

Reviving Magnet Schools: Strengthening a Successful Choice Option

A Research Brief



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Proyecto Derechos Civiles

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Executive Summary

Magnet schools make up the largest system of choice in the U.S. They were originally conceived to accomplish the twin goals of innovation and integration. Over the years, however, the integrative mission of magnet programs has somewhat receded, particularly during the second Bush Administration. Meanwhile, political and financial support has focused on the rapidly expanding charter school sector, even as research has suggested that charters are not, on average, performing better than regular public schools.

The following policy brief refocuses our attention on the more longstanding magnet sector. It is issued during a time of complex political and legal circumstances and seeks to understand how a variety of factors—including the *Parents Involved* ruling and the transition to a U.S. Department of Education led by the Obama Administration—have influenced federally-funded magnet programs.

Data from our 2011 survey of magnet school leaders indicates that magnet schools are continuing to evolve. Significant differences emerged between the two most recent magnet-funding cycles, the first overseen by the Bush Administration (in the midst of the *Parents Involved* decision) and the second by Obama's Department of Education. Respondents connected to the 2010-2013 funding cycle indicated that their magnet programs were associated with more inclusive admissions processes, a resurgence of interest in pursuing racially diverse enrollments and an increased willingness to allow out-of-district students to attend magnet programs.

Respondents from all federal funding cycles reported that their magnet schools were linked to evidence of heightened academic achievement, very high levels of demand and self-sustaining programs (i.e. the magnet school or program continued to flourish after the funding cycle ended).

While the respondent pool was not large, and though federally funded magnets are simply a subset of all magnet programs, the data highlight early signs of what may be an important shift towards the original goals of the magnet concept. Survey participants also underscored the ongoing popularity and success of their magnet programs. More research is, of course, needed, but all of these trends indicate that it is important to continue to provide support for the magnet school sector, and to include equalizing federal funding for magnet and charter school programs as part of a federal policy agenda focused on innovation *and* equity.

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Critical discussions around the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) are taking place during a period of rising student diversity, growing racial and economic segregation, exploding school choice options, and dramatically renewed federal involvement in shaping education policy. Magnet schools, as choice programs originally designed to promote diversity (many of which receive or have received federal funds), should lie at the intersection of these different trends.

The following policy brief examines key attributes of federally funded magnet programs in a changing legal and political environment. More than four years have passed since the Supreme Court handed down the *Parents Involved* decision, which limited the ways in which school districts could voluntarily consider race in student assignment policies. In December 2011, the Office for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education and the Civil Rights Division in the U.S. Department of Justice jointly released official federal guidance on how to move forward to create racial diversity in schools.¹ While this guidance is the latest—and strongest—endorsement of the importance of racially diverse schools, there have been several other past indications of support for promoting diverse schools by this Administration.² The new guidance expands upon the controlling opinion issued in *Parents Involved*, and outlines a number of ways that districts might pursue the compelling interest of reducing racial isolation in schools (Dillon, 2011).

As federal involvement in education has stepped up in a striking way in the last decade, the Obama Administration (along with the two previous administrations) has directed far more resources to support the expansion of the charter school sector, rather than funnel funding towards the more long-standing and proven magnet school concept (see Figure 1 and Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2011). In 2010, for example, charter schools received upwards of \$250 million from the federal government, while magnet schools obtained roughly \$100 million.³ Adjusting magnet school funding for inflation further underlines a sustained reduction in federal backing for magnet schools. With funding reaching nearly \$207 million (in 2011 dollars, almost \$114 in real dollars), the year 1989 represented a high point for federal magnet school support.

¹ See “Guidance on the voluntary use of race to achieve diversity and avoid racial isolation in elementary and secondary schools,” available at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/guidance-ese-201111.html>

² For example, Secretary Arne Duncan’s Letter to the Editor expressing concern over the abandonment of Wake County’s socioeconomic diversity plan or the limited availability of technical assistance funds to help districts design policies to comply with *Parents Involved*.

³ It should be noted that the Obama Administration requested a \$10 million increase for magnet programs in its proposed FY 2012 budget. Congress, however, did not approve the increase and magnet schools were level funded at \$100 million.

Figure 1: Annual Federal Appropriations for Magnet School and Charter School Programs



Source: Frankenberg, E., & Siegel-Hawley, G. (2011). Choosing Diversity: School Choice and Racial Integration in the Age of Obama. *Stanford Journal on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties* 6 (2), 219-252.

Layered onto these political and legal circumstances is evidence suggesting that the original desegregating mission of magnet schools has been shifting to emphasize academic excellence and innovation rather than equity (Blank et al., 1982; Christensen et al., 2003; Frankenberg & Le, 2009; Steel & Eaton, 1996). Of course, the two concepts are not mutually exclusive.

Drawing on a short survey of magnet school leaders, this policy brief describes the ongoing popularity and sustainability associated with federally-supported magnet programs (a subset of all magnet programs), their continued commitment to reducing racial isolation, evidence of academic achievement, an uptick in federal support for inter-district magnet school enrollment, and a variety of important uses for federal magnet school funding. These findings, in turn, highlight the need for continued support for magnet programs, and suggest that lessons from the magnet school model should be applied to charter schools and other forms of school choice.

This brief, targeted towards policymakers, legislators, and magnet school stakeholders more generally, focuses on how this overarching legal and policy context is shaping magnet school attributes on the ground. It also sheds light on the various ways in which the post-*Parents*

Involved climate is influencing the relationship between MSAP and magnet school characteristics under two different administrations.

