

# LEADING THE WAY: IMPROVING MAGNET SCHOOLS FOR INNER CITY BLACK STUDENTS

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This study evaluates today's magnet schools' strategies and how they contribute to the improvement of academic achievements of students in urban America. The focus will be on urban youth, primarily inner-city black students. Drawing from leadership and organizational theory, this article contributes to the literature on strategy and organizational structure by examining current magnet schools and how they align with their strategies. The study is particularly significant because the evidence indicates that the educational gap between urban and suburban students continues to widen.

**Keywords:** magnet schools, leadership, education, organizational theory

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## INTRODUCTION

As the new millennium begins, the United States remains the "Land of Opportunity" to many across the globe. However, the country continues to be haunted by the past. Is the proclaimed educational opportunity equal for all? The 1968 Kerner Commission Report, a presidential panel on race relations, concluded that America was "moving towards two societies, one Black, one White, separate and unequal." (PBS.org, 1998). In 1998, a follow-up study by the Eisenhower Foundation declared that situation had worsened. The study further stated that economic and racial breach had widened with America's neighborhoods and schools re-segregating; child poverty was up over 20% since the 1980's, a situation that disproportionately affected minorities (PBS.org, 1998). The Civil Rights Movement provided the thrust toward a more integrated and effective education for all Americans. However, no one said that this integrated vision was meant to last. Today, some people in society view education as "separate but equal." Proponents of "the land of opportunity" jargon would argue it is the best of times for all American children. The evidence points elsewhere, suggesting that it is difficult to ignore the inferior quality of education in urban areas without addressing the increasing trend of a segregated education system for people of color and poor children. The purpose of this study is to evaluate current magnet school strategies and offer possible improvements to combat shortfalls in education in an urban environment. The focus will be on urban youth, primarily black students. Through this process, there are three key areas that will be reviewed: strategy, structure, and culture.

## MAGNET SCHOOL APPROACH

Magnet schools, as a part of a federal school desegregation solution, became a hot commodity during the 1990s. The approach was simple: draw white students to predominantly black schools in the inner city by offering well-funded themed schools, such as performing arts or science and technology, which combined innovative learning with an integrated school. Today, there are more than 3,000 magnet or theme-based schools (Rossell, 2003). Magnet schools differ in how they implement their programs. Some offer a magnet program to all students in the school that is called a *whole school* (WS) format while the program within a school (PWS) format offers magnet curricula to some, but not all of the students in the school (Department of Education [DOE], 2003). Pegged as a way to integrate urban schools and curb white students from leaving, magnet schools have failed their original mission. Currently, the enrollment of magnet schools includes a high proportion of minority students (73% on average) and students living in poverty (60% on average). Rossell (2003) maintained that most surveys demonstrate that white people prefer majority white schools. Less than 16% of the magnet schools have been able to fully integrate the racial makeup of their student bodies (DOE, 2003). Actually, there has been little systematic research to support the notion that magnet schools can reduce minority

student isolation. Overall, the magnet schools have had modest impact on preventing, eliminating, or reducing Minority Group Isolation (MGI), which refers to schools that have minority enrollment of more than 50% (DOE, 2003). Unfortunately, inner city schools are becoming browner and poorer. There are a couple of reasons that make magnet schools vulnerable to extinction. Initially, magnet schools were funded as a tool for desegregation under the Emergency School Assistance Act from 1972 to 1981. The national desegregation crisis forced the United States to consider less intrusive ways for desegregation. The magnet schools provided this solution. Currently, desegregation is not a primary goal of the American education schools (Rossell, 2003). One of the greatest issues regarding the survival rate of magnet schools is funding. Since desegregation has become a secondary goal, magnet schools have not received the same level of support (Rossell, 2003). With the emergence of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) in 1985, federal grants were given to magnet schools as part of the approved desegregation plan to bring students from different socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds together (DOE, 2003). MSAP grants, representing 98% of all magnet schools in the United States, has funded a total of 285 of 292 magnet schools since 2003 (DOE, 2003). These grants also provide about \$110 million annually to support magnet schools (Goldring & Smrekar, 2000). Under this new program, magnet schools not only had to desegregate but also improve the quality of education in order to qualify for funding. Currently, magnet schools are a part of the 'No Child Left Behind' Act of 2001 (Rossell, 2003). Today, with tight budgets at the school district level, magnet schools become an easy prey to budget cuts. Finally, magnet schools do not seem to have a clear vision because they must address a multiplicity of goals that sometimes conflict with each other (DOE, 2003).

