



Developing a Strategic Grassroots Advocacy Action Plan



Mission: Providing leadership for high quality innovative instructional programs that promote choice, equity, diversity, and academic excellence for all students.

Grassroots Action Plan

Magnet Schools of America (MSA) organizes grassroots action on federal, state and local policy issues critical to its members. Grassroots activities can be carried out in your community and will enable you to utilize local supporters to demonstrate your school's impact on your legislator's constituents. Every magnet school is urged to play a part in this nationwide effort because the support of your federal, state, and local leaders is important to our future.



Your help is needed to ensure funding is sufficient to support magnet school programs, especially through the federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP), which is authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) or No Child Left Behind Act.

It is also imperative that state legislation and local regulations are enacted to strengthen magnet schools. As the local expert on magnet programs, you are able to educate federal, state, and local politicians about how your magnet schools are improving your community and just how important federal, state, and local support is for continuing these programs.

This Grassroots Action Plan provides step-by-step instructions for showcasing your magnet school and educating your leaders on its impact on the local school system and community. A

number of grassroots activities are outlined, and there is at least one that every MSA member will be able to accomplish. Make sure your grassroots activities are suitable for your program and community and the information you provide is non-partisan.

MSA staff is always available to offer technical assistance with your grassroots activities.

Please feel free to call the national office at (202) 824-0672.

HOST A TOUR OF YOUR MAGNET SCHOOL

Inviting your elected officials to visit your magnet school is an effective way to inform them about the innovative magnet programs in their district. It is also an ideal way to build relationships with your legislators and their staff, and establish yourself as a valuable resource.



STEP ONE: Invite your legislators to visit your school or to a special event in the community that will include an opportunity to showcase your magnet program.

1. Contact your legislator's local office to set up the visit. You may be advised to contact the Washington, DC office for scheduling of federal legislators. Contact information for federal legislators can be found in our Grassroots Action Center at: <http://www.congressweb.com/msa>
2. Be flexible and have alternate dates available for scheduling.
3. Call well in advance for scheduling. Depending on your federal legislator's schedule, this could be a month, probably more, in advance. Many congressional offices also require a written invitation before considering scheduling.
4. Clearly state that you want the legislator to attend. The education legislative aide from the Washington DC or district office may also be included in the invitation.



STEP TWO: Plan your legislator's visit for maximum effect. Make the visit worth your legislator's time.

1. **Plan a special event** that will bring many constituents to your school during your legislator's visit. Attendees can include school personnel, parents, students, school board members, institutional and business affiliate representatives, and community leaders.
2. **Educate attendees** about the issues that are important to magnet schools so they can ask better questions and promote your legislative agenda. (Use the fact sheet and talking points provided on page 6 and 7 as a starting point)
3. **Provide information** to your legislators on education and magnet school issues. You can contact your federal legislator's Washington, DC office and speak with the legislative aide who handles education to offer information either before or following the event.
4. **Contact the local media** to cover the event. This will ensure the community learns more about your school as well as your legislator's interest. Let your legislator's office know when you call that you will be working on press coverage for the event.
5. **Make the visit educational** - Showcase the programs offered by your magnet school. Have a one page profile of your school prepared and be sure to include information on the types of programs offered, the number of children served, demographics, and community partners. Provide copies of the profile to your legislator and other attendees.



STEP THREE: Reinforce the event with your legislator.

1. Publicize the visit in your school newsletter or other appropriate publications. Use pictures if possible. Send copies to both the legislator's local and Washington, DC offices. Don't forget to also post to Facebook and Twitter!
2. Call the Washington, DC office and talk with the legislative aide who covers education and offer to be a resource on issues relating to education and magnet schools.
3. Send a thank you letter to your legislator's Washington, DC office.

GRASSROOTS STRATEGIES

Grassroots Action Center - Magnet Schools of America has created an online Grassroots Action Center where you can contact your federal elected officials, find information about pending legislation and votes, and send personalized or pre-drafted messages to your political leaders. There is also a place to draft letters to the editor that are automatically sent to your local newspapers. Visit the Grassroots Action Center at: <http://www.congressweb.com/msa>

Email/Letters – Due to improved technology many congressional offices recommend sending e-mail through their websites, however, personal letters are also effective.

- Be clear about your topic and position by opening your email/letter with statements such as. “I am writing in (support or opposition) of (bill number or bill name or a specific issue such as, “funding support for the Magnet Schools Assistance Program”).
- One page is best and be sure to be polite and constructive.
- Be timely and explain the benefits or ramifications of a certain action.
- Use your name and address on both the envelope and the letter so that the staff identifies you as a constituent and can reply to your letter.

Letters to the Editor - Writing a letter to the editor of your local newspaper is a simple way to gain exposure for your magnet school.

- Your letter to the editor should be short and concise – no more than 300 words.
- Include your name, address, email address and phone number – newspapers will not publish anonymous letters.
- State why you are writing the letter and the problem or issue that concerns you. Write why it is important and how it affects magnet schools.
- Make a general recommendation of what should be done, by whom and when. Example: “I believe our state legislature should pass legislation this year to create a new statewide office of magnet programs dedicated to providing resources and support to magnet schools.”

Social Media - Elected officials are now utilizing different social media platforms to communicate with their constituents and keep them informed of their policy positions on emerging issues. Using social media will allow you to interact with your legislators and promote greater awareness of your magnet programs.

- Be sure to “like or follow” them on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter for up-to-date information from their office and to learn about upcoming public appearances including town hall meetings.
- On Twitter you can tag them in a tweet and ask them a specific question or provide them with information about your magnet program or stance on an issue.
- You can also comment on different posts on your legislator’s Facebook page.

Feedback—We would like to know about your ongoing grassroots efforts. Please take time to fill out this brief [online form](#) and let us know what is happening in your school district.

