to 12% of nonmagnet school parents; only 11% of the magnet school parents have not completed high school, compared to 27% of nonmagnet school parents. This trend is similar for both African-American parents and white parents⁶.

Parents in Cincinnati magnet schools are more likely to be employed than are parents in nonmagnet schools. In magnet schools, 13% of the parents indicate that neither parent is employed (either full- or part-time); this unemployment rate is double (26%) for nonmagnet school parents. Among African-American parents in

magnet schools, 17% indicate that neither parent is employed; compared to 29% in nonmagnet schools. Among white parents in magnet schools, 9% are unemployed, compared to 23% of the white parents in nonmagnet schools.

In general, similar patterns of enrollment are found in St. Louis (see Table 3). One-third of magnet school parents in St. Louis earn less than \$15,000 annually. This is in stark contrast to nonmagnet school parents--68% of whom earn below \$15,000. Nonmagnet school parents are also more likely to be unemployed. Similarly, St. Louis magnet school parents are almost three times as likely to hold college degrees when compare to non-magnet parents in St. Louis.

In summary, although the racial composition of many magnet and nonmagnet schools is similar, it is clear that magnet schools enroll students whose parents are of higher socio-economic status with regard to income, education, and employment. These differences are consistent for all racial groups.

Our data support the concerns of many that worry that school choice can lead to segregated public schools according to social class, and become the mechanism for a "new improved sorting machine" (Moore and Davenport, 1989). These findings are consistent with data from other districts across the U.S. For example, in a review of five choice programs--Minnesota's Open Enrollment Option, San Antonio's Independent School District's Multilingual program, Milwaukee's Voucher Plan and two other privately funded choice programs, Martinez, Thomas and Kemerer (1994) conclude that parents who choose schools are "... better educated, have higher incomes, and are less likely to be underemployed than nonchoosing parents"

(p. 679). In more recent studies, similar patterns have been found. For example, in Minnesota, Tenbusch (1993) found that parents with more education were more aware of open enrollment options in Minnesota. Similarly, Archibald's (1996) study of the Milwaukee magnet school program found that "clearly, in this district, there is evidence that, other things equal, neighborhoods with higher proportions of college educated adults enroll more students in magnet schools" (p. 158). Our findings are also consistent with the conclusions of the Carnegie Foundation Report (1992) that suggest that school choice seems to be an option for better educated and higher income families.

Although alarming, these findings are interpreted with less concern from some researchers. For example, supporters of school choice plans claim that the long term consequences of "white flight" and the loss of affluent parents to private and suburban schools, offsets the consequences of social class segregation (Rossell, 1990; Archibald, 1996). It is also suggested that we should not perpetuate the myth that neighborhood assignment and busing result in equitable schools and thus, school choice does not promote any more or any less inequality than mandatory assignment. As Clark notes: "Behind the bureaucratic pretense that comprehensive schools are equal schools lies the unquestionable fact that millions of students from poor and minority families living in poor neighborhoods are held captive in schools that are nowhere near as good as those found in well-off neighborhoods" (p. 110).

Explanations for this "creaming effect" include such issues as access to

information, availability of transportation, and location of schools. It has been suggested that one avenue to help reduce social class differences in a system of school choice is the availability of a complete system of information dissemination to encourage all parents to exercise choice. Our findings indicating differences in the socio-economic status of magnet parents and nonmagnet parents underscore the importance of applying a "test of equity." This test requires that information regarding magnet schools is both accessible and understandable to all parents, and allows parents (not just the most sophisticated or well-educated) to make informed decisions about where their children will go to school (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992; Glenn, McLaughlin & Salganik, 1993; Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, 1992).

These issues are addressed more fully in a later section in this paper.

Why Parents Choose

Why do parents choose alternatives to their neighborhood schools? Empirical studies of various choice plans, including research on magnet schools, suggest a complex array of reasons (see, Goldring and Hausman, 1996). The complexity seems to converge around a number of central questions: Do parents choose for academic reasons or convenience reasons? Is convenience a proxy for safety and for parents' familiarity with the neighborhood? Furthermore, do parents choose alternatives to allow their children to learn with others from "similar" or "higher" social class backgrounds?

The Carnegie Foundation survey (1992) found that few parents, only 15%,

cited academic issues as their main reason for considering an alternative school for their child. Similarly, a study of Minnesota's open enrollment plan reported that only 20% of participating parents chose for academic reasons, while 40% of the parents mentioned convenience as their main reason for choosing an alternative school for their child (Minnesota House of Representatives, 1990). In contrast, Fossey (1994) found that parents participating in Massachusetts' interdistrict choice plan did not choose for convenience, but made "... rational decisions when transferring their children out of their home communities, choosing districts with higher indicators of student performance and higher socioeconomic status than the districts they left" (p. 331). This view is supported by a recent study by Wells and Crain (1997) of African-American parents from the St. Louis city who chose to send their children to suburban county schools. These parents perceived that the county schools were better than the city schools. "Whether these parents and guardians are completely accurate in their assessment of the quality of the country schools, the fact that they cited resources and achievement-oriented factors, as opposed to the proximity and familiarity factors cited by the parents of students in the city schools, makes an important statement..." (p. 206).

Parents may make school choices based on the social and racial makeup of the student body. In case studies of three magnet schools, Metz (1986) reported that one magnet school "...developed a long waiting list because many middle-class and ambitious working -class parents sought a school where their children would be with the children of the highest social class and achievement level possible..." (p.

