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Magnet Schools as a Tool for Desegregation and Internal Inequity within Magnet Programs

Magnet schools have historically been used explicitly as a tool for desegregation in public schools since the 1970s. By offering a level of academic choice to parents and students, magnet schools intend to encourage integration without causing the phenomenon of white flight. While it can appear that magnet schools are successful in promoting desegregation through integration without white flight, many magnet schools have internal segregation within the magnet programs, leading to inequity within the schools themselves. By examining the purpose and history of magnet schools and how they are designed to promote desegregation, the overall success of magnet schools can be examined.

Magnet schools were originally created for the specific purpose of promoting desegregation through voluntary integration using school choice. Magnet schools are structured around “specialized subject themes or educational methodologies” that are intended to draw in students from many different areas (Yu and Taylor 1). By attracting parents and students from many neighborhoods through programming, the community of a school becomes more heterogeneous as students from diverse races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds interact with each other. As magnet schools are intended to be schools of choice, students of higher socioeconomic status or majority race backgrounds choose to attend magnet schools, thus limiting the phenomenon of “white flight” that often comes from involuntary integration.

According to Yu and Taylor in a study conducted for the U.S. Department of Education, these children “already have choice,” so magnet schools must serve as the most appealing option to such families (1).

Magnet schools originated in the mid-1970s under the explicit goal of desegregation (Steel 15). The first federal support of magnet schools came from the Emergency School Aid Act, which existed from 1972 to 1981. In 1976, the ESAA was amended to include funding for “authorizing grants to support planning for, and implementation [of] magnet schools” (Yu and Taylor 61). The significance of the ESAA is that it was explicitly and specifically designed to aid in desegregation, and by providing funding for magnet schools, the ESAA labelled magnet schools primarily as tools for desegregation. After a two year break in funding for magnet schools, the government established the Magnet School Assistance Program, or MSAP, in 1984 (Yu and Taylor 62). The MSAP and ESAA have several key differences - while the ESAA was solely dedicated to the mission of desegregation, the MSAP is slightly broader. In addition to promoting a heterogenous school environment and integration, the goal of the MSAP overall is to “strengthen the knowledge of academic subjects and the grasp of tangible and marketable vocational skills” (Yu and Taylor 62-63). Still, in order to receive grants from the MSAP, districts were required to implement either a court-ordered or voluntary desegregation plan, so both were still heavily focused on the goal of desegregation (Yu and Taylor 63).

As stated in the MSAP, magnet schools “must have a desegregation emphasis” (Steel 20). The goal of magnet schools overall is to “reduce minority isolation and enhance racial balance” (Yu and Taylor 16). Magnet schools seek to accomplish desegregation in several ways. First, magnet schools are prevalent in areas that are primarily constituted by minority and

low-income individuals, particularly urban areas and large urban school systems, where there is a dire need for good schools. High-minority areas can be defined as areas where less than 50% of the population is white, and low-income areas can be defined as areas where more than 50% of the students receive free or reduced lunch (Steel 22). In a study conducted for the U.S. Department of Education in the early 1990s as explored in *Educational Innovation in Multiracial Contexts: The Growth of Magnet Schools in American Education*, only 4% of districts in the nation offer magnet school programs, while 53% of urban school districts offer magnet school programs (22). On a broader scale, only 11% of districts nationwide offer overarching desegregation programs, while 59% of urban districts offered them (Steel 22). While there often an inferred correlation between large urban school districts, high-minority areas, and low-income areas, the study also highlights specific statistics for high-minority and low-income areas. In high-minority areas, it is four times as likely to see a magnet school program and three times as likely to see a desegregation plan as compared to districts nationwide (Steel 22). In low-income areas, magnet schools are about three times more prevalent, and desegregation plans about four times more prevalent (Steel 22). The relative prevalence of magnet schools in urban, high-minority, low-income areas is proof that magnet schools are attempting to fulfill their initial goal as a driving factor in school desegregation. By having more choice in critical areas, there is more opportunity for integration, as well as improved schools in historically impoverished urban areas.

