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50 YEARS OF MAGNET SCHOOLS: AN OVERVIEW OF DESEGREGATION EFFORTS

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50 Years of Magnet Schools: An Overview of Desegregation Efforts¹

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Abstract: Geographically based racial and economic segregation in the United States has resulted in unequal funding for schools and therefore unequal educational opportunities for students. In this report, we discuss the 50-year history of magnet schools as a voluntary desegregation mechanism. During these years, the funding policies and legal landscapes shifted in ways that supported and then undermined magnet schools' desegregation mission. Throughout the 1990s and culminating in 2007, the courts eroded the ability of magnet schools to prioritize desegregation. Post-2007, in response, magnet schools broadened their approaches to include an additional focus on innovative academic programs. We end the report with research questions that remain underexplored regarding magnet schools and their effectiveness as a desegregation mechanism.

Introduction

Social stratification based on income and race has been a constant throughout U.S. history (Rose, 2007), with the legacies of colonialism (Levy & Young, 2011), slavery (Kendi, 2017), Western expansion (Love, 2005), and Jim Crow (Alexander, 2020) still being reflected in segregated present-day school systems (Grant, 2009; Parcel & Taylor, 2015; Ryan, 2010). On the whole, schools that predominantly serve high-income and/or White students have better academic outcomes than those which serve low-income students and/or students of color (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013).

Since the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision in the mid-20th century and the passage of landmark civil rights legislation in the 1960s, various efforts have been made to counter trends of academic underachievement in segregated schools through the desegregation of said schools (Johnson, 2019). One of the most prominent desegregation models that is still in use today is the magnet school (Kryczka, 2019). Magnet schools have been used as a voluntary desegregation mechanism whereby White and/or high-income students are

recruited to attend low-income schools serving students of color. Magnet schools were originally designed to promote voluntary desegregation of schools by offering theme-based instruction to attract diverse racial populations (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2010; Frankenberg et al., 2008; Goldring, 2009; Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2012; Steel & Levine, 1994).

Driven by court rulings and federal funding, especially with the establishment of the Magnet Schools Assistance program (MSAP) in 1985, the number of magnet schools tripled from 1,019 in 1981–1982 to 3,254 in 2013–2014 (Blank et al., 1996; Rossell, 2005; Smrekar & Goldring, 2000; Wang & Herman, 2017; Yu & Taylor, 1997). Magnet school enrollment also rose dramatically, from an estimated 1.2 million students in 1991–1992 (Steel & Levine, 1994; Yu & Taylor, 1997) to an estimated 2.6 million students in 2013–2014 (Wang & Herman, 2017). The federal-funded MSAP schools aim to “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” (Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, n.d., “About MSAP” section).

Although magnet schools were originally established as part of desegregation plans to promote racially diverse schools and as an alternative to mandatory reassignment typically accomplished by forced busing, the mission of magnet schools has been evolving in response to changing legislation and court decisions. The 2007 Supreme Court decision in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* was particularly influential as it limited the use of race in student assignment. This decision, along with increasing competition from other types of choice schools (charters in particular), caused the larger magnet school movement to go through a period of self-evaluation and, ultimately, expand its purpose beyond racial desegregation. Consequently, the MSAP has added new objectives in its subsequent grant cycles that emphasize attention to academic improvement, systemic reform, and educational innovation (see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/magnet/index.html>).

This report provides an overview of the literature on the varying impact of magnet school voluntary desegregation efforts on academic achievement during the past five decades. It concludes with research questions that remain underexplored regarding magnet schools and their effectiveness as a desegregation mechanism.

Origins of Segregation in Schools

The need for desegregation mechanisms in public school systems, whether through magnet schools or other mechanisms, is driven by one simple fact: schools are segregated because school attendance zones are formed geographically (Richards, 2014), and housing is geographically segregated (Freeman, 2000). This segregation is the result of three primary factors explored in this section: (a) a history of discriminatory and unequal housing policies and

practices, (b) a structurally inequitable school finance system based upon local property taxes and tied to segregated housing, and (c) racist attitudinal trends among White homeowners.