208). In contrast, Rossell (1990) suggests that to understand parents' choice making as it pertains to race and social class, it is important to explore the curriculum of the magnet schools as well as the racial makeup of the neighborhood where the magnet schools are situated, and the racial composition of the schools themselves. In a review of 20 magnet programs, Rossell (1990) found that "whites will transfer to minority schools only if the districts put additional funds and a special curriculum there" (p. 145).

Another perspective suggests that parents do not choose schools as much as they leave other schools behind. This view argues that parents participate in school choice plans because they have a general sense of dissatisfaction with their previous school. Witte, Bailey & Thorn (1993) found that parents who participated in the Milwaukee voucher experiment were very dissatisfied with their local public schools. In a review of choice plans, Martinez, Thomas and Kemerer (1994) reported that parents who choose alternative schools are more dissatisfied with their previous school than are parents who opted not to participate in the choice plans.

This research is consistent with our findings from both the surveys and case studies. When we asked parents in our study to identify the issues that were important to them in selecting a magnet school for their child, most reported the academic reputation of the school, teaching style, and transportation (see Table 4).

[Insert Table 4 Here]

Satisfaction

Our data also clearly indicate that parents who are most dissatisfied with the schools in their communities are most likely to choose magnet schools. For example, in St. Louis, 59% of magnet school parents gave the schools in their community a grade of C, D, or F. Furthermore, the data suggest the higher the income of the parents, the higher the level of dissatisfaction with public schools in the community. Moreover, whites expressed more dissatisfaction with the community's schools than African-Americans. Again in St. Louis, African-Americans accounted for 75% magnet parents who rated the schools in the community with an A, while whites in magnet schools accounted for 59% of the parents who gave the schools a grade of D or F. These findings are supported in a study by Lee, Croninger, and Smith (1994) in their research on Detroit's interdistrict choice plan where they found "opinions about choice are driven by negative views of the quality of local schools" (p. 433).

Transportation

Without question, transportation is a major issue for many parents when choosing a school (Clewel and Joy, 1990). Although public transportation is provided by the school systems in both Cincinnati and St. Louis, many parents are uneasy about using this means of transportation, due to safety concerns and the length of time required to ride on the bus each day. We asked parents if there were public schools in the district that they did not consider due to transportation. Fourteen percent of the parents in Cincinnati and 42% of the parents in St. Louis

answered yes to this question. Minority parents in both St. Louis and Cincinnati are significantly more likely than white parents to indicate that transportation is an issue. White parents in magnet schools are the least likely to indicate that transportation is a consideration in choosing a school (because, as indicated below, they are more likely to choose a school closer to their home). Additionally, and perhaps predictably, lower income parents are more likely than upper income parents to be concerned about transportation.

Academic Reputation

Social class position seems to influence parent's reasons for choosing a magnet school. For instance, higher income parents in both St. Louis and Cincinnati are significantly more likely to choose schools because of the academic reputation of the school. For example, 74% of St. Louis parents with incomes over \$50,000 indicated they chose a magnet school because of academic reputation, compared with 26% of lower income parents. This finding supports research by Rossell (1990) that higher income parents will choose urban magnet schools if they perceive there is a "good" academic program for their children.

In magnet schools, race influences some reasons for choice. Both white and African-American parents are equally likely to choose magnet schools because of academic reputation. However, white parents in Cincinnati magnet schools, for example, are significantly more likely to choose a magnet school because it is located near their home (50.7% white compared to 15% African-American). This finding is also supported by the Rossell (1990) study. She reported that the longer the bus ride,

the lower the percentage of the opposite race enrolled in the magnet school.

Accounting for racial segregation of housing, whites in Cincinnati are more likely to attend magnet schools closer to their homes rather than choose a magnet school that would require a longer bus ride.

Together, these results paint a complex picture of why parents choose magnet schools. Parents seek good academic programs for their children, and are looking for alternatives due to a certain level of dissatisfaction with the other public schools. Simultaneously, parents are keenly aware of the practical issues that confront them when choosing a school further away from their homes. Parents who are upper-middle class, who own their own cars, and have flexibility in their schedules, can more readily avail themselves of a wide array of choices without concern or dependence on the public system of busing. It would be a misinterpretation of our data to suggest parents choose schools for academic reasons or proximity or convenience reasons. Rather, our data suggest that parents choose for academic and convenience reasons.

How do Parents Choose?

Much of the theoretical underpinning for parental choice in education is rooted in rational choice theory. Although rational choice theory is often termed "economic" in its approach to human behavior (Becker, 1986), the theory emerged from concepts in political science and is focused on individual decision making in a nonmarket system (Almond, 1990).

The core concepts in rational choice theory are individualism and interest

maximization. Individuals are viewed as rational decision makers who act out of self-interest; they choose alternatives that provide the highest benefit based on individual preferences (Ostrom & Ostrom, 1971). Accordingly, in the context of school choice, parents will rationally weigh various educational options and alternatives and make choices that maximize their own goals. Rational choice theory implies that "parents will reflect upon their values and the needs of their children and will articulate their preconceived preferences regarding education. . . and, in doing so, will weigh costs and benefits" (Goldring & Shapira, 1993, pp. 397-398). This notion of individualism is central to rational choice theory. Tversky and Kahneman (1986) suggest that individuals utilize varying "decision frames" or perspectives when they confront a choice. "The frame that a decision maker adopts is controlled by the norms, habits and personal characteristics of the decision maker" (p. 121).