In another report from the Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights titled *Difficult Choices: Do Magnet Schools Serve Children in Need?* three districts were studied in Cincinnati, Nashville, and St. Louis to and the study claims that the magnet schools were key factors in

achieving “a high degree” of desegregation (13). In both Cincinnati and Nashville, the percentage of Black students enrolled in the district and the percentage of Black students enrolled in magnet programs is about equal (Steel 13). This shows that in those districts, the enrollment of Black students reflects the overall enrollment in the district, which shows that minority students are accurately represented within the magnet programs. Thus, in the studied districts, magnet schools can be considered a successful tool for desegregation.

Magnet schools do have some limiting factors as tools for desegregation. Entrance parameters can be limiting to students as they can be seen as segregationist. Many students who wish to go to magnet schools cannot because of capacity issues (Yu and Taylor 19). Most schools use a lottery system to admit new students, but over half of magnet schools have waiting lists, and of the schools that have waiting lists, about “60 percent of the students on...[the] lists were Black, Hispanic, or from another minority” (Yu and Taylor 19). About a third of reported magnet schools have other entrance requirements such as “[test scores, auditions, and] preference for children with siblings already in attendance” (Steel 9). When students, especially historically disadvantaged minority students, are unable to attend magnet schools when they would like to, the system is continuing to oppress them. Magnet schools exist for the purpose of desegregation, yet many minority students are still denied access to the better and more integrated education that magnet programs are meant to provide.

How magnet schools are advertised to potential parents and students can also produce inequity, especially when examining minority-to-majority magnet programs. Most schools employ similar strategies of using “newsletters, brochures, [and] advertising campaigns” to promote their schools to potential new families (Yu and Taylor 17). While these do provide a

wide breadth of accessibility of information, and some studies show that lower income families are more likely to use these resources than higher income families, high-income families are still advantaged (Yu and Taylor 17). Higher income families are more likely to “have cars and flexible work hours,” but more importantly, they have access to a social network that low-income families do not have (Yu and Taylor 17). Higher income families live in neighborhoods with like-minded parents also searching for good schools, have jobs where they interact with other parents, and have the time, resources, and motivation to research good schools. Low-income families often come from backgrounds that do not foster a sense of motivation to obtain a quality education. They might have night jobs where they interact with few people, or they may not be employed at all (Yu and Taylor 18). While magnet schools do provide resources for families to know more about their programs, low-income families are at a natural disadvantage when compared to high-income families. While there is statistical evidence to support that magnet schools do attract disadvantages, low-income, and minority students from areas outside of the school zone, it can be inferred that those students are from families that are more motivated and informed than others. When these students leave their zoned schools, it can be argued that this can lead to further inequity. When there is already a dearth of motivated students, and the few motivated students that exist leave a school, the cycle of inequity continues for students left outside of magnet programs (Yu and Taylor 18).

As stated above, Magnet schools do have some statistical evidence of success in desegregation, especially when examining standardized test scores and graduation rates of disadvantaged and minority students. In the St. Louis study, magnet students “substantially [outperformed]” students in non-magnet programs in standardized tests in four subjects in the

early 1990s (Steel 19). In Cincinnati, magnet programs that contained a significant number of disadvantaged students “performed above average on standardized tests,” showing success for disadvantaged students involved with magnet schools (Steel 19). In St. Louis for the graduation year of 1993, the percentage of four-year graduates of non-magnet Black students was in the mid-20s, while over half of Black magnet students graduated (Steel 19). The same study also showed that low-income or minority students are more likely to go to a magnet school than high-income or white children (Steel 48). While this may only be true for the three cities studied, the graduation rates and standardized test scores coupled with proven participation of minority students in the magnet programs indicates that magnet schools do experience success.

While magnet schools can show overall success, there are debates on whether they further segregation within magnet programs. A dissenting opinion that refutes the success of magnet schools is examining Programs Within a School magnets, or PWSs. In a study that consisted of several interview with non-magnet and magnet students within a PWS, students cited enormous inequalities between the educations of those within the magnet program and those in the non-magnet program. The study *Magnet Schools: Desegregation or Resegregation? Students' Voices from Inside the Walls* emphasizes that it's important to look beyond the statistics of a school in order to “examine the racial composition of classrooms” (33). While schools might appear to be desegregated and well-integrated, minority students may be systematically regulated to the non-magnet program, and may not actually interact with a heterogeneous student body on a daily basis in their classrooms.