With regard to housing policy, historically, certain practices have created structural inequalities in the access to housing that is available to White people and higher-income people and that which is available to people of color and those with lower incomes. Neighborhoods tend to be segregated, both by race and by income. As a result of the cumulative effect of the housing policies described below, many urban areas (for example, Richmond, Virginia, and Austin, Texas) were more racially segregated as of 2017 than they were in the era of legal chattel slavery (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017; Tretter & Sounny-Slitine, 2012).

Various housing policies and economic practices have led to this outcome: in the Jim Crow era, the practices of mortgage redlining² (Aalbers, 2011; Cloud & Galster, 1993; Harris & Forrester, 2003) and racially restrictive covenants³ (Welsh, 2018) became very common means used to keep people of color out of White neighborhoods.

Even after legal cases made such explicit forms of housing discrimination illegal, other more subtle pro-segregation practices emerged that are still in use to this day. For example, there continue to be legal cases of lending discrimination, or cases in which a lender takes adverse action against someone (namely, denying them a loan) due to demographic factors. While defendants in such cases can avoid legal troubles if they can provide legally defensible reasons for denying loan access that were not related to demographics, clear demographic trends of lending discrimination remain common (Cloud & Galster, 1993; Jackson, 1980). Several practices by real estate agents and brokers continue to promote housing segregation, such as blockbusting⁴ (Meyer, 2000; Rubenstein, 2013) and racial steering⁵ (Gans, 1982; Jackson, 1987; Meyer, 2000).

Practices underlying serial evictions that target the most economically disadvantaged urban citizens and disproportionately affect people of color have created a terrain of advantage and disadvantage that is based on residence and ripples out through differential job opportunity, access to health care, and schooling quality for children (Desmond, 2016). Every year, an unrecorded number of Americans, possibly in the millions, are evicted from their homes (Hartman & Robinson, 2003), resulting in states of permanent instability for the most disadvantaged. These forms of housing market exploitation rely on government support, which prioritizes landlords' legal rights and forcibly removes families by dispatching armed law enforcement officers (Desmond, 2016).

Why does segregation persist in housing markets? Attitudinal research on housing segregation has revealed interesting data examining this question. In one study of 4,000 adults in Los Angeles, when asked about their "ideal neighborhood," participants of all races showed some degree of prejudice towards other racial groups (Charles, 2000). In another study in Los Angeles County, patterns of prejudice towards "out-groups" were manifest, with White respondents having the most adverse response to the prospect of Black neighbors (Bobo &

Zubrinisky, 1996). In several studies conducted in Detroit in the 1970s and 1990s, there was a strong negative relationship between the number of Black families in a neighborhood and White participants' willingness to live there (Farley, 1992; Farley & Schuman, 1976; Farley et al., 1994). Similar patterns were also found in methodologically similar surveys conducted in Atlanta (Timberlake, 2000), Omaha, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, and Los Angeles (Clark, 1991).

The Effects of Geographical Segregation on Schools

The social desirability of certain neighborhoods is reinforced by the social desirability of local schools. U.S. public schools primarily draw attendance boundaries geographically. Since public schools are primarily funded through locally collected property taxes (Baker, 2016), neighborhoods with higher property values tend to have more well-funded schools (Alemán, 2007) whose students perform higher on standardized tests (Dhar & Ross, 2012). Such performance leads to the perception of more well-funded schools as “good” schools, both within the popular imagination and on popular sites used in housing searches like GreatSchools.org (Hasan & Kumar, 2019). High ranking on such sites has been found to lead to White students increasingly moving toward high-ranked schools and away from low-ranked schools, thereby increasing school-based segregation. Schools which are perceived to be “good” tend to be in predominantly White and wealthier neighborhoods, which are in turn perceived to be “good” neighborhoods in which it would be socially desirable to live.

What is the impact of this geographical segregation on schools? Students who attend segregated schools, whether that segregation is based on race or family socioeconomic conditions or both, often have differential academic outcomes (Caldas & Bankston, 1997; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Rumberger & Willms, 1992; Van Ewijk & Slegers, 2010). Research has shown that low-income students of color lack equal opportunities to learn that results in lower academic performance on standardized tests (Reardon et al., 2019). Specifically, students in schools that are segregated as predominantly White and high-income have higher academic outcomes, while students in schools that are segregated as predominantly Black or Latino and low-income have lower academic outcomes. In a statewide study of the effects of racial segregation on achievement in California high schools, Rumberger and Willms (1992) found that even after adjusting for differences in student background characteristics, schools serving predominantly Black and Latino students had lower academic outcomes than schools serving predominantly White and Asian students.