Background and Overview of Federally Funded Magnet Programs

The nation's school enrollment is growing more racially and socioeconomically diverse and, at the same time, displaying deepening patterns of segregation. Two decades ago, roughly 33% of black and Latino students attending traditional public schools were enrolled in intensely segregated educational settings—schools where 90-100% of their fellow students were from minority racial backgrounds (Orfield, 2009). More recently, about 40% of black and Latino students were enrolled in similar settings (Orfield, 2009). Schools with high concentrations of poverty—a phenomenon that often overlaps with racial isolation—were also on the rise. The share of schools where at least three-quarters of students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals rose from 12 percent in 2000 to 17 percent in 2008 (Aud et al., 2011). Because segregated school environments continue to be linked to a variety of educational harms, including diminished academic achievement and depressed graduation rates (Linn & Welner, 2007; Orfield, Frankenberg & Garces, 2008), these trends profoundly impact educational opportunity and outcomes for fast-growing and historically disadvantaged groups of students.

Current efforts to combat the growing racial and socioeconomic isolation of students have been limited by the 2007 Supreme Court decision in *Parents Involved*. The ruling placed restrictions on the way school districts can use race when assigning students to schools, stipulating that the individual race of a student cannot be the sole determining factor in school assignment.⁴ (At the same time, however, the decision endorsed the importance of school districts adopting policies to prevent racial isolation and pursue diverse schools.) *Parents Involved* was the culmination of several decades' worth of legal backpedaling on the implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education* (Boger & Orfield, 2005). Even though the Supreme Court recently curtailed voluntary integration, it remains—within the above guidelines—one of the only viable policies for districts interested in pursuing diverse schools. Carefully crafted magnet policies, some of which were enumerated in the recent federal guidance, typically meet the new legal standards.

Magnet schools became popular during the mid-1970s⁵ as a way to infuse school desegregation strategies with more parental choice. The integrative mission at the heart of the historical magnet concept helps differentiate them from more contemporary forms of school choice—like vouchers or charter programs—that have not yet systematically focused on promoting racial and socioeconomic diversity (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2011). Today, magnet programs encompass the largest form of school choice (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley & Wang, 2011) and have an established track record of promoting diversity and academic achievement (Betts et al., 2006; Bifulco, Cobb & Bell, 2008; Gamoran, 1995).

Indeed, a number of studies have pointed to important academic gains for children attending magnet schools. One of the more widely disseminated reports found evidence to

⁴ This restriction does not apply to districts that remain under court supervision.

⁵ Magnet schools originated in the 1960s.

support higher rates of student achievement in magnets than in regular public high schools, private or Catholic schools (Gamoran, 1995). The study also found that magnet students made faster achievement gains in most subjects – with the exception of mathematics – than high school students in other types of schools.

Connecticut’s inter-district magnet programs offer current evidence of the link between higher academic achievement and magnet school attendance. As part of its compliance with a statewide desegregation case, Connecticut has established more than fifty interdistrict magnet schools in metropolitan Hartford, New Haven, and Waterbury, schools that draw students from multiple school districts with the intent of providing racially diverse educational settings for students. Through a comparison of magnet lottery participants, an analysis of student achievement in inter-district magnet schools found that magnet high schools have positive effects on students’ reading and math scores (Cobb, Bifulco & Bell, 2008).

Federal relationship to magnet schools

Federal support played a central role in the early expansion of magnet schools. The Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP), which debuted in 1976 as part of an amendment to the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA), gave federal dollars to districts interested in opening magnet schools to further desegregation goals. Magnet programs multiplied quickly, with the U.S. Department of Education (ED) estimating in 2000 that over half of all large urban school systems used or continued to use magnets as a tool for desegregation (Smrekar & Goldring, 2000).

Federal MSAP grants are awarded every three years. The U.S. Department of Education reviews grant applications, typically selecting 30 to 50 school districts per cycle to receive funding. For example, 36 school districts were recipients of \$100 million in federal funding for the 2010-2013 cycle (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Forty-one districts received MSAP grants for the previous 2007-2010 cycle. As such, MSAP funding continues to substantially influence the development and characteristics of magnet programs around the country.

Yet, as federal education policy priorities have shifted, so too have magnet school priorities. The U.S. Department of Education has conducted three broad reviews of magnet programs established with the help of ESAA funding or MSAP grants. The first ED report, released in 1983, found that over 60% of magnets studied were “fully desegregated,” with the remainder still reporting substantial racial and ethnic diversity (Blank et al., 1983). Importantly, this first report took place before any change in desegregation law, while subsequent reviews occurred after the Supreme Court began to authorize the termination of desegregation plans in the 1990s. The next evaluation, published in 1996, found less encouraging results: only 42% of new magnet programs were operating under obvious desegregation guidelines (Steel & Eaton, 1996). Finally, the latest ED magnet study, issued in 2003, found that 57% of newly founded magnet programs were making progress in combating racial isolation, while another 43% were experiencing an increase in segregation. The first two evaluations of magnet schools examined the extent to which MSAP awardees specifically designated desegregation as a goal of their programs. The third Department of Education study did not research desegregation goals, suggesting that priorities—at least at the federal level—had changed considerably. While the

narrowing of research goals did not necessarily mean that the magnet programs themselves were no longer establishing desegregation goals, the Department of Education's failure to examine what had been a key focus of the first two reports is indicative of altered values.