GRASSROOTS STRATEGIES

Town Hall Meetings

Many legislators hold town hall meetings periodically in their district/state. The legislator will speak on current issues and invite questions and comments from the audience. Participating in these meetings will enable you to bring the importance of magnet schools to the attention of your legislator and inform your community about your program(s).

- Find out when and where the town hall meeting will be held. The time and place of these events is often announced on television, published in your local newspaper, or listed on your elected officials' websites.
- Determine if the agenda is appropriate and relevant to education issues.
- Organize magnet school supporters to participate in the town hall meeting and provide them with questions and/or talking points. (see pages 6 and 7 for ideas)
- After the town hall meeting be sure to follow-up with your legislator's office regarding the issues that were discussed during the meeting, especially if the legislator requested additional information.

Organize Magnet School Supporters

- Build a coalition by identifying other magnet schools or local magnet school supporters. This may include other magnet school principals, teachers, administrators, parents and families.
- Families are a powerful and often overlooked ally that can help build support for your magnet program. Encourage them to be vocal advocates on your behalf and share their personal stories of how your magnet school has impacted their children's lives.
- Identify other local education groups or coalitions that will support magnet schools and/or have a similar legislative agenda. (For example, state and local chapters of the NEA, AFT, or PTA)
- Organize a monthly meeting with these groups to discuss topics that are important to magnet schools.
- Set up information-sharing networks so that your efforts can be coordinated.
- Identify a leader or lead organization to facilitate and encourage this coordination and decide who will take responsibility for disseminating information quickly.
- Prior to meetings send information about magnet schools to supportive groups, including evaluative data on student academic achievement and performance.
- Suggest participants come to meetings with copies of letters/emails they have sent supporting magnet school issues or ask them to be prepared to write them prior to or following the meeting.
- Urge participants to act on future information alerts.
- Organize Telephone/Email/Social Media Campaigns – Share time-sensitive information with magnet school supporters through phone calls, email, social media, and faxes.

KEY FACTS ABOUT MAGNET SCHOOLS

- Based on our analysis of the Common Core of Data collected by the U.S. Department of Education, we estimate that there are more than 3,800 public elementary and secondary magnet schools serving approximately 2.6 million students in the United States.
- Magnet schools are the largest form of public school choice. They were originally created in the early 1970's as a means of voluntarily promoting school integration and improving the quality of America's educational system through innovative curricula and classroom instruction.
- The first magnet schools were modeled after the Bronx School of Science, the Boston Latin School, Chicago's Lane Tech, and San Francisco's Lowell High School. These schools offered specialized or advanced curricula to select students.
- Skyline High School in Dallas, Texas is considered the first magnet school in the United States. It opened its doors on March 1, 1971.
- In describing the effect of a Houston Performing and Visual Arts School, an educator said it worked like a "magnet" in attracting students.
- Magnet schools utilize a variety of academic themes to attract students of different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds including: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), language immersion, business and communications, careers and technology, and visual and performing arts. Others use specialized instructional techniques like those found in Montessori schools or International Baccalaureate (IB) programs.
- While many people believe magnet schools are selective and only accept students based on academic prowess, the majority of K-8 magnet schools do not have entrance criteria, but rather, use computer-based lottery systems for admissions.
- Since students' only eligibility requirement is an interest in the theme, students from a wide array of backgrounds attend magnet schools resulting in higher level cognitive and social learning.
- Magnet schools serve all students including English language learners as well as students receiving special education services. Transportation to magnet schools is typically provided at no cost to families.
- Magnet schools are more "hands on – minds on" and often use an approach to learning that is inquiry or performance/project based. They use the state, district, or Common Core standards in all subject areas, however, they are taught within the overall theme of the school.
- Unlike charter schools, magnet schools do not operate autonomously under any sort of "charter," but are administered by the school district. They are subject to the same measures of accountability and standards as traditional public schools, as well as the collective bargaining agreements made with teachers unions.

TALKING POINTS

Benefits of Magnet Schools

- According to a 2011 research brief published by the National Coalition on School Diversity (NCSd) reviewing public schools of choice, magnet school students are more likely to enroll in schools with racially and socioeconomically diverse environments than charter students. White students attending magnet schools were also *more* exposed to low income students than white students in charters. This is an important fact to note considering the increasing research that indicates that enrollment in racially and socioeconomically integrated schools is associated with numerous educational benefits.

**REMEMBER: YOU ARE THE
EXPERT ON MAGNET
SCHOOLS IN YOUR
COMMUNITY.**



- According to a 2009 study, magnet students report a greater sense of community at school and perceive more peer support for academic achievement. The study also found that these students also report more positive intergroup relations and less racial tension among peers than students attending non-magnets.
 - Studies have found that students attending magnet schools have higher graduation rates than students attending traditional public schools.
 - According to a 2011 study, magnet students are less likely to be absent or skip class than at non-magnet schools.
 - A *Civil Rights Project* study found that magnet school faculties are more stable than non-magnet school faculties, in addition to being more racially diverse.A 2001 study found that magnet schools report higher levels of parent and community involvement than traditional public schools.
- A 2012 survey of Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) grantees found that nearly three-quarters of federally supported magnet schools were oversubscribed, demonstrating the high demand and popularity of these schools. The study also found strong evidence that student achievement increased after receiving a MSAP grant, and these programs were able to flourish and sustain themselves after the duration of the grant.
- One of the few large-scale national studies of magnet schools was done in 1996 by Dr. Adam Gamoran, a professor of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and director of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research. It concluded that magnet schools were more effective than traditional public schools, Catholic schools, and secular private schools at raising student achievement in reading and social studies. His analysis tracked the achievement of 24,000 eighth grade students from public and private schools across the county.