In a similar study in Louisiana that focused on socioeconomic status as well as race, Caldas and Bankston (1997) found statistically significant correlations between individual students' race and the predominant race within a school; for example, there was a strong tendency for Black students to attend schools predominantly attended by other Black students. Caldas and Bankston (1997) also found statistically significant correlations between individual students' socioeconomic status and the predominant socioeconomic status within a school; for example,

low-income students attended schools predominantly attended by other low-income students. Statistically significant correlations were also found between individual students' race and socioeconomic status; namely, Black students tended to be low-income. In terms of the effect of such segregation on academic outcomes, attendance at schools predominantly attended by low-income Black students was highly correlated with low performance on state tests.

These same patterns of academic underachievement in schools predominantly attended by low-income students and students of color have also been repeatedly documented in more recent scholarship (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Loeb et al., 2005; Owens et al., 2016; Ready, 2010; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Van Ewijk & Slegers, 2010). In contrast to segregated schools, all students benefit from integrated schools by experiencing increased access to highly qualified, stable teachers and education leaders, resulting in higher student achievement in math, science, language, and reading, as measured on standardized tests; increased likelihood of graduating from high school; increased likelihood of attending college; higher educational attainment; and higher incomes in life after school (Ayscue et al., 2017; George & Darling-Hammond, 2021; Mickelson, 2016; Tegeler et al., 2011).

The Effects of Segregation on Teacher Turnover, School Resources, and Quality Coursework

Why do students in segregated schools tend to underperform academically? First, the literature shows that schools serving students of color and low-income students have a harder time recruiting and retaining high-performing teachers. In a national study of the Schools and Staffing Survey, Shen (1997) found that teachers leave their schools at higher rates when those schools predominantly serve low-income students and students of color. Additional region- or state-specific studies have had similar findings: in North Carolina, novice teachers are distributed in such a way as to disadvantage Black students more than White students (Clotfelter et al., 2005). In New York state, urban schools tend to have less qualified or experienced teachers, and low-income, low-achieving, and non-White students (especially in urban areas) have the least skilled teachers (Lankford et al., 2002). In Georgia, racial segregation across schools is high, and schools that serve higher percentages of Black students have more inexperienced teachers, have fewer teachers with advanced degrees, and have higher levels of teacher turnover, especially among White teachers (Freeman et al., 2005). In Texas, teachers tend to transfer out of low-performing schools, which predominantly serve students of color and low-income students, to better performing schools which have less demographic diversity (Hanushek et al., 2004). Similarly, in California, teachers tend to transfer out of schools predominantly serving students of color into schools with fewer students of color (Carroll et al., 2000).

Building on this work, Loeb et al. (2005) argued that it is the poor working conditions in schools serving low-income students and students of color that lead to high levels of teacher turnover in those schools. A number of factors play a part in creating these poor working

conditions: to begin, segregated schools tend to have fewer resources. Loeb et al. (2005) found that schools serving students of color and low-income students had larger class sizes, more facilities problems, fewer textbooks, and lower salaries. Such schools also tend to offer less challenging courses, which means both less academic opportunity for students and less engaging teaching experiences for faculty. Oakes (1990) found that, at a national level, schools serving students of color have less access to the kind of demanding science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) coursework that would prepare students for STEM careers.

Even in more integrated schools, within-school segregation often keeps low-income students and students of color out of higher quality coursework. Tyson (2011) found that, at the national level, students of color are disproportionately tracked into remedial and lower quality coursework. In a study of five Midwestern communities, Gamoran (1992) found that schools serving predominantly low-income students and students of color assigned fewer of these students to honors English classes when they transition to high school. One study of 92 honors, regular, and remedial English classes found that students of color are disproportionately placed in remedial and regular coursework, and that those courses had lower rates of student participation and discussion (Gamoran et al., 1995). In a more recent qualitative study of one Pennsylvania school, English Learner students, who were predominantly students of color, were consistently tracked out of Advanced Placement (AP) coursework (Kanno & Kangas, 2014).

