

# **ATTRACTING SUCCESS:**

## **A STUDY OF MAGNET SCHOOLS IN SOUTHERN STATES**



**SUMMER 2018**

## Overview

Magnet schools are a subset of public schools that provide specialized, typically theme-based education to prepare students for college and careers (Magnet Schools of America, 2018). Unlike other public schools-- where enrollment in a given school is dictated by a student's address—magnet schools are open to students from other zones in the school district or designated metropolitan area to attend.

Magnet schools represent the largest set of choice-based schools in the nation and today enroll twice as many students as the rapidly growing charter school sector (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, 2008). As of 2017, an

estimated 3.5 million students attend 4,340 magnet schools nationwide (Hundley, 2017).

The first magnet schools were developed in the 1960s and 1970s as a means of increasing diversity in predominantly minority schools in large urban areas. By providing enhanced programs, these schools proved attractive educational prospects for parents and students, thus drawing them to these schools voluntarily and reducing the need for busing and other enforced desegregation methods (Maloney, 1986). Recruitment practices for these schools thus promoted enrollment from an array of geographical areas, attracting students.



## Traditional Public Schools and Magnet Schools

Magnet schools are distinguished from traditional public schools in a number of ways:

**Curriculum.** Magnet schools typically have greater flexibility terms of curriculum focus, offering unique themes-- such as technology, language immersion, or visual and performing arts-- or innovative instructional approaches that are designed to attract students across different ethnic and economic backgrounds (Blazer, 2012).

**Admission standards.** Magnet schools also have additional flexibility in terms of their admissions standards, with some requiring applicants to go through a rigorous testing and application process based on academic ability and achievement. However, three out of four magnet schools do not use academic criteria and instead use lottery systems, family income, or other non-academic based criteria for admission (Magnet Schools of America, 2017).

**Academic rigor.** In a study of successful K-8 magnet schools, the Department of Education noted that the selected schools for study had designed rigorous curricula both to meet exit standards and to promote high test scores among their students ("Creating and

Sustaining Successful K-8 Magnet Schools," 2008).

**Funding.** Administered by local public school districts, magnet schools are generally supported with local funding; in some instances, states can provide additional support. In addition, the federal government also awards grants through its Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP). These grants are awarded to 30 to 50 school districts every three years by the U.S. Department of Education reviews grant applications (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2012).

## Effectiveness of Magnet Schools

Existing literature regarding the effectiveness of magnet schools provides a complex portrait across several domains:

**Integration.** One of the primary reasons for the creation of magnet programs was to attract students from outside a school's neighborhood, in order to promote desegregation. To this end, magnet schools have proven to be highly successful. Researchers have found that, compared to standard public schools, magnet schools have enrolled a larger share of black and Latino students. However, there have been caveats. For instance,

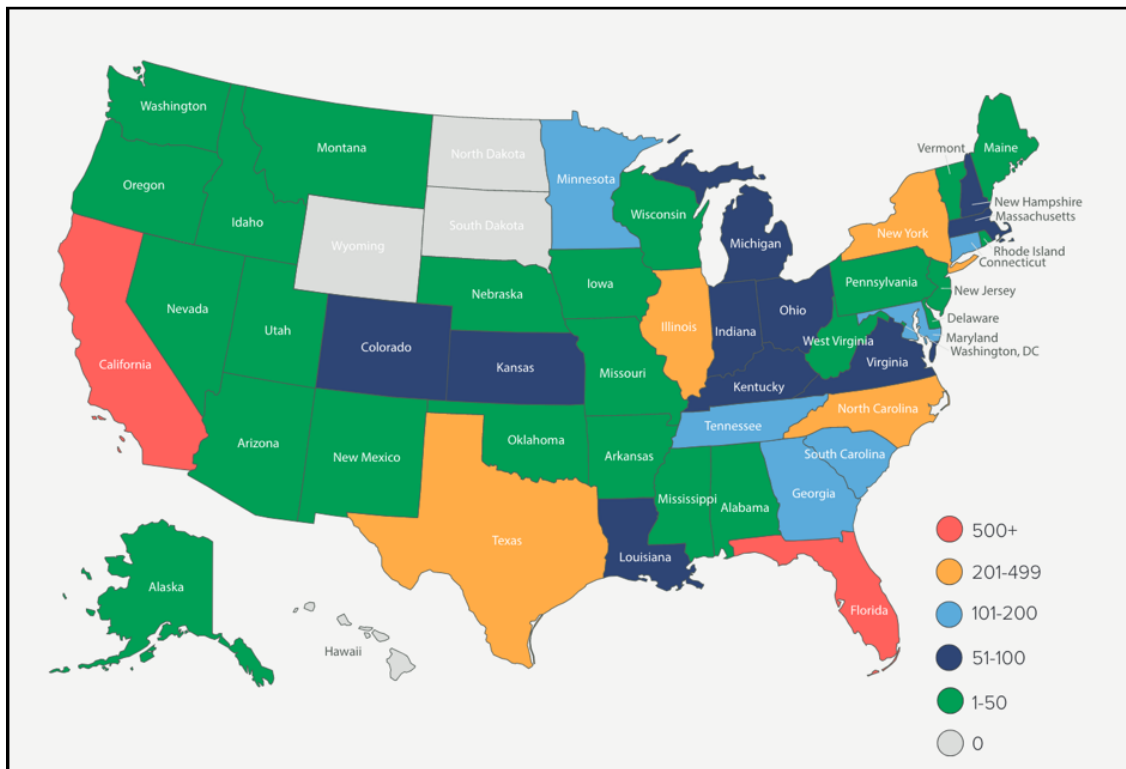
Arcia (2006) found that the gains made towards desegregation by Miami-Dade County magnet schools had significantly eroded within a four-year period.

**Teacher Quality.** In a study on teacher qualifications and work environments across the different school types, Cannata (2008) concluded that the evidence on the qualifications of teachers in different types of public schools (magnet, interdistrict and intradistrict choice) is mixed. Although there are some differences, those differences fail to provide a conclusive story. For instance, among forms of public

school choice, there is some evidence that teachers in magnet schools have less experience and teachers in districts that participate in interdistrict choice have more experience, but these differences disappear when the sample is restricted to urban schools. Among public choice schools, teachers in magnet schools were more likely to graduate from highly selective colleges, and teachers in districts with interdistrict choice less likely to do so (Cannata, 2008).

**Student performance.** Researchers have generally concluded that magnet schools have a positive

### Magnet Schools By State



Source: Magnet Schools of America