Much of the recent critique of rational choice theory focuses on the failure to take account of the social, political, and organizational contexts in which decisions are made. As Cibulka (1996) notes, "If preferences are determined in a social context, utility maximization must be portrayed as a dynamic and fluid process" (p. 9). Other theorists have underscored the importance of expanding rational choice theory to consider complex decision making contexts that include more than the individual decision maker. March (1986), for example, extends the notion of individual rationality to include those aspects that are highly embedded in specific social contexts. This context in which individual decisions are made is influenced by a

network of social relationships with others. Coleman (1990) argues that when individuals are faced with important decisions, "a rational actor will engage in a search for information before deciding" (p. 238). As the rational actor seeks information s/he will confer with others and begin to place trust in their judgments. Therefore, when many people are making similar decisions at a similar time, these individuals begin to depend on one another for information and judgment. Coleman suggests that these types of exchanges, geared toward satisfying individual interests, lead to the formation of social relationships or social networks. The exchange of information and judgments serves as a crucial basis for making decisions, but also provides a social context for making these decisions. Coleman concludes, "There is a broadly perpetrated fiction in modern society. . . This fiction is that society consists of a set of independent individuals, each of whom acts to achieve goals that are independently arrived at" (p. 300). Coleman's analysis of individuals sharing information and judgments to make decisions in a context of social networks suggests that individuals do not act independently.

Sources of Information

The survey and interview data we collected from parents regarding sources of information utilized in Cincinnati and St. Louis magnet schools indicate information access and collection patterns ranging from predictable and stable sources to a more serendipitous or unguided search. Our surveys indicate that in total, across all social classes, parents use social networks as the main source of information about school choice more often than they use information formally

disseminated (see Table 5). For example, 57% of all parents in Cincinnati indicated that they talked with friends, while only 10% utilized informational centers or schools. Similarly, parents in St. Louis rely upon friends when choosing a school. Some parents in St. Louis also utilize official district information, such as newsletters and information centers.

[Insert Table 5 Here]

Our survey research suggests that higher income families utilize a wider array of resources more frequently than lower income families (see Table 6 and Table 7). These findings are consistent with data from controlled choice programs in Milwaukee (Archibald, 1988) and in Montclair, New Jersey (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992), that indicate that income and education are influential elements in the context of parents' information collection process. Higher income families are more likely than lower income families to use discussions with friends and teachers as sources of information; these parents are also more likely to use school visits and achievement tests scores when they are choosing a school for their children. Although lower-income families also utilize friendship networks in the process of school choice, they do so less frequently and at lower rates.

[Insert Tables 6 & 7 Here]

Neighborhoods, Networks, and Knowledge

Consistent with our survey results and Coleman's conceptualization of

rational choice theory, the findings from the qualitative multiple-case studies indicate that parents' social networks play a central and fundamental role in the source and type of information utilized in the context of choice. These networks indicate the importance of information gathering and exchange when parents participate in choice decisions. These pervasive patterns of information exchange further shatter the myth of independent, isolated action in the context of decision making (Coleman, 1990).

During extensive interviews with magnet school parents, there were repeated references to co-workers, kin, and in some cases, "the woman down the street," as sources of information regarding the magnet program and specific magnet schools. The "word-of-mouth" channel was underscored and distinguished from more deliberate district- and magnet school-level information dissemination activities, such as mailings, meetings, and media outreach. As one magnet school parent noted, "I know it gets into the paper, but unless that is something you are looking for, you don't see it." Although most parents reported that they are aware of district- and school-level policies designed to provide accurate and accessible information to parents regarding magnet school choices, these sources are far less salient than parents' social and professional networks.

As this and other studies indicate, the nature and function of parents' primary social networks is directly related to social class (see Lareau, 1989; Useem, 1991). That is, the development and utilization of parents' social networks are linked to issues of occupation/employment status, neighborhood stability and

isolation, and membership in recreation and community organizations (Cochran, 1990; Cochran and Brassard, 1979; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). For example, several parents noted that information regarding the magnet system was more easily collected due to their own or a relative's employment status in the school district. Jacqui Adams, a Head Start director with a daughter enrolled in the math and science magnet school in Cincinnati (MaSAC), noted:

The only reason that I know as much as I do is not just because I'm a concerned parent. There are a lot of concerned parents out there. The only reason that I know is because I'm part of the (school) system.

Jacqui's network includes principals, counselors, and school board members. She described the benefit of this kind of "insider information:"

I can ask the kinds of questions to get the information that I need to help me make informed decisions. That is the same thing I try to urge other people. If you don't know what you want, then you need to talk to people so that you are given the best information you can get and make the best decision that you can with what information you have.

Another parent whose three children attend magnet schools in Cincinnati reported that he routinely "checks things out" with a co-worker at his satellite television installation company; this co-worker also happens to be a school board member. Verda Jackson, a senior executive at the Urban League, noted that she talked to several people before enrolling her son at MaSAC four years ago. She recalled a specific conversation she had with a colleague at the Urban League.

This person happened to be another parent, but also at the time she happened to be the education director here. She has had a lot of working relationships with different principals over the years, and is well known at the Board of Education because she has worked on a number of programs. I asked her about the particular MaSAC program. She knew both the principal at the school and the program.

Many of the magnet school parents in St. Louis utilized similar information resources related to workplace and kin networks. Although these parents are aware of the district's pamphlets on magnet schools and have read newspaper articles about magnets, they sought the advice of kin and employees when, as one parent put it, "we were stumped." Terrell Jefferson, an electronics engineer and a father of two children at Overbrook Basic Academy in St. Louis, explained:

When we first started, we talked to different people. There are a lot of people that we know who are in the school system here. We know someone who works for the board of education, so we always deal with him.