The most recent round of federal MSAP funding—the first since the *Parents Involved* decision—represented a shift in grant eligibility requirements. Under the Bush Administration, MSAP applicants were required to propose race-neutral means of reducing or eliminating racial isolation. According to the ED's own evaluation during that period, the introduction of race-neutral criteria dampened MSAP grantees' ability to reduce or eliminate racial isolation (Christensen et al., 2003, p. 77). In contrast, the Obama Administration's Department of Education proposed a new interim rule in 2010 to allow districts flexibility to design plans that would comply with *Parents Involved* (notably, its holding that pursuit of diversity should not be binary white-nonwhite or black-nonblack) and reduce minority isolation. ED further said that it would evaluate the reduction or elimination of minority isolation in magnet schools and feeder schools in a case-by-case manner that takes into account the particular circumstances of the district. A number of districts awarded the most recent MSAP grants have recently been declared unitary by the courts, perhaps suggesting that ED valued supporting the continuation of diversity efforts through a boost to area magnet programs. Other school districts awarded grants in the 2010-2013 cycle included several places where magnets are central to desegregation policy (e.g. Los Angeles Unified, Hartford, Connecticut and several countywide districts in Florida).⁶

Magnet School Enrollment and Segregation Trends

Enrollment and segregation by race

In 2008-09, federal data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that more than 2.5 million students enrolled in magnet schools across the nation, up from just over two million students five years earlier. Magnet programs enrolled more than twice the number of students served by charter schools, making magnets by far the largest sector of choice schools.

Compared to regular public schools, both charter and magnet programs enrolled a larger share of black and Latino students. More than thirty percent of students attending magnet and charter schools were black in 2008-09, compared to roughly 15 percent of students attending regular public schools. Latino students made up a larger percentage of the magnet enrollment (29.0%) than either the charter enrollment (25.4%) or the regular public school enrollment (21.8%). On the other hand, charter schools enrolled considerably higher shares of white students than magnet programs, though both choice sectors served a far smaller percentage of white students than regular public schools.

Given the differences in aggregate racial composition, it follows that patterns of racial segregation in magnet and non-magnet schools also differ. Research consistently documents high levels of segregation for black and Latino students in regular public schools. In 2008-09,

⁶ For a complete list of districts receiving MSAP funds for the 2010-2013 cycle, see <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/department-awards-100-million-magnet-school-grants>.

federal data showed that 35% of black students and nearly 43% of Latino students enrolled in regular public schools attend intensely segregated minority settings.

Likewise, high levels of segregation for black and Latino students exist in magnet and charter schools. In the same year, a full 70 percent of black charter school students attended intensely segregated minority schools (where 90-100% of students are from minority racial backgrounds), compared to just 50 percent of black magnet school students. And though 35 percent of all charter school students attended majority white charter settings, just 10 percent of black charter students did the same.

Patterns of socioeconomic isolation

Magnet, charter and regular public schools also differ in terms of the levels of low-income students they enroll. Federal data shows that the share of low-income students among all public school students has risen over the last ten years, and with it, students of every race have higher percentages of low-income students in their schools. However, black and Latino students attend schools that, on average, have much higher shares of low-income students than do students of other races. This trend holds across each sector of schools: magnet, charter, or public.

Table 1: Exposure to Low-Income Students, by Race and School Sector, 2008-09

	Overall Share of Low-Income Students in Sector	White Student	Black Student	Latino Student	Asian Student	American Indian Student
Charter Schools	56.1	24.7	60.4	57.2	35.9	46.5
Magnet Schools	45.6	38.1	62.3	66.8	48.0	51.9
All public schools	44.4	32.4	59.0	61.4	36.5	50.5

Source: NCES Common Core of Data, 2008-09.

Over the last several years, charter schools have rapidly begun to serve more low-income students. In 2005-06, the average black charter school student attended a school where roughly half of the students were considered low income (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008). By 2008-09, the share of low-income schoolchildren in the average black students’ charter school had increased to 60 percent (see Table 1). A similarly sharp acceleration occurred for Latino charter school students. So while recent trends suggest that charter schools may not be creaming as many advantaged students as before, if the enrollment of low income students continues at the same pace, charter school students stand to become substantially more isolated by poverty than regular public or magnet students.

White students experience distinctly lower levels of exposure to low income students in the charter sector compared to the magnet and regular public sector, suggesting that some charters may be serving as places of white flight from poverty in other public schools. Though low-income students made up 56% of the charter enrollment, white students attend charter schools where, on average, low-income students made up just 25% of the population. This startling discrepancy means that white students attend very different charter school environments than their black and Latino counterparts.

The above numbers suggest that two of the most popular school choice sectors display substantially disparate enrollment and segregation trends. Both magnet and charter schools enroll higher shares of black, Latino and low-income students compared to regular public schools. However, charter schools display profoundly higher levels of segregation for black students (but not for Latino students) than magnet or regular public schools. Severe racial disparities in exposure to low income students are also linked to the charter sector, with white students experiencing much lower levels of exposure to poverty than black or Latino charter students.

Description of Respondents and Survey

Data for this policy brief was obtained through the distribution of a survey instrument containing 19 items covering a range of issues related to racial integration and diversity efforts in magnet schools and programs. Respondents answered a variety of questions dealing with demand for magnet programs, admissions procedures, MSAP funding and outcomes, and policies to address racial isolation.⁷

Fifty-two magnet school leaders completed the survey, representing a 46% response rate. Many of the survey recipients were magnet school directors, MSAP project directors or district superintendents or assistant superintendents (see footnote for exact breakdown). Respondents answered questions pertaining to 51 different school districts from every region of the country. The magnet schools that respondents were associated with combined to educate more than 300,000 students, which represents approximately 7.6% of all magnet school students.⁸

Survey respondents were spread fairly evenly across the last few MSAP funding cycles. Table 2 shows that slightly fewer had been awarded MSAP funding in the most recent 2010-2013 cycle compared to the two prior ones. The vast majority of respondents did receive funding over the three cycles studied, with only 3 (or 5.9%) reporting that they had never been MSAP recipients. Some respondents received funding over multiple MSAP cycles. As mentioned previously, MSAP awardees are simply a subset of all magnet schools around the country.

