

Magnets Reimagined as School Choice Option



Daniell Pitt, 14, joins other students during a discussion of the science of vegetable growing at Bailey Middle School, a STEM-themed magnet school in Nashville, Tenn., that opened this year. Magnets have evolved from a desegregation tool to another school choice option.

—Josh Anderson for Education Week

By [Nora Fleming](#)

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Once considered a solution to desegregate racially divided districts, magnet schools today have been forced to evolve, given legal barriers that bar using race to determine school enrollment and increasing pressure to provide more public school choices.

In a post-desegregation era, many large districts like Chicago, Los Angeles, and Baltimore County, have maintained high numbers of magnet schools, even amid the economic downturn, and others are using magnets as a strategy to meet new goals around improving school quality.

The changing definitions and demands have left the purpose and future of magnet schools in flux, according to magnet school advocates and researchers, particularly as the charter school movement continues to gather steam on national and state levels.

“This is a pivotal time for school districts and education leaders to clearly define the role of magnet schools,” said Claire Smrekar, an associate professor of education at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tenn., who has researched magnet schools for decades. “The future of magnet schools will depend upon which policy values and priorities school leaders embrace and whether the federal role will emphasize racial diversity as an educational goal or place the highest value instead on accountability and innovation exclusively, at the expense of diversity.” While the term “magnet school” has expanded, traditionally it referred to schools whose curricula was linked to thematic or content-specific subject matter and whose student bodies remained unbound by neighborhood lines. They have typically relied on lottery systems to determine enrollment.

Several decades ago, magnet schools became a popular strategy for many districts that often touted the catchy themes of the schools to attract families from diverse backgrounds in hopes of willingly desegregating their schools. These schools were also seen as a way to keep white, middle-class families from leaving the public school system, Ms. Smrekar said.

But as many districts moved out from under court-ordered desegregation mandates, the diversity of magnet schools in some places started to decline, and student-body demographics resembled the neighborhoods in which the schools were located. In addition, the 2007 U.S. Supreme Court decision [*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District*](#) bars a school system from assigning students through a race-based lottery, unless the district is still under court supervision for desegregation.

In turn, the magnet schools' umbrella has expanded to include those with increasingly specialized themes as well as those that focus on an accelerated curriculum and require more than a luck-based lottery for acceptance. According to the National Center on Education Statistics, as of the 2008-09 school year, magnet school enrollment was actually higher than charter school enrollment, but charter enrollment has steadily risen each year while magnets', though still high, has been more variable.

And though the federal funding stream for magnets, the [Magnet School Assistance Program](#), MSAP, has remained relatively consistent the past few years at around \$100 million annually, and magnet schools were listed as a "turnaround strategy" in the reauthorization bill for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act introduced by Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, the federal funding for charter schools is much higher.

"The playing field is different with magnets and charters, as there's no state funding for magnets and there are fewer federal dollars available for magnet schools [than for charters]," said Robert Brooks, the executive director of the [Magnet Schools of America](#), a nonprofit advocacy organization based in Washington. "Still, we don't see a decline in interest in magnet schools, but magnets now included as part of districts' broadening portfolio of options for parents, as districts are recognizing that it's important for parents to have choices to pick the best school for their child."

Model Repositioning

In some districts, the push for magnet schools has not subsided, but just been repurposed.

In Nashville, for example, six low-performing schools, all high poverty, high minority, were turned into magnets this past year. Themes were attached to each school, staff members were coached on how to restructure and improve instruction accordingly, and enrollment was opened to students districtwide through a lottery system. While Nashville has been operating a few magnet schools for years, the six new magnet schools are part of ramped-up efforts to improve district schools, said Alan Coverstone, the district's executive director of innovation.

As part of the plan, one of the new magnet middle schools became a direct feeder to [Hume Fogg High School](#), an established magnet that's ranked as one of the best in the country by *U.S. News and World Report*. Nashville's hope is that the linkage will make both the middle school more appealing to parents district-wide and eventually make Hume Fogg more diverse.

“As we move into post-desegregation, we have to find ways to advance our goals of excellence and diversity without using race, and magnet schools provide an exciting academic option,” Mr. Coverstone said. “Magnet schools not only strive to raise academic-achievement options for students traditionally left behind as strong charters do, but they also create strong schools that promote diversity that students across our county want to be a part of.”

Other districts are also creating more magnet schools. Last year, Lawrence Township, a diverse district of 15,000 students on the northern outskirts of Indianapolis, converted all its elementary schools to magnets, the only district in the country to do so, according to the Magnet Schools Assistance Program. Launching more magnet schools was seen as a solution to combating the district’s racial and economic isolation, a way to reduce the achievement gap between students, and a means of giving parents more choices for public schools, said Jan Reckley, the district’s magnet grant-project coordinator.