The Effects of Desegregation on Academic Achievement

Historically, the most prominent form of policy instrument used to respond to the negative effects of segregation has been school desegregation, done involuntarily through mechanisms like busing programs (Felice & Richardson, 1977; McClendon & Pestello, 1983) and voluntarily through education programs such as magnet schools. This report focuses on magnet schools as one specific desegregation mechanism within the larger desegregation movement of the late 20th century.

Meta-analytic evaluations of overall desegregation efforts for the first 10 years produced conflicting results. In a meta-analysis of the evaluation work on desegregation up to that point, Cook et al. (1984) found that desegregation at a national level had had positive (but small and not statistically significant) effects on Black children's reading and math abilities. On the other hand, in a similar review of the literature to that point, Schofield (1989) found no consistent or conclusive evidence of desegregation inherently benefiting academic achievement. As was typical of research at that time, both of these studies focused exclusively on possible academic benefits of desegregation, such as improved grades, student retention, and graduation rates. Other scholars pointed out later that since these studies were conducted in the decade immediately after desegregation efforts began in earnest, short-term elements of the desegregation process (such as trauma and anxiety experienced by students involuntarily bused

out of their neighborhoods to schools where they might not feel welcome) might have negatively affected student achievement (Hanushek et al., 2009).

These studies support the argument of Armor et al. (2006) that “there is no evidence of a clear and consistent relationship between desegregation and academic achievement” (p. 5; see also Armor, 1995). However, these studies looked at overall desegregation efforts on a national scale, combining data for meta-analyses. Other research evidence exists at the school, district, and county level, exploring local differences in implementation and outcomes. Measuring the impact of desegregation has been a moving target due to changes in desegregation law over the last half century. In the following sections, we will first explore studies that document these changes in desegregation law and then document the way that desegregation efforts played out in individual states, districts, and communities.

1972–2020: The Law, Targeting Funding, and Desegregation

Between 1972 and 2020, magnet schools have had to navigate conflicting governmental mandates: legislation and funding that initially supported racial desegregation were subsequently restricted or countermanded by Supreme Court rulings. While federal desegregation efforts were intended to increase educational equity and academic opportunities for disadvantaged low-income children of color nationwide, subsequent court rulings served to increase academic opportunity for the socioeconomically and/or White already-advantaged children and resulted in increased segregation in magnet schools. A brief history of magnet schools in this shifting public policy context will provide a backdrop for the results of empirical research studies documenting the effectiveness of magnet schools for their intended desegregation purposes.

In 1972, the Emergency School Aid Act was passed by the U.S. Congress. This Act contained a number of provisions intended to promote the desegregation of schools, including grants and/or contracts between low-performing school districts and nonprofit organizations, as well as funds that could be used to create desegregation mechanisms on a local level (McDonnell et al., 1978). Part of this Act included funds to support desegregation through involuntary mechanisms like pupil placement (Eskridge, 2010) and busing (Delmont, 2016), alongside voluntary desegregation mechanisms like the development of magnet schools or enrichment programs in low-income schools serving students of color that would attract high-income and/or White students as a form of voluntary desegregation (Arcia, 2006).

At the time, cities began using magnet schools and other initiatives as methods of school desegregation, supported by federal funding. The following year, funds made available in the Emergency School Aid Act became much more widely used due to the *Keyes v. School District No. 1, Denver* 1973 Supreme Court decision. In that case, the Supreme Court ruled that if a plaintiff could prove that a governmental entity had engaged in intentional segregation in their area, then that area could be presumed to be illegally segregated, and a court order could be

issued to mandate desegregation. Proving intentional segregation on the part of a government entity proved easier than expected, even in Northern cities with no history of Jim Crow laws, and many cities and metropolitan areas soon found themselves subject to court orders (Orfield, 1994).