⁷ The survey was disseminated by the Magnet Schools of America (MSA) via Survey Monkey in March 2011. It was distributed to 110 magnet program directors, assistant superintendents, and superintendents. Ninety-two survey recipients were MSAP grantees from one of the last three grant cycles. The rest of the surveys went to districts that contain magnet programs and are active MSA members. The recipients represented a total of 94 school districts around the country, many of which serve magnet students in large, urban school systems (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, forthcoming).

⁸ The characteristics of MSAP survey respondents were as follows: Superintendents, 23; Assistant Superintendent, 10; Magnet Director, 34; MSAP Project Director, 22; District Grants Manager, 6; Curriculum Director, 4; Director of Federal Programs, 3; and Director of Elementary Education, School Reform, Choice, or Special Programs, 8.

Table 2: Survey respondents by MSAP cycle

	2010-2013 funding cycle	2007-2010 funding cycle	Cycles prior to the 2007-2010 funding cycle	No MSAP grant awarded	All respondents
Number	23	29	27	3	51
Percent	45.1	57.0	52.9	5.9	100.0

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q11, 2011.

Note: Numbers do not add to 100 since some respondents received MSAP funding for multiple cycles.

The smaller nature of the respondent pool means that they may not be representative of magnet leaders from the larger MSAP-funded universe of magnet schools. These circumstances limit our ability to generalize from our findings. Still, we are able to explore important questions about the ways in which federally funded magnet schools are operating, an area that has not been the subject of much recent research. These responses also represent the experiences and opinions of magnet school leaders responsible for educating more than hundreds of thousands magnet students in over 50 school districts around the nation. Despite the sample’s limitations, we report on important magnet school trends while recognizing the need for a broader, further investigation of magnet policies and outcomes.

Our analysis uses descriptive statistics to summarize the characteristics of variables, and cross-tabulations to describe relationships among different sets of variables.

Key Attributes of Magnets Receiving MSAP Support

High levels of demand for magnet schools receiving MSAP grants

Demand for school choice options has intensified over the past several decades (Scott, 2011).⁹ Demand remains a fundamental ingredient of a successful choice policy. Without it, the need for a variety of choices is diminished since families appear to be satisfied with their existing options.

For magnet schools, which have historically strived to enroll a diverse cross-section of students, demand from a wide-ranging group of families is essential. This is one reason that magnet schools often have unique educational themes—to attract a variety of families through innovative programming and curricula. Traditionally, considerable demand for magnet schools has been present, which is likely a reason that contributed to their growth and popularity. For example, one earlier analysis found that three-quarters of districts with magnet schools had more demand than available seats (Blank, Levine, & Steel, 1996). In 2008, another analysis found that

⁹ Of course, school choice via residential location decisions has long been used by affluent and/or white families.
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magnet schools reporting increasing levels of racial diversity over a ten-year period were associated with the highest levels of parental demand (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008).

According to all survey respondents, nearly three-quarters (72.5%) of the MSAP-funded magnet schools with which they were associated were oversubscribed (see Table 3). In other words, respondents reported that more applicants applied for admission than there was space available. The extent to which their programs were in demand varied, and was linked to both the length of time the school(s) had been open and the number of magnet programs to which a respondent’s answer pertained. Approximately 27% of survey participants who responded to the question reported that fewer than 500 students failed to obtain admission to their program(s), while another 16% reported that demand exceeded capacity by roughly 500-1500 students. Finally, 24% of respondents reported that between 1500 and 7500 students applied for a seat in a magnet program but weren’t admitted. These latter categories, many of which were linked to respondents that were associated with more than one school, suggest that many federally supported magnet programs are in very high demand.

Some differences in demand emerged across the various MSAP cycles. MSAP awardees from the previous cycle (from 2007-2010), were significantly more likely to report that their magnet programs were oversubscribed (75.9%) than current MSAP awardees (69.6%). This variation could be related to the fact that current MSAP funding is supporting the opening of new magnet programs (where demand is still being generated) or a funding emphasis on helping struggling magnet schools improve their “magnetic” capabilities.

Table 3: Magnet program(s) oversubscribed by MSAP funding cycle

Are magnet program(s) oversubscribed?		2010-2013 funding cycle*	2007-2010 funding cycle*	Cycles prior to the 2007-2010 funding cycle**	No MSAP grant awarded*	All respondents
Yes	Number	16	22	23	3	37
	%	69.6%	75.9%	85.2%	100.0%	72.5%
No	Number	7	7	4	0	14
	%	30.4%	24.1%	14.8%	0.0%	27.5%
Total	Number	23	29	27	3	51
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q4 and Q11, 2011.

*no significant differences

**p<.05 (comparison group is all other funding cycles)

Note: "All respondents" category does not equal the sum of each category because some respondents were awarded MSAP grants over multiple cycles.