Jefferson High School, which is examined in this study, is a school in a primarily Black and Latino neighborhood. It is a majority-to-minority magnet school program with a

school-within-a-school PWS called the Jefferson Exemplary Program, or JEP that was explicitly created for the purpose of a “desegregated school setting (Bush 37). Notably, the JEP has strict admission requirements, including letters of recommendation and a 3.5 grade point average with no grades below a B (Bush 37).

What is most significant about the segregationist nature of the JEP is how the students and teachers within the school view the magnet program. One of the students in the JEP program reported that he could “count the number [of Latino and African-American students in his JEP classes]...on one hand” (Bush 38). In an interview, this student reported that although White students are not the majority at Jefferson High School, they are the majority in the classes in the JEP (38). In addition, the students interviewed all termed the non-JEP classes as the “regular” classes, indicating that there is a universal acknowledgement that the JEP classes are somehow above the others or more special (Bush 39). Even the teachers use the term “regular” when referring to the non-JEP classes, which indicates a culture and community of divisiveness between the JEP program and the non-JEP program. When teachers and students all acknowledge that there is a significant positive difference between the non-magnet and magnet programs within a school, and when there are few minorities in any of the magnet classes, it is evident that there is a significant racial divide.

Even though the students are technically in an integrated school, their classes remain homogenous. The purpose of an integrated school is to raise quality of education for all students, but by unintentionally racially segregating a school internally, the quality of education for the students in the non-magnet program becomes of less quality than the magnet program. This is directly reflected in the study through a phenomenon called “attitudinal [or] behavioral

reinforcement of segregation” (Bush 40). The students in the study claim that the teachers at the school would rather teach JEP classes, and that it is a goal of the teachers to be able to work up to teaching in the magnet program. Teachers “just [do not] care” in the non-magnet classes, or at least that is how the students perceive the teachers’ attitudes (Bush 41). Furthermore, students in both the JEP and non-JEP classes claim that JEP students are shown preferential treatment (Bush 41). The JEP classes are even physically separated from the non-JEP classes, with the JEP classes only taking place on the second or third floor, or in an entirely separate wing of the school, while non-JEP classes are on the first floor (Bush 43). The non-JEP students even verbally reiterate that they never see JEP students during the school day (Bush 43-44)

Attitudinal reaffirmation of segregation is dangerous because it furthers the divide between non-magnet and magnet students, thus showing students in the non-magnet program that they are not as important or as valued as the magnet students. Once students are stratified into their program by their standardized test scores and GPA, they stay there. Because students of color and low-income students are systematically oppressed and not given equitable educational opportunity from a young age, the majority of minority students will not be able to match the educational output of their white and high-income counterparts. Thus, they stay in the “regular” programs, and are subconsciously (and sometimes consciously) told that they are less than those in the magnet programs, creating a segregationist and unequal divide between minority and majority students. Even though it appears as though magnet schools are successful, when an internal divide occurs, it serves to only reinforce segregation and does not allow for positive change.

Overall, magnet schools are an effective first step to integration and desegregation. There is statistical proof that demonstrates that minority students in magnet schools and magnet programs benefit from the existence of magnet programs, especially when examining standardized test scores and graduation rates. However, there are significant problems with magnet schools and magnet programs. Majority-to-minority programs, where integration is focused on creating a program that will draw in White and high-income families can fail when the programs become internally segregationist and do not allow for minority students to thrive, such as in the case of program-within-a-school magnets. Minority-to-majority programs fail when insufficient advertising cannot attract minority, disadvantaged, and low-income families, especially when such families need to be unusually motivated in order to find and pursue these magnets.

Magnet schools can be a solution to desegregation in some districts and in some cities. The relative success of magnets in St. Louis that have helped significantly increase the graduation rates of Black students is proof of this. But it is unrealistic to assume that magnet schools are the overarching answer to inequity in public education nationwide. In some districts, magnet schools are an effective answer. In others, charter schools may function better. But at the root, systematic inequity in education is still fostered by systematic racism through the property tax, inequitable distribution of resources, poor quality teachers, and other serious issues within the education system. While magnet schools appear to help the problem, they are not the entire answer, and it is important to understand the root of the issue in order to implement significant positive change.

Works Cited

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