With the help of a startup grant from the Magnet Schools Assistance Program, the district has been able to pay for instructional coaching and consultants to help teachers craft course frameworks and weave themes like environmental and international studies into their curricula. The district also plans to establish magnet schools at the secondary level, too, in coming years, Ms. Reckley said.

Academic Competition

Other districts have expanded the priorities of their existing magnet schools by employing new ways to gauge student enrollment and new models for curriculum.

In Connecticut, for example, while race does not determine enrollment, a [state Supreme Court decision](#) in the mid-1990’s led to the creation of interdistrict magnet schools that enroll students across district lines because segregation can be more prevalent between districts rather than within.

The Chicago district, on the other hand, places a priority on blending students of different socioeconomic backgrounds in its 82 magnet and selective-enrollment schools. To determine placements at more than half of those schools, the district places student applications into one of four Census tracts linked to factors like family income, home ownership, educational attainment, percentage of single-family homes, and percentage of homes with English as a second language.

Students from each tract compete only with one another through a lottery system for spots.

While many magnet schools still use luck-based lottery systems, other districts have shifted to heightened academic requirements as a way to decide who can attend their magnets.

Competition to enroll at some has become increasingly steep, as the schools have placed more emphasis on gifted education. Just recently, the competition to get into [Thomas Jefferson Science and Technology High School](#), a top-ranked magnet in Northern Virginia, led one company to publish a guidebook for its admissions testing. And at Nashville’s Hume Fogg, for example, academic strength has trumped diversity as a goal in recent years, particularly because of parents’ changing priorities, said Principal Paul Fleming. To be in the running for a spot at the school, which focuses on a rigorous liberal arts curriculum, applicants must meet academic criteria.

"Parents no longer see our school as part of the desegregation process, but as a choice option with high academic standards," Mr. Fleming said. "I think choice is here to stay. But while you can set up schools with different labels or with different focuses, if you aren't getting to the core of teaching or learning, it doesn't matter how you're organized or the classes you offer. It's less about the form and more about the quality of instruction."

Blended Models

The push for charter schools has overshadowed magnet schools as a public school choice option, according to some magnet school advocates.

Much of the discussion around public school choice today centers on charters, which, unlike magnet schools, have mixed research results about their effectiveness, said Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at [The Century Foundation](#) who researches school diversity.

"Magnet schools represent a form of choice that values racial and economic integration, built on a much sounder body of research, which finds that separate schools for rich and poor are inherently unequal," Mr. Kahlenberg said. "Low-income students in economically diverse schools have a much better shot at succeeding than those stuck in high-poverty schools."

Recent research from [The Civil Rights Project](#) at the University of California, Los Angeles, also suggests students in charter schools tend to be more segregated by race and class than those in magnet schools. This segregation, they report, has negative impacts on academic achievement and graduation rates, unlike the diversity found to have positive impacts on student performance.

Charters and magnets, however, are not necessarily an either/or choice for districts, some say. In a number of districts, both magnets and charters are seen as options for choice and reform, particularly as low-income students tend to be sequestered in neighborhood schools that are also low performing as a result of zoning, a recent [Brookings Institution study](#) found.

Todd Ziebarth, the vice president of state advocacy for the Washington-based [National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#), an advocacy group, said that while he would argue charter schools are "more public" than magnets given the lack of any entrance requirements, one type of choice doesn't push the other out. In fact, according to Mr. Ziebarth and others, the two types of choice may end up influencing one another, particularly with charters becoming more diverse like [Denver School of Science and Technology](#) and [San Diego's High Tech High](#), for example. Also, more districts are continuing to weave characteristics of both into traditional neighborhood schools, and others are supporting district wide open-enrollment policies.

In Chicago, 98 of the district's public schools are themed neighborhood schools, seen as a way both to improve instruction and give parents another public school option. Similarly in Nashville, all high schools have small learning communities, or two to three theme-based coursework paths linked to careers.

According to Bryan Stoll, the head of magnet programs at the 105,000-student Baltimore County district, which operates 29 magnet and other themed neighborhood schools, maintaining the magnet program has just as much to do with diversity and parent choice as it does in keeping students engaged in school. Students attending magnets tend to have more incentive to attend school because they're learning new, specialized curricula they are interested in, said Mr. Stoll.

"[In the future] I believe we will continue to see more demand for free, public school options," Mr. Ziebarth said. "Charter schools have been in a strong position, particularly in places where they are delivering results. But people need options for schools other than charter schools, so the more options for families, the better, particularly in urban districts."