MSAP awardees report rising levels of academic achievement

Magnet programs have been at the forefront of a movement promoting both equitable and excellent schools. Yet, as mentioned earlier, some evidence suggests that their original emphasis on promoting diversity through the creation of specialized programs has been largely subsumed by efforts to promote academic achievement (ED reports). Ideally, of course, both goals are vigorously pursued, efforts which are highlighted by the Obama Administration’s priorities for MSAP-funded magnet programs:

These grants assist in the desegregation of public schools by supporting the elimination, reduction, and prevention of minority group isolation in elementary and secondary schools with substantial numbers of minority group students. In order to meet the statutory purposes of the program, projects also must support the development and implementation of magnet schools that assist in the achievement of systemic reforms and provide all students with the opportunity to meet challenging academic content and student academic achievement standards.¹⁰

Federally funded magnet programs report strong evidence of heightened academic achievement after receiving MSAP grants (Table 4). More than 80% of respondents indicated that magnet school student achievement rose in the years following the receipt of federal dollars.

Like trends for magnet school demand, however, variations in evidence of academic achievement emerged between different funding cycles (see Table 4). The most recent MSAP awardees were considerably less likely to report evidence of rising academic achievement (70.6%) than the previous cycle’s awardees (87.1%). This difference is most likely related to the early nature of the cycle. A number of 2010-2013 cycle respondents indicated that evaluations of student achievement were in progress.

Table 4: Evidence of rising academic achievement by MSAP funding cycle

Do you have documentation of rising academic achievement for magnet school students in the years after you received the MSAP grant?		2010-2013 funding cycle*	2007-2010 funding cycle**	Cycles prior to the 2007-2010 funding cycle*	All respondents
Yes	Number	12	27	22	34
	%	75.0%	93.1%	81.5%	82.9%
No	Number	4	2	5	7
	%	25.0%	6.9%	18.5%	17.1%
Total	Number	16	29	27	41
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q13 and Q11, 2011.

*No significant differences

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education, Magnet Schools Assistance Program. See <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/magnet/index.html> for further information.

**p<.05

Note: "All respondents" category does not equal the sum of each category because some respondents were awarded MSAP grants over multiple cycles.

Inter-district enrollment often permitted for federally funded magnet school programs

The majority of school segregation today occurs between different school districts rather than within a single district (Clotfelter, 2004; Reardon & Yun, 2005). Policies designed to bridge district boundary lines or school attendance zones thus become a critical component of efforts to reduce racial isolation. Magnet schools—indeed most schools of choice—are not limited by traditional school zones that usually encompass nearby neighborhoods. Some programs are also designed to attract students from multiple school districts. As such, school choice can provide important opportunities for lessening the segregating impact of attendance zone and district boundaries.

Results from the survey suggest that many federally supported magnet schools take advantage of this policy lever by allowing inter-district magnet school enrollment (see Table 5). Two-thirds of respondents from all MSAP cycles reported that students from other districts were allowed to attend magnet programs. While it should be noted again that this is a small sample of magnet school directors and may not reflect the behaviors of the broader magnet sector, the overwhelming support for inter-district enrollment is an encouraging trend and one that should guide other choice programs.

Significantly more respondents from the most recent MSAP award cycle allowed inter-district magnet enrollment (81.8%) than respondents from the previous 2007-2010 cycle (75.9%). This difference across the awards from two different political administrations—Bush and Obama—suggests that the current administration may be placing more emphasis on reducing racial isolation across district lines.

Table 5: Inter-district enrollment by MSAP funding cycle

Are students from other districts allowed to attend your magnet program(s)?		2010-2013 funding cycle**	2007-2010 funding cycle***	Cycles prior to the 2007-2010 funding cycle***	No MSAP grant awarded*	All respondents
Yes	Number	18	22	15	1	33
	%	81.8%	75.9%	55.6%	33.3%	66.0%
No	Number	4	7	12	2	17
	%	18.2%	24.1%	44.4%	66.7%	34.0%
Total	Number	22	29	27	3	50
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q10 and Q11, 2011.

*no significant differences

**p<.05 (comparison group is all other funding cycles)

***p<.10(comparison group is all other funding cycles)

Note: "All respondents" category does not equal the sum of each category because some respondents were awarded MSAP grants over multiple cycles.

Policies designed to reduce racial isolation in evidence for MSAP grantees

In addition to increased evidence of inter-district magnet enrollment policies, survey respondents indicated that other policies designed to reduce racial isolation, either explicitly or implicitly, were in place. An explicit policy might include the presence of diversity goals, whereby a magnet program maintains a conscious directive to promote diversity. More indirect policies center on the ability to access school choice, which can be curtailed by a number of factors. Awareness of choice options, for example, is critical and may require special outreach to communities that lack access to mainstream social and informational networks (Petrovich & Wells, 2005). Transportation is another important consideration, the provision of which may be particularly important for families that lack the means to get their children to more distant programs. Unfortunately, in the wake of the 2008 fiscal crisis, many districts are considering (or have already implemented) cuts to magnet school transportation (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Tefera, 2011).

Survey respondents indicated that significant majorities of magnet school programs employed implicit policies to promote diversity. Nearly 85% of respondents reported that magnet school programs conducted special outreach to raise awareness about magnet options, and almost 70% indicated that free transportation was provided to students (see Tables 1A and 2A in Appendix). Just 2% of survey respondents reported that no policies were in place to reduce racial isolation (Table 4A in Appendix).

Compelling differences were present between awardees for the two most recent MSAP cycles related to reducing racial isolation. Notably, the first took place under the Bush Administration around the same time as the *Parents Involved* decision,¹¹ and the second occurred under Obama with somewhat more distance from the ruling. Tables 1A and 2A in the Appendix show that the 2010-2013 awardees were more likely to report special outreach to various communities (91.3%) than 2007-2010 MSAP funding recipients (79.3). The most recent cycle's recipients were also more likely to provide free transportation (69.6% versus 62.1%).