In selecting the magnet school over their neighborhood school, the Jeffersons also consulted with Terrell's two cousins, both of whom are teachers in a local school district.

Several parents noted the easy and convenient contact they enjoy with other parents in the neighborhood whom they have known for a number of years; many

of the children in the neighborhood are regular visitors to their home. The neighborhood associations, local playgrounds and swimming pools, and community soccer teams provide a readily accessible channel for information exchange with other middle-class parents regarding magnet school curriculum, climates, racial composition, and reputation. The information gathered and shared among the social network members is richly detailed, reliable, and relevant.

Terry Bloome, a full-time mother whose husband owns a landscaping business, is a member of a closely knit, stable, and predominantly Jewish neighborhood. She pointed to the tightly interwoven neighborhood networks, including the regularity and predictability of soccer practices, as key resources for sharing information about schools:

We are real into soccer. (These) are the kinds of parents that just talk the whole time during the soccer practice...We are just always talking about the schools and what everybody is doing about magnets.

Donna Murphy, a production editor for a publishing company, explained that she knew very little about school when her daughter turned six years old. She consulted a neighbor:

She is a teacher, so I trusted her judgement, even though I'm not close to her or anything. The only time I talk to her is when we talk about things like that, but I trust her judgement. I thought I was going to send her to the neighborhood school until I talked to that woman down the street.

Donna also relies upon her kinship networks, which include a sister-in-law who is a teacher in Cincinnati, and friends who are teachers in the area. This connection to "insider information" provides a referral or "frame of reference" that renders a manifest and measurable advantage to some parents. Donna explained:

I think that is why a lot of people stick with their neighborhood schools because it is safe and they don't know that maybe sending them somewhere else would be better. They don't have that frame of reference. I'm glad I have that to influence my decisions.

Shannelle Freeman, a youth counselor with the juvenile court, served on a local advisory committee to the Cincinnati school board a few years ago. She noted that her unique experience and position paid an invaluable dividend in terms of access to and assessment of the information she gathered. As Shannelle described the process:

My number one (issue) was that anything was better than my neighborhood school. So my investigation was not hard for me since I was already a part of the system. A lot of parents lack (this) because they don't know what is out there. It is not a matter of being a bad parent. It is a matter of not knowing what is available and then after you find out what is available, not knowing how to critique it.

Occupations that provide broader contact with the public also provide opportunities to tap into information sources that might otherwise not be available to parents.

Danetta Mitchell, a parent in St. Louis who is a beautician, learned about magnet

schools for her daughter after several conversations with her customers. The information gleaned from these discussions was crucial in selecting a school, as she explained:

One of my customers is a public school teacher. I talked with her about the international studies magnet. We have a lot of teachers that come to the shop so I got to know a little about the magnet schools. One of my customers works for the board of education and she brought me an application, so I just sent it in. . . Most of my friends and people I associate with, we have children and they know people and we always talk.

Lower-Income Parents and the Process of School Choice

As a consequence of the relationship between social class structure (employment, education, income) and social networks, the pool of resources from which lower-income parents can draw to make decisions regarding school choice programs may be somewhat smaller than the one available to middle-class parents (Smrekar, 1995). These constraints are particularly evident for parents who are not employed, never finished high school or attended college, and who live in Cincinnati neighborhoods that are unstable and transient, unsafe and isolated. These parents are far less likely to have friends or family members who work in the school system. In the absence of the type of social networks that can deliver relevant and valuable information regarding magnet school options, applications, and deadlines, lower-income parents tend to "luck into" the system of school choice in

Cincinnati.

Consider Anne Cooke, a mother of three who rents a small two-bedroom apartment in a neighborhood about three miles from the MaSAC campus. Anne is unemployed and receives government assistance (AFDC--Aid to Families with Dependent Children). She was unaware of the curricular focus of the Math-Science Academy when she enrolled her daughter two years ago. Anne opted for a magnet school because her neighborhood school, "is in a terrible part of town for a five year-old." So how did she hear about MaSAC?

My niece went there three years ago.

Q.: What did you know about it before you sent your daughter there?

Not a lot. I just felt it was a better neighborhood and a better school to go to than where they would have had to go.

Several of the other lower-income parents were similarly vague, unclear, or uninformed regarding magnet school options and the curricular focus of their child's school. Although some of these parents are employed, they tend to work in occupations that disallow workplace associations, either by structure or by design (e.g., janitorial services, night shifts, etc.). Orleta Pierce, with two school-age sons, has a GED and works the midnight-7 am shift in the housekeeping unit of a nursing home. Although Orleta has lived in Cincinnati for almost 20 years, she said she doesn't know many people. In contrast to her rural hometown in southern Kentucky, "You can't get anyone up here to help you without wanting something back." She described her decision to select MaSAC two years ago:

I used to be a school bus driver and I liked the way that they treated their children after they got out. It wasn't rowdy; it seemed like they were more in control.

Q.: Does the school emphasize something special?

It has some special programs in there, but I don't really know what MaSAC means. I would have to ask... I tell you I fell in love with this school. I really liked it from being over there. (My son) doesn't get in fights. He comes home.

Another parent, Mrs. Althea Robinson, who is a public school teacher in Cincinnati and has a son at Greenwood Paideia, provided a sketch of the parents with whom she has spoken about the magnet school program. Her view is consistent with the images drawn by lower-income parents interviewed for this study. The nature and quality of the information available to these families is markedly different and distressingly inferior to that available to higher income families. As Althea explained:

All they know is that is an alternative program that is better than the alternative (a neighborhood school). They don't really know what the (magnet) program is about. They just want their kid in one to keep him out of trouble or to change his environment, change his friends, that type of thing.

