

Traditional schools blurring district lines

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By Michael Alison Chandler, January 03, 2012

Soon after principal Kevin Lowndes welcomes new students to Wheaton High School each fall, he begins recruiting the next freshman class.

Seven years ago, Montgomery County's school board placed Wheaton in a group of five public high schools known as the "Down County Consortium." The board approved specialty themes for each, then invited families in the area to choose the school and program they like best.

The aging brick building in a working-class neighborhood of Silver Spring now showcases its engineering and bioscience programs during open houses and information sessions, in an online video, and during visits to middle schools and informal meetings with neighborhood parents.

"You need to get out there and sell your school and sell your programs and recruit your students," Lowndes said.

As school choice becomes a mantra of 21st century education reform, especially for the growing charter school movement, traditional public schools also are embracing free-market competition.

Tens of thousands of Washington area children crisscross their districts to attend specialized science, foreign language or performing-arts programs in regular public schools.

The mission of these choice programs is changing, though. Magnet schools, offering specialized curriculum to attract students beyond neighborhood boundaries, were created in the 1960s as tools for voluntary desegregation. But as courts dismantled school assignment policies based on race, many school districts have played down — or abandoned — their diversity goals.

Now, choice in many traditional public schools is seen a way to increase student performance and parent satisfaction as well as to stay competitive with private schools and public charters.

"I like choice," said Dara Gideos, a Silver Spring parent. "It makes you feel like you are controlling your destiny." Gideos did not want her eighth-grade daughter to attend Wheaton, her neighborhood high school, so she was glad to have other schools to choose from.

After visiting open houses all fall, Gideos expects to find out her daughter's final assignment by mid-February.

In a sign of the changing times, many school districts are abandoning the term magnet.

"Magnets are associated with desegregation," said Gladys Whitehead, director of curriculum and instruction in Prince George's County.

The Prince George's school board shut three dozen magnet programs after court-ordered desegregation ended in 2004. Diversity goals had become harder to achieve in the predominantly black school system, and officials found that extra program costs were not leading to better results. Now county schools offer a smaller number of "specialty programs" with goals of "raising student achievement and appealing to different students' interests," she said.

Arlington County has "choice schools," and one in four of the county's students attend a school other than his or her home school. Historically, some of Arlington's choice initiatives were created to decrease racial isolation, but most came about because of community interest in a particular program, said spokeswoman Linda Erdos.

In Prince William County, one in 10 students go to a non-neighborhood high school, enrolling in "specialty programs" such as performing arts or International Baccalaureate. These programs, created in the 1990s, were never associated with racial diversity, school officials said.

Montgomery still has magnet programs, which are competitive and offer enrichment to a wide applicant pool. Many were established in schools with dwindling enrollment or a more racially isolated population.

The county's two high school consortia — which include eight of its 25 high schools — are not considered magnets. Families who live in the two designated areas rank their high school choices when children are in eighth grade. Admission is largely determined by interest and available space. A lottery is used for schools that are oversubscribed.

Creating this system enabled the school board to avoid the contentious process of redrawing boundaries as new schools were opening. But the board also cited research that shows students perform better when they choose their own course of study.

Early goals of the program included decreasing racial and economic isolation in parts of the county most affected by poverty and immigration. The Northeast Consortium, which consists of Blake, Paint Branch and Springbrook high schools, was started in 1998 with help from a federal desegregation grant for magnet schools. But soon after it got underway, a ruling by the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals limited Montgomery's ability to use race as a factor in school transfers.

The Down County Consortium, which includes Blair, Einstein, Kennedy, Northwood, and Wheaton high schools, was developed in 2004. Soon afterward, the school board tweaked the lottery for oversubscribed schools to include socioeconomic status as a factor in admission.

But a 2008 report by the county's Office of Legislative Oversight found that as county demographics have shifted, poverty rates have climbed and the share of white students in all of the consortium schools has fallen.

Now school officials focus almost entirely on other benefits of choice programs, such as increasing student engagement and parent satisfaction.

Some civil rights advocates worry that as schools become less economically and racially diverse, students suffer. Research shows that racially isolated or overwhelmingly poor schools tend to have higher teacher turnover, a less-rigorous curriculum and lower academic achievement.

Magnet Schools of America, a Washington-based advocacy group that counts more than 2,000 magnet schools nationwide, promotes diversity as a key advantage of what it calls “the original school choice.” The federal government spends \$100 million a year to help establish magnet schools with plans for increasing diversity.

Many of today’s school choice advocates have a different view: They say schools with a high number of poor or minority children don’t have to be inferior.

Urban charter schools often focus on the specific needs of disadvantaged students rather than trying to appeal to the desires of the middle class.

In Montgomery, rather than busing students from rich neighborhoods in the west to poorer neighborhoods in the east, officials have invested more heavily in poor schools and won recognition for narrowing achievement gaps.

At Wheaton, which has 1,200 students, 80 percent of students come from families poor enough to have qualified at some point for meal subsidies. That makes it the county’s poorest high school.

On many measures, Wheaton still lags far behind the academic powerhouses in western Montgomery known as the “W-schools” — Whitman, Wootton, Walter Johnson and Winston Churchill high schools.

But Lowndes, the Wheaton High principal, said the competition created through the consortium is helping improve the school and turn around a reputation for lagging achievement that has sent some neighborhood families in search of alternatives.