In terms of more direct policies to address racial isolation, over one-third of respondents specified that their programs employed diversity goals (Table 6). Importantly, that figure represents a statistically significant uptick from respondents governed by the 2007-2010 funding cycle, when less than a quarter reported utilizing specific diversity goals. Respondents connected to the most recent magnet funding cycle were also more likely to report that they used diversity goals than recipients of a similar survey disseminated in 2008, during the early aftermath of *Parents Involved*.¹²

¹¹ Applications were due just prior to the June 2007 decision was issued. The deadline for intergovernmental review was set for the actual date of the decision, and the winners were announced in September of 2007 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

¹² Since both samples are not necessarily representative of magnet schools as a whole, these variations could also reflect differences between the two small sample sizes. In other words, the earlier survey may have captured one small group of respondents whose attitudes may not have accurately reflected the universe of magnet school leaders, *Reviving Magnet Schools: Strengthening a Successful Choice Option* 16
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A quarter of all survey respondents indicated that their magnet programs employed other methods to reduce racial isolation (see Table 3A in Appendix). Yet a significantly higher share of respondents from 2007-2010 cycle selected "other" methods (34.5%), which could be related to the Bush Administration's support for race-neutral policies. These alternative methods included geographically based selection preferences designed to take the demographic makeup of neighborhoods into account, as well as preferences related to prior enrollment in magnets and where parents/families worked.

Table 6: Specific diversity goals by MSAP funding cycle

Magnet program(s) operates under specific diversity goals		2010-2013 funding cycle*	2007-2010 funding cycle**	Cycles prior to the 2007-2010 funding cycle*	No MSAP grant awarded*	All respondents
Yes	Number	8	7	8	2	20
	%	34.8%	24.1%	29.6%	66.7%	39.2%
No	Number	15	22	19	1	31
	%	65.2%	75.9%	70.4%	33.3%	60.8%
Total	Number	23	29	27	3	51
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q7 and Q11, 2011.

*no significant differences

**p<.05

Note: "All respondents" category does not equal the sum of each category because some respondents were awarded MSAP grants over multiple cycles.

The significant MSAP funding variations related to direct and indirect methods to reduce racial isolation between the two most recent cycles further highlight shifting federal priorities for magnet schools. It appears that Obama's Department of Education has begun to demonstrate a stronger commitment to magnet programs intent upon pursuing the historical, desegregating mission of magnets.

Admissions criteria for federally funded magnet programs emphasize equitable access

Beyond the broader policies to reduce racial isolation described in the previous section, many magnet schools are governed by admissions criteria that dictate which students can and cannot gain access to the programs. Prior research has shown that magnet schools employing non-competitive admissions criteria like open enrollment, lotteries or interviews are more diverse than programs using competitive standards that include testing or GPAs (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008). This makes sense given that non-competitive criteria may not erect the same barriers to access as testing or GPA stipulations.

while the current survey's emphasis on MSAP-funded magnets may capture a different, small (and thus perhaps not reflective of broader trends and sentiments) group.

All respondents receiving federal funding for their magnet schools indicated high levels of commitment to non-competitive criteria. Nearly 80% of MSAP awardees employed lottery admissions procedures, and approximately 30% were governed by open enrollment policies (Table 7 and Table 5A in Appendix).¹³ By contrast, just 16% considered test scores in their admissions procedures, while roughly 18% factored in GPA.

Table 7: Magnet school admissions policies by MSAP cycle

Magnet school admissions policies		2010-2013 funding cycle	2007-2010 funding cycle	Cycles prior to the 2007-2010 funding cycle	No MSAP grant awarded	All respondents
Employs open enrollment	Number	7*	8*	6*	3**	15
	%	30.4%	27.6%	22.2%	100.0%	29.4%
Considers test scores	Number	1**	3*	7**	1**	8
	%	4.3%	10.3%	25.9%	33.3%	15.7%
Considers GPA	Number	1**	5***	8**	1*	9
	%	4.3%	17.2%	29.6%	33.3%	17.6%
Total	Number	23	29	27	3	51
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q10 and Q11, 2011.

*no significant differences.

**p<.05

***p<.10

Note: "All respondents" category does not equal the sum of each category because some respondents were awarded MSAP grants over multiple cycles.

Substantial shares of survey participants considered neighborhood proximity (38%) and gave preferences to students with siblings in the same magnet programs (57%) (See Tables 6A and 7A in Appendix). Both dimensions of admissions policy have a basis in practical realities: shorter physical distances to the program and a lessening of the potential hassle of having two children from the same household attending different schools. However, each of these criteria could potentially diminish the prospect of a more diverse enrollment, particularly if the neighborhoods surrounding the magnet program are racially isolated or if the school's enrollment is already majority one-race.

Parental involvement stipulations, requiring that families agree to a certain level (often number of hours) of commitment to supporting the school or their student's academic endeavors, have recently cropped up as a popular school choice admissions policy. The highly touted KIPP network of charter schools, for instance, requires that families commit to a certain number of hours of support, which can be prohibitive for single parent families or parents working multiple jobs to support their children (Carnoy, Mishel, Jacobsen, & Rothstein, 2005). Perhaps due to

¹³ Respondents were given the option of checking more than one admissions criterion so totals do not add up to 100.
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some recognition of the potentially limiting impact of such policies, very few magnet school leaders (6%) receiving federal dollars to support their programs reported the presence of parental involvement commitments (Table 8A in Appendix). Nevertheless, given the potential constraints to participation, the fact that any federally-supported magnet schools mandated parental involvement is of serious concern.