Chontelle Willis, a single parent of three children, works the night shift as a patient care technician at a public hospital in St. Louis. Her son, Jamal, attends Overbook

Basic Academy. What did Chontelle know about Overbrook at the time of her decision to enroll Jamal?

I didn't know anything. I just read one of those papers where it says the magnet programs and I filled it out. . . My little boy, he picked the school. He is the first one that went.

Q. Why do you think he picked that one?

Because it said academy. He thought that it probably was going to be a military school and he wanted to wear a uniform.

Q. What do they have at Overbrook that is special?

I don't know. I guess it is just the change of classrooms or something, just the different way they teach. They make it more interesting than the regular school.

Although Chontelle is satisfied with her choice of school, the context for this decision indicates something far less than an informed opinion or a general understanding of the options represented in the magnet school program. Our interviews with Chontelle and other lower-income families in the study suggest a pattern of decision making in the context of little information or understanding about the school choice. Indeed, when these parents were asked what they knew about their school at the time of their decision, almost all said, "nothing." Even when the curricular focus is distinctive and demands a particular learning and teaching style, such as the one at Greenwood Paideia in Cincinnati, parents may be less informed at least initially, than we assume.

This pattern of information, knowledge, and networks in a context of school choice supports earlier research that indicates the relative resource accounts of social networks are directly related to members' social structural position (Cochran, 1990; Cochran & Brassard, 1979; Lareau, 1989). Although personal choice shapes the pattern of all parents' social networks, these choices tend to be far more constrained for low-income families; higher income families are more likely to be members of social networks which provide information on school processes and practices (Lareau, 1989; Smrekar, 1993). In a comprehensive review of parent information patterns in ten Massachusetts cities involved in controlled choice plans, Glenn (1993) concludes:

Urban environments include low-income parents, minority parents, non-English speaking parents--groups in which many members have neither automatic access to information about schools, nor knowledge of channels for getting information... (p. 3)

District Information Dissemination

Without social networks to provide richly detailed and accurate information, lower-income families necessarily rely more heavily than do higher income families on magnet school literature disseminated by the school district. Indeed, our survey results indicate that low-income families utilize school newsletters at a higher rate than do higher income families. Low income families are much less likely to visit schools than are higher income families when considering a magnet school for their children. Only 32% of the low-income parents in magnet schools in

St. Louis indicated that they visited the schools, compared to 58% of high income parents. Similarly, in Cincinnati, higher income parents are twice as likely to visit schools during the choice process than are low-income parents. How effective are these materials in communicating to those families who rely on this resource for information on magnet schools in Cincinnati and St. Louis? Are dissemination strategies adequate to meet the needs of all families?

Both school districts provide information to parents on their magnet school programs. For example, the Cincinnati Public School District publishes a comprehensive guide for parents that includes one-page descriptions of each school, along with applications, school addresses, and deadline information. A magnet school brochure is mailed to the home of every student enrolled in the CPSD for whom the district has an address. In addition, the district regularly advertises on the radio, television, and in the newspaper, with specific information to parents regarding the magnet school option. Still, the parents surveyed and interviewed in our study indicated that they utilize these resources at much lower rates than they do their social networks. Three factors seem to influence this pattern of utilization: the process of choosing, the source of information or "the messenger," and the quality of the information provided. Parents in Cincinnati observed that only those families with reliable automobiles, chunks of discretionary time, and in some cases, cellular telephones, are able to gain entry to the most popular magnet programs under these admissions arrangements. For those parents who are unfamiliar with the language of schooling and are intimidated by "the messenger," targeted outreach

designed to reach hard-to-contact parents should not be an option, it should be a requirement in all magnet systems. The source and quality of information should not constitute an obstacle for participation among a certain disenfranchised segment of the school population.

Policy Implications

The insights offered by the parents we interviewed for this study outline a set of policy imperatives for educational leaders and policy makers. They demand that the architects and managers of magnet school systems attend to the important differences in parents' capacities to maximize choice decisions and to participate effectively and strategically in the process of choosing school options. The findings from magnet school programs in Cincinnati and St. Louis speak directly to differences among parents in their process of choosing, their source of information, and the quality of information available to parents.

First, we believe that the process of choosing schools in a system with magnets would be enhanced under a mandatory selection system which elevates the *option* of choice to an affirmative decision or obligation. Evidence drawn from the health care sector provides dramatic documentation of the positive effect of mandatory decision making on the type, quality, and availability of information and on the "culture of choice" (Ball, 1993).

Second, we contend that the "test of equity" is perhaps no more relevant than in the area of the quality of information available to parents regarding school choice options (see the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department

of Education, 1992). The literacy and native language of parents are a paramount concern, as well as outlets for the dissemination of information that take account of formal and informal communication channels within various ethnic communities.

Parent information centers (PICs) like those established in the Cambridge, Massachusetts, controlled choice program may provide a partial solution to the concern around issues of equity. There are more than 20 PICs in Boston and Cambridge and each one features:

- o a convenient location near public transportation;
- o three or four multiculturally representative staff/counselors on duty
- o materials about local public schools, and maps showing their locations
- o office hours that include evenings

The research indicates that PICs have been instrumental in providing information that is reliable, accurate, and accessible to disadvantaged and minority parents (Glenn, McLaughlin & Salganik, 1993). As Cookson (1994) notes: "Parent information centers are community resources that bring schools and families together and act as benign brokers of educational choice. Without investments in these centers, the process of school choice becomes chaotic, uninformed, and potentially destructive to children" (pp. 136).

