

Magnet Schools of America: A Brief History

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Early History: where we came from

During the 1960's, options to traditional public schools, including magnet schools, sprang up in the America's largest cities as a protest to racially segregated schools. The history of magnet schools and the popularity and dispersion of magnet schools is tied to the 1960's protest over school desegregation and the educational reform model of public school choice as a way to address educational inequity.

Magnet schools are based on the premise that students do not learn in the same way or at the same rate; that if we find a unifying theme or a different organizational structure for students of similar interest, students will learn more in all areas. In other words, if a magnet school voluntarily attracts students and teachers, it will succeed because, more than for any other reason, those in attendance want to be there. They will have chosen that school.

In 1968, the first school designed to reduce racial isolation by offering a choice to parents was McCarver elementary school in Tacoma, Washington. In 1969, Trotter Elementary School, in the Boston, Massachusetts system, opened for the same reasons. Both of these first attempts offered a different organizational pattern. They guaranteed continuous progress education, in which students would progress at their own rates. These schools were referred to as alternatives."

In 1970, with the assistance of \$6 million from the federal government, Minneapolis mounted an alternative experiment in the southeast section of the city. Following the pattern established in Minneapolis, Harlem High School in New York City, with the assistance of the Urban Coalition, broke into smaller units with more personalized instruction. Also following the pattern established in the Minneapolis elementary schools, Berkeley, California, embarked on a full-scale alternative schools program, featuring basic skills centers, environmentally-oriented programs, independent contract curriculum and businesses.

Dallas, Texas, opened the first "super" high school in 1971. Designed around the concept of career strands, skyline High School attracted students of all kinds – rich, poor, Hispanic, African American, Asian, and White – from all over the city. It was during this time that Houston, Texas, in describing the effect of its Performing and Visual Arts School, said that it worked like a "magnet" in attracting students. The word appeared to catch on. By 1975, the term was being used to describe types of fiscal assistance contemplated by the federal government.

In 1973, Cincinnati, with Dr. Donald R. Waldrip as superintendent, opened a wide range of school options, among them, one of the first Montessori schools in the public sector and the first foreign language schools beginning in the primary grades. Concurrently, San Mateo, California started a public Montessori school.

By 1980 most major cities had systems of magnets, but it was the federal courts that caused the greatest surge in magnet education. Until the early seventies, federal district courts had routinely ordered school systems to mandatorily racially desegregate themselves. Many of the early court orders included bussing, redistribution of teachers and administrators, but little relative to curriculum and instructional delivery. However, in declining to approve a multiple district solution to segregation in Detroit, the courts did approve special enrichment programs to help to overcome the effects of "past discrimination." Following this decision, almost every court order that mandated that schools desegregate had a voluntary component. This voluntary component became known as magnet schools. The courts discovered that by using a carrot instead of a stick more desegregation would take place, and, at the same time, the quality of education would improve.

Our early start

In 1977, at the urging of group sponsors such as AASA, and NSBA, Dr. Donald R. Waldrip, initiated a series of three annual conferences on magnet schools (1977 – Dallas, 1978- New Orleans, 1979- San Diego). In 1986, Dr. Waldrip was asked to convene magnet school conferences since many desegregation court orders included magnets schools as remedies and there was new federal legislation, the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP). This conference, held in Milwaukee became the first of a continuous annual conference.

MSA

In 1991, Dr. Waldrip* became executive director of the newly formed **Magnet Schools of America**, a not-for-profit 501c(3) with the first home office in Texas. Judy Stein became the next executive director with the MSA office moving to Florida. When Dr. Robert Brooks became executive director, the office moved to Washington, DC in order to establish a national presence for the organization. Judy Stein served as the first president of MSA. Other past presidents have included Dr. Robert Brooks, Diane Creekmore, Sandra Day, Mary Ellen Elia, Donna Grady Creer*, Phale Hale*, Norris Hill*, Caroline Massengill, Dr. Ronald Simpson*, and William Magnotta. The current executive director is Scott Thomas.

MSA currently offers annual conferences along with technical assistance conferences in order to provide magnet schools with the tools necessary to implement and sustain the highest quality education for students in a multi-ethnic multi-cultural environment of choice.

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