## RESEGREGATION OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The United States must revisit its educational system. Kozol (2006) argued that segregation has returned to public education as a result of several years of federal policies. Currently, the number of black children attending integrated schools has dropped to its lowest levels since 1968. Demographics within the public inner city schools continue to change. Blacks and Hispanics comprise 56.1% of students in urban areas (Levin, 1999). In this situation, the lack of white students in public schools is not due to white flight but demographic changes. These changes impact politics, which in turn, impact culture. In the process, traditional education suffers. When one discusses segregation, people immediately think about the South. Prior to *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, most Southern public schools were one race schools, either white or black (Armor & Rossell, 2001). Many argue the success of past desegregation strategies. Between the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, federal courts and government agencies demanded race-conscious policies in every portion of school operations (Armor & Rossell, 2001). As a result, many white parents started a massive withdrawal of their children from public schools into private, segregated academies, resulting in the withdrawal of substantial financial support. This left public schools underfunded and inferior. Magnet schools are seen as an effective way to introduce market incentives to both voluntary and mandatory desegregation plans. School choice is the latest buzzword to hit public schools. School choice includes a variety of programs, such as tuition vouchers for private or public schools, charter schools, magnet schools, inter district transfers, and controlled-choice districts. However, Levin (1999) maintained that many school choices may perpetuate racial and ethnic stratification and are likely to increase economic segregation.

## SCHOOL STRATEGY

Magnet schools should refocus their strategies. Magnet schools are the poster child for school choice. However, Levin (1999) argued that at least a decade after the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, black students still remain segregated in their Southern school systems. Magnet schools were set up to initially combat segregation in a market driven fashion without the harsh court mandates. Today, magnet schools have no clear vision because they are asked to be all things to all people. Magnet schools need a shared vision. Today's magnet schools do not have a singleness of strategy. They are required to promote racial diversity, improve scholastic standards, and provide a range of programs to satisfy the individual needs of students (Goldring & Smerkar, 2000). Some see the problems in urban areas as a hopeless socioeconomic issue. Traub (2000) argued that there is no evidence that any existing strategy can close the overall achievement gap between children with low socioeconomic status and their wealthier, largely suburban counterparts. Traub further explained that society speaks of the inner city poor as if they were remote tribes instead of citizens of the United States. These inequalities inflicted on inner city students because of their homes, neighborhoods, and peer environments eventually confront them as adults after they complete public school. Although magnet schools in certain areas are extremely popular and garnish support from local school systems, maintaining magnet schools are a considerable investments of resources. With this being said, diluting the magnet school scope prevents public schools from achieving any or all of their mission goals. For example, 78% of students in districts with magnet schools are in large urban areas; however, the larger proportion of minority students makes it virtually impossible that large districts

can achieve any racial desegregation plan, regardless of the strategy (Goldring & Smerkar, 2000). Unfortunately, improving the quality of any urban school will be difficult. Many proponents focus on the enormous amount of federal dollars already spent on large districts, such as the Washington, D.C. area. The politics of improving these inner city schools will be a challenge. One clear strategy is to allow magnet schools to serve their communities without regard to race or ethnicity. Demographic shifts are forcing traditional leaders to rethink their strategies and create new paradigms. In the United States, some 8.6 million students are attending multiracial schools. Multiracial schools emerged because growing segregation of black and Hispanic students exist in public schools (Orfield & Lee 2006). The schools are multiracial because they have two or more 'historical' minorities with relatively few white students. Although these multiracial schools present a challenge to educators, they represent the evolution of the United States. Therefore, it is more critical to teach students in inner city schools that are highly segregated than it is to spend time trying to integrate them with suburban students who do not want to attend.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

While there is no magical organizational structure to fit every problem, the revamping of current magnet schools should be designed so that they are appropriate for the challenges of urban areas. Therefore, magnet school structures should be customized for the specific communities. Contemporary educators have been working on novel solutions in order to address the pressing issues of public schools. Administrators, principals, and teachers must have the right type of leadership to both guide and understand the needs of urban communities. Current school officials may be negatively impacting the performance of magnet schools with their biases. Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, and Brissie (1987) argued that teachers may contribute to parent involvement. Some teachers fear parents because they may blame the teachers for the lack of performance of their child. The National School Boards Association conducted a survey of 4,700 educators from 127 schools in 12 urban districts on school climate. Nearly one in four teachers in urban schools provides a negative picture of school culture (Toppo, 2007). Twenty-three percent of public school teachers at all levels feel their inner city students would not do well in college (Toppo, 2007). Clearly, leaders in magnet schools can influence the direction, performance, and relationships in urban schools. In addition, Hoover-Dempsey, et al. (1987) maintained higher teacher efficacy may minimize the perception of threat in their roles as experts when dealing with certain parents. Lareau (1987) observed that a teacher's attitude is a critical determinant of parent involvement in a school because the teacher is the school's primary representative. Authoritative leaders without any empathy for inner city communities will gain little support from parents or students. Magnet schools should use innovative structures that intentionally develop the bond between teachers, students, and parents. The new models of the 21<sup>st</sup> century call for smaller, more fluid, and interactive organizations. Actually, the remake of structures of schools is applied to support small learning communities. They create small, pedagogically autonomous groups in a new school by creating independent learning communities. Davidson (2001) advocated building small learning communities to foster the whole school culture. Many educators are resistant to any change of their stable academic environments. However, Nadler and Tushman (1997) maintained that leaders need to be flexible to market changes as the market relates to organizational structure. Parson (1998) argued for a replacement of traditional elementary and secondary schools with community learning centers that bring individuals, programs, and processes together to create a culture for learning organizations. In the future, the new structure for successful organizations will center on a small organization with a core of key personnel and a portfolio of support staff around that core (Handy, 1997). In this framework, decentralization and relationships become vital. The organizations may be flattened by more empowerment of stakeholders such as parents in the local community. In summary, how magnet schools are structured becomes a critical ingredient in the academic achievement of inner city children.