Although parent information centers respond to some of the equity concerns related to the source and quality of information available to parents, our research findings argue for a broader strategy, one that "taps into" the lines of trust and communication already established by existing social networks and community-

based organizations, including civic and labor groups, and religious and volunteer organizations. As Petronio (1996) notes in her research on controlled choice in Cambridge, Massachusetts, parents rely heavily upon social networks even in an environment in which the PIC program is well organized and well known. Thus, a strategy dependent upon parent information centers is of rather limited value. The Cambridge findings as well as our data from Cincinnati and St. Louis underscore the importance of connecting with parents' social networks in order to expand channels of communication and information exchange in an environment that is considered by participants to be trustworthy and reliable. The information should be disseminated in places where parents live and do business--in grocery stores, community health centers, doctors' offices, gas stations, laundromats, churches and temples, and public housing offices. Also, the information dissemination strategy should include a targeted outreach to those families most difficult to reach, including the most socially and residentially isolated. A diffuse information dissemination campaign guided by persons with clout and credibility who are indigenous to the community would signal a critical degree of understanding and support to maintain a system of school choice dedicated to equity as well as to excellence.

Conclusion

The issue of equity is a stinging reminder of an ideal overwhelmed by multiple goals and competing values--desegregation, parental choice, and school improvement. We amplify the significance of these competing interests at this

particular time in the history of school desegregation because of the shifting legal and political climate that privileges private choices over a compelling state interest in promoting diversity. In a recent series of major federal court rulings [see *Capacchione v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1999); *Eisenberg v. Montgomery County Public Schools* (1999); *Tuttle v. Arlington County School Board* (1999); *Wessman v. Gittens* (1999)], school district efforts to maintain admission policies that are designed to promote and to ensure racial diversity in magnet or alternative schools, have been repudiated. The 1971 U.S. Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* that authorized school officials to take race into account in admission policies in order "to prepare students to live in a pluralistic society" now appears irrelevant -- subordinated to private privileges and rights subsumed under the "equal protection" clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Under the new rules and precedent established in a 1995 Supreme Court ruling (in a case that involved a federal program that awarded a percentage of construction contracts to minority owned construction companies; see *Adarand*), race conscious programs that involve "racial balancing" strategies are constitutionally suspect and are subject to "strict scrutiny." This elevated constitutional bar includes a two-pronged test that compels districts to prove that their racial classification scheme "furthers a compelling state interest" and is "narrowly tailored" (see *Adarand*, 115 S. Ct. At 2113)). In other words, unless school districts are currently under court order to remedy the effects of past racial discrimination in their systems (a compelling state interest), magnet school

admission policies must be race neutral. Weighted or separate lotteries designed to yield racially diverse student populations that mirror the racial group averages for the entire school district are now construed to be unfair because such policies may deny special benefits (e.g., the unique curriculum offered by a magnet school program) to students based solely on their race (see *Capacchione v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg*). In one of the most recent and historically significant rulings, the District Court judge in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg case wrote that he "accepts that children may derive benefits from encounters with students from different races. . . . "but that in race conscious magnet school admissions programs, "children are not viewed as individual students but as cogs in a social experimentation machine." The Supreme Court has yet to rule on whether or not promoting diversity constitutes a compelling state interest. Lower federal courts have simply side-stepped the issue by "assuming" that promoting diversity in schools "may be a compelling state interest" without so ruling (with the exception of *Hopwood v. State of Texas* in which the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals rejected diversity as a compelling state interest in a law school admissions policy that involved racial preferences for ethnic minorities).

The recent court ruling in Boston Latin School (*Wessman v. Gittens*) case perhaps provides some insight on the shifting legal and political climate on racial diversity and the implications of this new era for magnet school policies. In rejecting the long held commitment to diversity in student admissions policies at Boston Latin, the First Circuit Court of Appeals wrote: ". . . the potential for harmful

consequences prevents us from succumbing to good intentions. The Policy is, at bottom, a mechanism for racial balancing -- and placing our imprimatur on racial balancing risks setting a precedent that is both dangerous to our democratic ideals and almost always constitutionally forbidden." With a chorus of big city mayors, from Austin and Seattle, to Boston and Nashville, calling for a return to "neighborhood schools," there is strong suggestion that the ideal of diversity may be subjugated to an ideal of unencumbered choice and parental privilege in public education. Against this backdrop, the issue of social class diversity and isolation becomes even more paramount. as underscored by the most recent report by the Harvard Project on School Desegregation. In addition to providing new information on increasingly segregated school systems across the nation, the Harvard group (1997) writes that "the racial and ethnic segregation of African American and Latino students has produced a deepening isolation from middle class students and from successful schools" (p. 1). In general, racial segregation in neighborhoods goes hand-in-hand with social class isolation. The consequences are devastating for students and discouraging for those committed to educational equality.

Table 1

Specified and Obtained Desegregation Goals from Magnet School Assistance Program

	Specified	Obtained
Reduce Isolation	85% (529)	44% (228)
Eliminate Isolation	2% (12)	33% (9)
Prevent Isolation	13% (82)	73% (60)
Total	100% (615)	47% (292)

Adapted from L. Steel and M. Eaton (196). Reducing, Eliminating, and Preventing Minority Isolation in American Schools. U.S. Department of Education.