In response to these court orders, many school system leaders proposed policy responses based on some form of magnet school model. Prominent magnet programs arose in Milwaukee, Cincinnati, and Buffalo, and their increased integration led to the establishment of the Magnet School Assistance Program, which provided specific funding for the creation of magnet schools (Orfield, 2013) through an amended Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

This combination of court orders and targeted funding began to show an impact in the 1980s and 1990s. In the early 1980s, Blank et al. (1983) conducted the first national study of magnet schools, involving 15 districts. They found that by internal district measures, over two thirds of the 15 participating districts were fully desegregated, with seven of the 15 using magnet schools as a primary desegregation mechanism (Blank et al., 1983). However, qualitative case studies of magnet schools over the same period showed that integration at a whole-school level did not necessarily result in intraschool desegregation, as White students were placed predominantly in advanced coursework and kept separate from lower income students of color (see Metz, 1983; Rosenbaum & Presser, 1978).

In the most longitudinally and nationally comprehensive study to date of racial integration through magnet schools, Rossell (2003) examined racial integration over time (from 1968 to 1991) through various desegregation plans in 600 school districts, many of which included magnet schools as part of their larger desegregation policy portfolio. Rossell (2003) found that districts which used magnet schools for desegregation had higher levels of desegregation than districts with no desegregation plans, although that effect of magnet schools was no different from other voluntary plans (such as majority-to-minority programs). Several other national studies analyzing data from the same period (Archbald, 2004; Rossell & Armor, 1996; Yancey & Saporito, 1995) found similarly that magnet programs led to higher levels of racial desegregation; however, these studies found that magnets did not assist in desegregation by socioeconomic status, implying a persistent class division.

Over the same period covered by these studies (roughly from the 1970s to the 1990s), many magnet schools became prestigious, and high-income parental demand for their children's entrance to the programs increased, which led to a problematic quandary for school system leaders—that is, magnet schools had originally been created as a means of voluntary desegregation, with the purpose of attracting high-income and/or White students to low-income campuses serving students of color. However, as many magnet schools became successful, more and more high-income and/or White parents lobbied for access to these schools, including several prominent parent challenges to desegregation court orders and mandates, as these parents desired that school seats set aside for low-income students and/or

students of color in magnet schools should be opened up for their high-income and/or White children (Orfield, 2013).

Finally, in one such legal case pushing back against desegregation mandates in magnet schools, *Board of Education of Oklahoma City Public Schools v. Dowell* (1991), the Supreme Court ruled that once court orders have been fulfilled by local authorities, the injunctions can be permanently dissolved, opening magnet school seats to all interested families. Many school boards took advantage of this and dissolved their court orders, many of which included magnet school integration plans. As magnet schools in these districts left behind their integration plans, those magnet programs effectively re-segregated themselves, becoming schools that primarily served privileged children from high-income and/or White families (Boger & Orfield, 2009).

Steel and Eaton (1996) found that in the wake of terminated court orders, 42% of the magnet schools receiving federal funding still had clear desegregation goals or guidelines. Although some individual school districts managed to maintain socioeconomic desegregation plans which effectively desegregated their districts by race,⁶ Christenson et al. (2003) found that 43% of federally funded magnet programs experienced segregation increases after the removal of court orders.

In the wake of *Board of Education of Oklahoma City Public Schools v. Dowell* (1991), magnet school leaders and their districts could decide whether or not to maintain a focus on racial desegregation, as there were no external pressures for them to do so. In the 1990s and 2000s, many magnet programs were created without any desegregation focus at all, as the definition of magnet schools as a policy mechanism no longer necessarily included racial integration. Magnets now only held in common two broad characteristics: a curricular theme of some kind and a lack of reliance on traditional attendance zones (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2013).

Despite the lack of court orders mandating desegregation, some magnet programs chose to continue to include racial integration as part of their mission. However, even this level of voluntary desegregation became difficult in the wake of the 2007 Supreme Court decision in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007). According to the ruling from this case, the use of any kind of race-based classification in schools must be directed toward a “compelling government interest,” and achieving racial balance in schools did not meet that standard. Following this decision, there was widespread concern that this meant that even those magnet schools choosing to use racial desegregation as part of their mandate could no longer do so. In their federal guidance for magnet schools, Ali and Perez (2011) pointed out that districts could now only use “race-conscious” metrics for magnet schools and other integration efforts so long as the metrics do not depend on individual racial classifications. These increasingly stringent legal guidelines made desegregation through magnet schools increasingly difficult.