Admissions criteria policies were not linked to the same variation between the past two MSAP funding cycles as other magnet attributes. Instead, more pervasive differences emerged between the older funding cycles (prior to 2007) and the two most recent ones. For example, more than a quarter (25.9%) of MSAP awardees prior to 2007 considered test scores as part of their admissions policies, compared to roughly one-tenth (10.3%) of 2007-2010 awardees and one in twenty (4.9%) 2010-2013 MSAP recipients. Similar variations were present for GPA considerations (see Table 7 above). These trends suggest that more recent MSAP funding evaluators have placed substantially less emphasis on competitive admissions criteria than earlier officials.

MSAP funding provides essential support for magnet school development

Another dimension of the survey asked respondents about the various ways in which MSAP funding was used. More than 95% of all MSAP awardees said that federal funding was used to offer unique curricula or teaching methods previously not available, to provide professional development for faculty and staff, and to purchase equipment to upgrade learning technology. Over 80% of respondents used MSAP funds to expand creative themes or to retrain faculty in innovative teaching practices. Forty percent of respondents suggested that MSAP funding was used to develop language-based programs (which could help reduce racial isolation for the nation’s growing Latino student enrollment). Other survey participants, using the open-ended response option, indicated that MSAP funds helped with marketing and recruitment, providing curriculum coaches and implementing outside programs like Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID).

Table 10: MSAP Funding Uses

MSAP funding been used to:	Percent
Purchase equipment to upgrade instructional technology	100.0
Offer professional development for faculty and staff	98.0
Offer unique curricula or teaching method previously not available	95.9
Expand creative theme-based offering (e.g. the arts)	85.7
Re-train faculty and staff in innovative practices or methods	81.6
Expand career-related program options	53.1
Develop language-based program(s)	40.8
Used for other purposes	28.6
<i>Total number of respondents</i>	<i>49</i>

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q14.

Note: Respondents were given the option of checking more than one funding use so totals do not add up to 100.

A final important point: MSAP funding has helped initiate or expand a sustainable set of programs. Fully 93% of respondents who answered this question reported that magnet schools funded under previous cycles are still in operation. Federal funding for magnet programs has thus helped support a system of choice schools that stay open and—based on the evidence presented here and in other places—typically flourish by both fostering achievement and promoting diversity.

Table 11: Sustainability of MSAP-funded magnet programs

If your magnet school(s) has been awarded MSAP funding in the past, is the MSAP-funded school(s) still in operation?		
Yes	Number	40
	%	93.0
No	Number	3
	%	7.0
Total	Number	43
	%	100.0

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q12.

Note: Nine respondents chose not to answer this question.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Federally funded magnet schools display a host of important characteristics—including a fundamental commitment to both excellence and equity—according to respondents of this survey. Participants indicated that they had substantial evidence of increased academic achievement after being awarded an MSAP grant across all recent cycles. In addition, magnet programs displayed an on-going commitment to promoting diversity (either through explicit or implicit admissions policies) and drawing students across segregative school district boundary lines. Participants also indicated that they used MSAP funds to establish or expand a sustainable set of programs. Those federal dollars went towards a variety of important improvements for magnet programs, including enhancing curriculum and course offerings, training faculty and staff and investing in innovative technology.

Importantly, substantial differences between the characteristics of magnet schools from the two post-*Parents Involved* grant cycles emerged. Respondents associated with the 2010-2013 cycle (administered by the Obama Administration) placed a stronger emphasis on reducing racial isolation through lottery-based admissions, setting goals for diversity, conducting extensive outreach, accepting students from other districts and offering free transportation than their counterparts in the 2007-2010 cycle. The significant distinctions between the two cycles may herald a shift back towards the original, integrating mission of federal magnet programs—challenging legal and political circumstances notwithstanding.

In short, despite the limitations of our sample, it provides new evidence suggesting that federally funded magnet programs may be taking a step forward in their established pledge to link school choice with a reduction in racial isolation. These efforts offer a sharp contrast to

studies suggesting that most charter schools have not yet committed to implementing civil rights standards related to choice (e.g. offering free transportation or conducting extensive outreach to a diverse set of communities) (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2011). Enrollment figures for magnet and charter school programs, outlined in Part II of this brief, indicate that choice left to its own devices—without civil rights standards—tends to create a bimodal distribution of students. This distribution results in a situation where white students are typically enrolled in more middle class schools of choice while underrepresented minority students are attending high poverty choice programs.

Several policy recommendations flow from these findings. First, given what respondents describe as very important uses for federal MSAP funds, more fiscal support is needed to expand and sustain the magnet sector. Second, given the positive characteristics linked to magnets in this report, as well as others (see, e.g. Betts, 2006; Cobb, Bifulco & Bell, 2009; Gamoran, 1995; Silver & Saunders, 2008), school turnaround strategies promoted by the Obama Administration should absolutely include conversion to a magnet program. Third, federal support for further research is sorely needed. New studies should begin to unpack a contemporary definition for magnet schools, explore the types of districts in which magnets operate (and where they might expand), and provide a detailed analysis of the financial assistance needed to start up successful magnet program(s), among other potential topics. Fourth, though the new guidance was a critically important step in the right direction, the federal government should continue to provide clear support and guidance for voluntary integration strategies, in addition to offering technical support for magnet program directors in schools and districts. Fifth, findings from this survey indicated that the design and description of MSAP grant opportunities can significantly influence the characteristics of magnet schools. Future grant cycle notifications should sustain the emphasis on reducing racial isolation. Sixth, civil rights standards from linked to many federally funded magnet schools should be applied to the charter sector.