Table 2

The Enrollment of African American Students in Different Types of St. Louis Public Schools

	Percentage	Number of Students
Magnet Schools	15.0%	6,646
Interdistrict Transfer Program	28.5%	12,593
Integrated Neighborhood Schools	15.9%	7,009
Non-Integrated Neighborhood Schools	40.6%	17,915
Total	100.0%	44,163

Source: Report from the Civic Progress Task Force on Desegregation of the St. Louis Public School System, Park I, December [Department of Justice Exhibit No. 90, Liddell v. Board of Education, E.D.Mo. No. 72-100 (c)(6), filed March 1996][“Civic Progress Report”].

Table 3

Summary of Socio-Economic Status of Parents in Cincinnati and St. Louis

	Cincinnati		St. Louis		
	Magnet	Nonmagnet	Magnet	Integrated Nonmagnet	Non-Integrated Nonmagnet
<u>Income Levels</u>					
Below \$15,000	24.9%	43.7%	32.2%	67.5%	62.7%
<u>Educational Levels</u>					
College Degree	21.2%	11.9%	22.4%	7.5%	11.3%
Graduate Degree	18%	7%	11%	2.7%	4%
<u>Free Lunch</u>					
Qualified for Free Lunch	49%	80%	71%	95%	97%
<u>Family Structure</u>					
Married	63%	44.5%	55%	26.5%	21.3%
Single, Never Married	9.7%	20.4%	13%	33.2%	43.6%
<u>Both Parents Unemployed</u>	12.6%	25.7%	11.3%	38.2%	39.8%

Self Reports From Parent Surveys. (See Endnote 1)

Table 4

Parents' Reasons for Choosing a Magnet School (Percentage of Respondents)

Reason for Choice:	Cincinnati	St. Louis
Academic Reputation	72.0	62.0
Teaching Style	64.7	53.9
Transportation	50.7	42.6
Teachers	40.9	33.1
Near Home	32.5	18.6
Racial/Ethnic Mix	44.4	36.3
School Shares Values	42.7	31.7
Parent Involvement	39.5	23.2
Discipline	37.8	30.9
Safety	31.1	28.6
Another Child at School	35.0	18.8
Principal	32.9	23.0
Individual Help	29.0	39.8
Special Programs	32.2	48.9
Like the Neighborhood	19.2	19.4
Near Child Care	0.7	1.0
Child's Friends	14.0	9.8
Smaller Class Size	14.7	28.0
Special Needs Services	8.0	21.7
Near Job	8.0	4.6
Before/After Care	1.4	0.4

Self Reports From Parent Survey

Table 5

Information Used by Magnet Parents when Choosing a School (Percentage of Respondents)

Source of Information	Cincinnati	St. Louis
Talks with Teachers	38.7	42.0
Talks with Friends	56.7	43.4
Their Fifth Grade Child	35.8	49.7
Other Child's Experience	29.9	20.0
Other Family Members	19.5	16.6
School Newsletter	9.0	31.5
Informational Meetings	16.3	13.5
Radio, TV, Newspaper	3.5	10.7
Visit to Schools	44.5	38.0
Informational Center	9.9	23.3
Achievement Test Scores	29.4	16.8

Self Reports From Parent Survey

Table 6

Sources of Information Used by Magnet Parents by Income -- Cincinnati

	INCOME			
	Low <14,999	Medium <24,999	Medium High <49,999	High +50,000
Talks with Teachers*	32.1	28.3	43.8	45.0
Talks with Friends*	46.4	51.7	66.3	60.0
Your Fifth Grader	31.0	35.0	36.3	39.2
Other Child's Experience	22.6	23.3	31.3	37.5
Other Family Members	19.0	16.7	26.3	16.7
School Newsletter	13.1	8.3	6.3	8.3
Informational Meetings	15.5	6.7	16.3	21.7
Radio, TV, Newspapers	4.8	0.0	3.8	4.2
Visit To Schools*	27.4	26.7	51.3	60.8
Informational Center	8.3	5.0	13.8	10.8
Achievement Test Scores*	19.0	18.3	31.3	40.8

*p<.05

(Percentages are parents from the income group using a particular source of information.)

Table 7

Sources of Information Used by Magnet Parents by Income -- St. Louis

	INCOME			
	Low <14,999	Medium <24,999	Medium High <49,999	High +50,000
Talks with Teachers*	35.3	33.0	51.1	53.8
Talks with Friends	38.1	36.9	51.9	48.1
Your Fifth Grade*	42.4	40.8	58.5	63.5
Other Child's Experience	18.0	19.4	20.7	25.0
Other Family Members	18.7	16.5	14.1	17.3
School Newsletter	33.1	33.0	31.9	23.1
Informational Meetings	10.1	11.7	17.0	17.3
Radio, TV, Newspaper	7.2	8.7	14.8	13.5
Visit To Schools*	31.7	31.1	42.2	57.7
Informational Center	19.4	24.3	23.7	30.8
Achievement Test Scores*	15.1	9.7	20.7	25.0

*p<.05

(Percentages are parents from the income group using a particular source of information.)

Endnotes

1. This section of the paper is adapted from our recently published book: *School Choice in Urban America* (1999), New York: Teachers College Press.

2. Schools were chosen to participate in the study based on the following criteria: 1) the participating school included a fourth and a fifth grade and; 2) the fourth grade was not the entry grade. These criteria were selected to increase the likelihood that each school would have a relatively substantial population of fifth-grade students who had been enrolled in the school for more than one year prior to the fall of 1993 (or the 1993-94 school year) and whose parents or guardians would therefore be relatively familiar with the school.