1970–2009: Magnet School Desegregation in Local Communities

To understand the effects of these federal changes at the local level, the following county- and city-specific case studies illustrate several general patterns: first, that after the removal of court orders, magnet schools became a much less effective means of desegregation, and second, that in these specific cases there was not sufficient empirical research evidence showing that magnet school desegregation positively impacted school achievement. It is necessary to note that these community-specific studies are small in scale, and their findings cannot be generalized to the utility of magnet schools as a desegregation mechanism nationwide.

Raleigh and Durham, North Carolina

In Wake County, North Carolina, schools were consolidated into a single unified countywide school district in the late 1970s, driven largely by court orders mandating racial integration (Parcel & Taylor, 2015). As part of this reconsolidation, magnet schools were created throughout the Wake County school system and became quite popular, especially with high-income parents and White parents (Grant, 2009). However, the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Board of Education of Oklahoma City Public Schools v. Dowell* (1991) significantly impacted Wake County's magnet school system. No longer required by law to provide means of racial integration in schools, in 1999, Wake County decided to use socioeconomic status, rather than race, as their primary metric for desegregation. Within this new system, no more than 40% of a school should receive free or reduced price lunch (Parcel & Taylor, 2015). At the time, 38% of Wake County's students of color did not receive free or reduced price lunch and were reading at or above grade level while only 13% of the White students fell in this category; therefore this socioeconomic measure failed as a proxy for race. The number of schools with over 45% Black students doubled within several years (Grant, 2009; Parcel & Taylor, 2015).

This trend has been confirmed in several evaluation studies conducted in Durham public schools by Bifulco et al. (2009a, 2009b). In two studies, Bifulco et al. used 2002–2003 data (i.e., post-court order and post-implementation of a non-racial desegregation system) to examine what factors were related to choosing to attend schools of choice in Durham, whether magnet, open enrollment, year-round schools, or charter schools. They found that magnet schools tended to remain segregated on the basis of race. Black students were more likely than White students to opt out of their zoned school for a nonzoned option like magnet schools (Bifulco et al., 2009a), and the proportion of Black students in a magnet school had a direct negative relationship with the likelihood of White students choosing to attend that magnet school (Bifulco et al., 2009b). These study results reflect what one could expect given White parental attitudes about having their children attend desegregated schools (see Bobo & Zubrinsky, 1996; Charles, 2000) in a context that lacked any mandate to desegregate based on race (Bifulco et al., 2009a, 2009b).

Miami, Florida

Dade County Public Schools, which serve the city of Miami, received a court order to desegregate in the 1970s. In response, in 1973, Dade County created a widespread magnet school system that rapidly expanded the number of White students attending schools that had previously been attended only by students of color (Arcia, 2006). In response to the rescinding of court orders in the 1990s, as occurred in Raleigh, the level of racial segregation increased dramatically in the 2000s. While in-district White student enrollment in magnets had previously been at 53%, after the court order that number dropped to 11% (Arcia, 2006). Generally speaking, Arcia (2006) found that while magnet schools were significantly less racially segregated than traditional public schools, the number of segregated magnet schools increased to a statistically significant degree between 2001 and 2005, showing that the removal of court orders had had a significant negative impact on magnet schools' ability to function as a desegregation mechanism. As Shircliffe and Morley (2013) argued, "choice without desegregation controls is extremely limited in reducing segregation and socioeconomic isolation" (p. 90).

Montclair, New Jersey

Montclair began a magnet school program in 1976 as a voluntary desegregation mechanism. As a result, desegregation increased through the early 1980s, though it eventually slowed due to a combination of factors, such as general declining enrollment, increased minority enrollment, and White parents choosing private schools (Clewel & Joy, 1990). The district responded to these trends by creating an all-magnet district plan, in which all schools other than the high school became magnet schools. While this increased overall desegregation, there nonetheless was strong evidence of intraschool segregation, with low numbers of minority students in gifted and talented, advanced placement, or honors tracks (Clewel & Joy, 1990).