This policy brief shows that, while MSAP funded magnet schools continue to evolve, they have sustained a twin focus on promoting academic excellence and reducing racial isolation. As school choice grows ever more popular, the federal government should renew and expand its commitment to magnet schools. Lessons from this long-standing and well-regarded sector should also influence the development of other forms of school choice.

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Appendix

Table 1A: Magnet school conducts special outreach by MSAP cycle

Magnet program(s) conducts special outreach		2010-2013 funding cycle	2007-2010 funding cycle	Cycles prior to the 2007-2010 funding cycle	No MSAP grant awarded	Total
No	Number	2	6	3	0	8
	%	8.7%	20.7%	11.1%	0.0%	15.7%
Yes	Number	21	23	24	3	43
	%	91.3%	79.3%	88.9%	100.0%	84.3%
Total	Number	23	29	27	3	51
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q18 and Q11, 2011.

No significant differences.

Table 2A: Magnet school provides free transportation by MSAP cycle

Magnet program(s) offers free transportation		2010-2013 funding cycle	2007-2010 funding cycle	Cycles prior to the 2007-2010 funding cycle	No MSAP grant awarded	Total
No	Number	7	11	8	1	16
	%	30.4%	37.9%	29.6%	33.3%	31.4%
Yes	Number	16	18	19	2	35
	%	69.6%	62.1%	70.4%	66.7%	68.6%
Total	Number	23	29	27	3	51
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q18 and Q11, 2011.

No significant differences.

Table 3A: Magnet program uses other strategies to reduce racial isolation by MSAP cycle

Magnet program(s) uses other strategies to reduce isolation		2010-2013 funding cycle	2007-2010 funding cycle***	Cycles prior to the 2007-2010 funding cycle	No MSAP grant awarded	Total
No	Number	17	19	20	2	38
	%	73.9%	65.5%	74.1%	66.7%	74.5%
Yes	Number	6	10	7	1	13
	%	26.1%	34.5%	25.9%	33.3%	25.5%
Total	Number	23	29	27	3	51
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q18 and Q11, 2011.

***p<.10 (comparison group is all other cycles)

Table 4A: Magnet school does not employ policies to reduce racial isolation by MSAP cycle

Magnet program(s) has NO policies to reduce racial isolation		2010-2013 funding cycle	2007-2010 funding cycle	Cycles prior to the 2007-2010 funding cycle	No MSAP grant awarded	Total
No	Number	23	28	27	3	50
	%	100.0%	96.6%	100.0%	100.0%	98.0%
Yes	Number	0	1	0	0	1
	%	0.0%	3.4%	0.0%	0.0%	2.0%
Total	Number	23	29	27	3	51
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q18 and Q11, 2011.

No significant differences.

Table 5A: Magnet program employs a lottery admissions process by MSAP cycle

Magnet program(s) employs a lottery admissions process		2010-2013 funding cycle	2007-2010 funding cycle	Cycles prior to the 2007-2010 funding cycle	No MSAP grant awarded	All respondents
Yes	Number	19	24	24	3	40
	%	82.6%	82.8%	82.8%	100.0%	78.4%
No	Number	4	5	5	0	11
	%	17.4%	17.2%	17.2%	0.0%	21.6%
Total	Number	23	29	29	3	51
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q7 and Q11, 2011.

No significant differences.

Note: "All respondents" category does not equal the sum of each category because some respondents were awarded MSAP grants over multiple cycles.

Table 6A: Magnet program considers sibling enrollment in admissions by MSAP cycle

Magnet program(s) considers sibling enrollment in admissions process		2010-2013 funding cycle	2007-2010 funding cycle	Cycles prior to the 2007-2010 funding cycle	No MSAP grant awarded	Total
No	Number	12	13	11	0	22
	%	52.2%	44.8%	40.7%	0.0%	43.1%
Yes	Number	11	16	16	3	29
	%	47.8%	55.2%	59.3%	100.0%	56.9%
Total	Number	23	29	27	3	51
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q7 and Q11, 2011.

No significant differences.

Table 7A: Magnet program considers proximity in admission by MSAP cycle

Magnet program(s) considers proximity in admissions process		2010-2013 funding cycle	2007-2010 funding cycle	Cycles prior to the 2007-2010 funding cycle***	No MSAP grant awarded	Total
No	Number	21	24	19	3	43
	%	91.3%	82.8%	70.4%	100.0%	84.3%
Yes	Number	2	5	8	0	8
	%	8.7%	17.2%	29.6%	0.0%	15.7%
Total	Number	23	29	27	3	51
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q7 and Q11, 2011.

***p<.10

Table 8A: Magnet program considers parental involvement in admissions by MSAP cycle

Magnet program(s) considers parental involvement in admissions process		2010-2013 funding cycle	2007-2010 funding cycle*	Cycles prior to the 2007-2010 funding cycle***	No MSAP grant awarded	Total
No	Number	22	29	26	2	48
	%	95.7%	100.0%	96.3%	66.7%	94.1%
Yes	Number	1	0	1	1	3
	%	4.3%	0.0%	3.7%	33.3%	5.9%
Total	Number	23	29	27	3	51
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: *Magnet Schools and the Impact of MSAP*, Q7 and Q11, 2011.

***p<.10