



# Drawn to Success: How Do Integrated Magnet Schools Work?

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## Magnet Schools: Their History and Effect

The history of school integration in America is replete with initiatives and endeavors which, for one reason or another, did not markedly transform the American education system. One effort with a lasting impact is the development of magnet schools.

Magnet schools were created in the late 1960s with the specific aim of increasing diversity in public schools. Magnet schools are public schools that typically offer specialized instruction and academic programs not found in most other public schools. They often have greater flexibility than traditional public schools in a number of different areas, from curriculum focus, to academic rigor, to admissions standards. Many magnet school policies include admission standards that focus on ensuring racial and/or economic diversity. Recruitment practices also draw enrollment from an array of different geographical areas, attracting students—like a magnet.

## Choice, with a Diversity Focus

Magnet schools offer unique curriculum options, with an academic focus on a particular theme that might appeal to a variety of parents and students (i.e. experiential learning, language immersion, STEM, or classical studies). They are also schools of choice. Unlike most public schools, to which students are simply assigned based on proximity, parents apply for their student's admission to a magnet school.

The first magnet school in America was an elementary school created in 1968 in Tacoma, Washington. McCarver Elementary School was specifically designed to reduce racial isolation by offering high caliber instruction, resources, and amenities, with an admissions policy based on a system of controlled choice. McCarver was an instant success, and nearly fifty years later it still serves 420 preschool through fifth grade students from diverse backgrounds. In 1969, Boston started the nation's second magnet school, the Trotter Elementary School. The Trotter was founded with the same focus on decreasing racial isolation and had similar success.

In 1970, Minneapolis, Minnesota, opened four magnet elementary schools and one magnet high school. Each of these schools had a different curriculum focus, however they each shared the same admissions policy of controlled choice, with an eye towards promoting and fostering integration. Though their curriculum and program focus differed, students in these schools, Black and White alike, made tremendous academic progress.

## Growth of Voluntary Effort

The popularity of magnet schools continued to grow at a slow, but steady pace throughout the 1970s. Magnet schools saw a substantive uptick in their popularity however, in the late 1970s, when they became one of few remaining ways to promote meaningful integration efforts after legal and legislative efforts at the federal level made school integration initiatives more difficult to implement. As desegregation efforts in most districts stalled or were abandoned, magnet schools, with their focus on parent choice as opposed to district assignment or judicial mandate, represented a viable solution to address school segregation. The magnet approach could withstand judicial and political scrutiny while appealing to students and their families. According to the US Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, in the 2013-2014 school year, magnet schools served 2,554,828 children, slightly more than the enrollment for charter schools, or 3.3% of the total number of public schools operating in the United States.

## One State's Approach

In Connecticut for example, magnet schools have been used for the greater part of 20 years to help the state enact court ordered desegregation initiatives. In 1989, in *Sheff v. O'Neill*, the Connecticut Supreme Court held that its state's system of segregated schools deprived students of color of access to a quality education; the Court ordered state legislators to remedy the problem. In response to the *Sheff* ruling, the Connecticut State Legislature passed legislation to spur voluntary initiatives to integrate schools. "An Act Enhancing Educational Choices and Opportunities," passed in 1997, provided increased funding for interdistrict, racially and socioeconomically diverse magnet schools.

With advocates continuing to push for the funding needed, today, Connecticut has 95 magnet schools serving 44,495 students. All of Connecticut's magnet schools have admissions policies geared towards promoting racial and socioeconomic diversity. Many of Connecticut's magnet schools are also among the highest performing schools in the state. Seven of Connecticut's 19 Blue Ribbon public schools are magnet schools. Connecticut regularly touts its magnet schools as effective vehicles for addressing and correcting the state's history of school segregation, and these schools are largely applauded and admired by legislators from both sides of the political aisle.

In Connecticut, where the prevalence of magnet schools has played a critical role in the state's efforts to ensure integration, magnet school enrollment makes up about 8% of the state's totally district public school enrollment.

## The Magnet Attraction

Enrollment at a magnet school is entirely voluntary, yet it is a popular option for many families. Low-income parents and families of color often clamor for admission because they can be more rigorous and engaging than options in their local districts. Meanwhile, they can incentivize white parents to leave their neighborhood schools for the specialized programs and curriculum.

To maintain balance among the various student populations they serve, magnet school policies have to be intentional about how they go about attracting and maintaining the various demographic groups they serve. This presents challenges when more families of color or students from lower socioeconomic background apply to magnet schools than seats are available or when limited white parents are willing to forgo zoned schools these types of schools. In Connecticut for example, school officials who help manage the state's magnet school program worry about losing funding if they are unable to maintain the required racial balance.

Despite their limitations, magnet schools remain a particularly effective way to create and promote school integration. They give students from all backgrounds access to high quality, diverse schools and classrooms. They offer educators the ability to create truly innovative programs which, when facilitated correctly, help foster a spirit of

inclusion. And they provide parents and students the opportunity to grow with and learn from classmates from diverse backgrounds. Since their inception, magnet schools have proven to be a way forward in the fight to improve American schools and to foster and promote integration. The students magnet schools serve, and the American education system as a whole, are all the better for this approach.