## **SCHOOL CULTURE**

It is somewhat intuitive that school culture can contribute to the betterment of inner city students. Organizations communicate their expectations both formally and informally through their culture. Scholars call this environment organizational culture (Organ & Bateman, 1991). In most educational institutions, school culture has been a domain where institutions try to promote moral values. On a personal level, students in general have a set of core values that dictate how they respond to a situation while a school has a set of core values that guides the organization while it does business (Malphurs, 2004). As organizations continue to be bombarded by pop culture, traditional values are challenged. Obviously, incongruent values held by students and teachers damage group dynamics by creating unhealthy conflicts in public school systems, which can easily escalate over time. Postmodern influences are clearly seen in urban subcultures where students question everything and challenge school authority (Kelm, 1999). If this is the case, leaders need to model the right values to students. School leaders such as principals and teachers have an immediate impact on school culture.

Currently, school culture perpetuates second class citizenship of urban children by treating them as insignificant. Magnet schools in urban areas offer incentives to attract suburban white children in order to desegregate these schools yet leave predominately white schools in the suburbs untouched. In these magnet schools, white students are often in a different format where they are isolated from the majority population of black and Hispanic students, thereby creating an informal caste system. Many times, administrators and teachers are forced to be in urban schools against their will. If teachers do not believe in the students, it creates an unhealthy “self-fulfilling prophecy” environment. This forces them to deal with little resources, unsupportive parents, rebellious students, and a lack of energetic support from school board officials. Furthermore, parents and guardians are major contributors to the success of children in school. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) suggested with good teacher-parent interaction, there is improved student achievement, improved student behavior, lower student absenteeism, and more positive attitude toward school. However, meeting this objective is extremely difficult for inner city schools. Several factors prevent urban parents from getting involved at school: lack of time, limited opportunities for involvement, and indifferent or antagonistic attitudes on the part of the school staff (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, and Brissie, 1987). Furthermore, the parent’s lack of education may be a contributing factor in disengagement of parents with teachers. Lareau (1987) argued that many of these studies subscribed to the culture-of-poverty thesis, which suggests that lower class families do not value education as highly as middle class families. This prescribed outlook creates bias in the parent-teacher interaction. Any discussion of culture and the school system would be incomplete without some consideration of attitudes. Students need to have a positive attitude for success. Moore (2014) argued Millennial students have a postmodern worldview which is shaped through technology and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Thus, parental discretion is vital to Millennial in determining what is authentic in their learning development. Furthermore, parental involvement is connected to school culture and affects how both student and parent will be treated and accepted in the academic institution. Therefore, the creation of a positive school culture fostering a positive value system in students may offer some hope for improving the lives of students in inner city communities.

## STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

The following strategic implications emerged as a result of this investigation and are offered to enhance the effectiveness of magnet schools:

- Magnet schools should have only one or two goals to achieve which will bring greater focus and increase opportunities for effective monitoring and achievement of set targets.
- Magnet schools should seek to increase a culture that is supportive of their vision.
- School systems should seek to determine if it is a better option to develop charter schools in lieu of magnet schools.
- Magnet schools should seek to create a school culture where parents can be meaningfully involved.
- Communicate formally and informally the organizational values to employees on a routine basis.
- Magnet schools should build multiracial schools in ways that improve the quality of schools without destroying the inherent benefits of cultural diversity.

## CONCLUSION

“By 1985, the Negro population in central cities is expected to increase by 72 percent to approximately 20.8 million. Coupled with the continued exodus of White families to the suburbs, this growth will produce majority Negro populations in many of the nation’s largest cities.

The future of these cities, and of their burgeoning Negro populations, is grim...This trend will continue unless important changes in public policy are made,” reported the 1968 Kerner Commission Report (Indiana University, n.d.). Today, society must recalibrate its efforts to give equal opportunity for all as it again deals with segregation in the United States’ public schools. This requires a critical evaluation of magnet school programs in order to meet the pressing needs of students trapped in urban environments. Political leaders, academics, and parents must be willing to make hard choices in this situation. If they are to be successful then magnet schools need a clear focus. The jury is still out on whether an innovative structure can help integrate schools; Renzulli and Evans (2005) argue that school choice and charter school options may have future consequences for racial integration given the potential of white flight similar to the 1960s. The paper found the following key issues:

- (a) magnet schools have numerous mission goals that prevent them from having a clear strategy,
- (b) magnet school structures should be customized for the specific communities and promote parental involvement, and
- (c) magnet schools instruct students who are heavily influenced by pop culture values and challenge traditional values in

the school culture. The application of the identified recommendations could help increase the success rate of urban schools by modifying traditional magnet schools. More significantly, adoption of these recommendations will feed into broader policy initiatives and specific efforts to reduce the widening gap between urban and suburban students in the United States.

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