To reduce possible response bias, the initial sample frame was further screened, based on information provided by the central office, and schools were eliminated based on the following additional criteria:

- Fourth- and fifth-grade classes assigned to the school were not actually attending that school in the 1992-93 or 1993-94 school year, for any reason, such as redistricting or renovation projects.
- The school was a receiver of students reassigned for the same kinds of reasons, such as renovation or closure of their zoned school.
- The school added or dropped a program within a two-year period prior to the 1993-94 school year, resulting in a substantial change in the composition of the student body.

Out of 54 schools in the Cincinnati sample frame, 20 were selected for inclusion in the final study sample--10 magnet schools and 10 nonmagnet schools. In addition, magnets that were not full, or dedicated, were eliminated from the sample. (That is, schools-within-schools were excluded, as were magnets composed of a mixture of zoned and choice students). As a result, 17 schools were eliminated. Next, of the 15 magnets remaining, 5 were eliminated on the basis of information provided by the central office (during the late summer of 1993) that raised the possibility of significant response bias at these schools, such as major programmatic changes. This announcement generated significant negative parental reaction to the proposed changes at these schools. Thus, these five schools were ruled out of the final sample, leaving ten magnets in the sample. Also, one of the ten remaining magnets in the sample dropped out of the study during the school year. Thus, the final magnet sample contained nine schools, including two Montessori magnets, two Paideia magnets, three schools with a foreign language theme, one "fundamental academy" (emphasizing traditional curricular themes and instructional approaches), and one school having a mathematics and science curricular emphasis.

Twenty-two nonmagnet schools were included in the Cincinnati sample frame. Of these, ten were selected for the final study sample by pair-matching them with the ten selected magnet schools on the basis of the racial composition of the student body (using percent African American).

In St. Louis, the initial sample frame included 66 schools. Five were excluded

because fourth and fifth graders were not actually in attendance, and four were excluded because they received large numbers of reassigned students, leaving an adjusted sample frame of 57 schools. Of these, 26 were selected for inclusion in the study.

Magnet schools: All ten elementary magnet schools in the St. Louis sample frame were selected. Non-integrated schools. Eight of 36 non-integrated schools were randomly selected for inclusion in the study. Integrated schools: Ten of the 11 integrated schools in the sample frame were initially selected by pair-matching them on racial balance (using total percent African American) with the 10 St. Louis magnet schools in the study sample. The principal of one of the schools selected declined to participate, citing the excessive paperwork that would be involved with both this project and the school's selection for participation in a mandatory statewide assessment program that was about to begin. The one remaining integrated nonmagnet school was then chosen to make up the sample. However, after the first series of meetings with principals in early September 1993, two more schools had to be dropped from the sample. Therefore, eight integrated nonmagnet schools remained in the final study sample.

Data Collection

An anonymous questionnaire was distributed to all fifth-grade parents and to all non-administrative certified staff in each school in the sample. Teacher questionnaires were distributed either in their school mailboxes or during a faculty meeting.

The response rate in Cincinnati was 62.1% (N=730) for the parent questionnaire and 67.6% (N=417) for the teacher questionnaire. The percentages of responses from African American and white parents from nonmagnet and magnet schools were equal. The response rate in St. Louis was 67.4% (N=953) for parents and 70.6% (N=553) for teachers.

Qualitative Multiple-Case Studies

This paper also includes qualitative case studies of four magnet schools (one Paideia and one math-science magnet in St. Louis and two Basic Academy magnet schools in Cincinnati), which focus on the context of school choice, the nature of school communities, and patterns of family-school interactions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal, counselor, and teachers (including a cross-section from both lower and upper primary levels) at each of the four sites. Interviews were also conducted with 12-14 sets of parents from each of three schools (two in Cincinnati and one in St. Louis). Parents were selected randomly from a stratified sample across race (two categories: African American and white) and social class (as indicated by eligibility for the federal free lunch program). School records and parent data cards provided demographic information indicating parents' race, occupation, and city address. This information was used to select a sample of parents consistent with the socio-economic and racial composition of the total population of school families.

Interviews with school staff were conducted at the school site; parents were interviewed in their homes. The interview sessions lasted an average of 90

minutes. All interviews were audio-taped, with participants' permission, and transcribed verbatim. In addition to interviews, an array of school documents (including brochures, enrollment applications, letters, newsletters, handbooks, and meeting minutes) was collected and analyzed.

3. Under the provisions of a 1983 Federal court order, the St. Louis City Public School District operates an interdistrict voluntary transfer program with 16 participating suburban districts which includes magnet schools in the city. The interdistrict choice program allows parents to choose between schools inside the district and some schools outside the district in order to promote racial balance.

4. All names used in the paper are pseudonyms.

5. Among African-American parents in the Cincinnati magnet schools, 34% have income levels below \$15,000, compared to 54% in nonmagnet schools; 29% of African-American parents in magnet schools have incomes above \$50,000, compared to 11% in nonmagnet schools. Similar trends are evident for white parents: 17% of white parents in magnet schools have a household income below \$15,000, compared with 33% in nonmagnet schools; 36% of white parents in magnet schools have incomes above \$50,000, compared with 23% in nonmagnet schools.

6. In the Cincinnati magnet schools, among African-American parents, 20% are college graduates and 14% hold graduate degrees; in nonmagnet schools, 15% are college graduates and only 1% hold graduate degrees. Among white parents in magnet schools, 23% are college graduates, compared to 9% of the white parents in nonmagnets.

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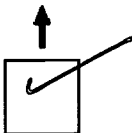
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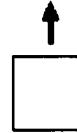
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