Hartford, Connecticut

In the 1980s, Hartford Public Schools began an internal evaluation process to see how it could integrate its campuses. The pressure to integrate intensified due to the original 1989 lawsuit which was later brought forth to the Connecticut Supreme Court as the landmark case of *Sheff v. O'Neill* (1996), in which students of color from Hartford argued that Hartford Public Schools were not providing them with the same resources as their White student peers. In response, Hartford began creating magnet school campuses (Beaudin, 2003), as well as interdistrict magnet options whereby low-income students and/or students of color from Hartford could attend better funded magnet programs in Hartford's suburbs (Dougherty et al., 2013). While this system resulted in a magnet school system that is more integrated than traditional public schools, that racial integration has not improved student achievement (Beaudin, 2003; Dougherty et al., 2013).

Post-2007: Magnet Schools Minus Race-Focused Admissions

Given the post-2007 mandate to remove race-focused admissions, magnet schools and school districts must determine whether and how they will achieve racial and economic integration. Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg (2013), in a nationally representative study involving 2007–2008 Schools and Staffing Survey Data and Magnet Schools of America survey data, found that even post-2007, those magnet schools that are still designed to increase desegregation are more integrated than magnet schools without explicit desegregation missions. The schools with desegregation missions had higher enrollments of Black and Latino students and students classified as Limited English Proficient or qualifying for free or reduced price lunch, while the majority of magnet schools that lacked a desegregation focus were predominantly White and racially isolated. While that may seem like a positive trend for race-conscious magnet schools, fewer and fewer magnet schools fit that description—only one third of Schools and Staffing Survey respondents who work in magnet schools work in these more race-conscious settings.

At a national level, using data from the 2000s, several studies have found that there is not much difference between magnet schools and non-magnets in terms of levels of racial and socioeconomic segregation. Using national data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Davis (2014) found that at the building level, magnet school racial composition is not statistically different from traditional public schools. In a national study using data from 21 federally funded elementary magnet schools nationwide—including both traditional magnet schools (those in disadvantaged areas that try to attract high-performing students from outside the attendance zone) and destination magnet schools (those in advantaged areas that try to attract low-performing students from outside the attendance zone)—Betts et al. (2015) explored the degree to which racial composition of schools changed before and after converting from a traditional public school into a magnet school. In the case of both traditional magnet schools and destination magnet schools, Betts et al. (2015) found that while schools in the study became slightly more racially diverse post-conversion, that change was not statistically significant, as pre-existing school choice policies in participating districts had led many students in the study to already move to their current campuses before they became magnet schools.

2010–2020: No National Magnet Schools Desegregation Studies

No nationally representative studies of magnet schools' impact on school segregation have been conducted for the entire decade of the 2010s. Some rigorous and illustrative localized studies on magnet schools and segregation have been conducted during this period. However, the lack of national-level explorations of magnet schools and segregation in the past 10 years means there is no empirical basis for knowing what large-scale impact (if any) magnet

schools are having on segregation in schools since the 2007 *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* court decision that restricted race-conscious school policies.

One large recent national study of school segregation used 8 years of Grades 3–8 standardized test data (2008–2016) from almost all the public school districts in the U.S. to examine the current school segregation landscape with respect to its effects on academic achievement gaps by race. Although this study did not focus on magnet schools, it provides an up-to-date national context for such an examination. Because magnet schools are part of the U.S. public school system, they would have been included in this research, but they were not separated out in the research results. These research findings provided evidence that “racial school segregation is closely linked to racial inequality in academic performance” (Reardon et al., 2019, p. 34). Further, their findings revealed that differences in schools’ poverty rates led to academic inequality and resultant achievement gaps. They found that “Racial segregation is almost invariably accompanied by large racial differences in school poverty rates” (Reardon et al., 2019, p. 35). Their study was not designed to examine the mechanisms at the implementation level through which the factors of racial segregation and poverty resulted in lower academic outcomes.

Localized studies of magnet schools and segregation during these years include Ayscue and Siegel-Hawley’s (2019) case study of districts using magnet models within turnaround schools, and Jones’ (2018) profile of Houston’s most famous magnet schools, which were predominantly attended by White students per court order. In one majority-Latino California district, Weis (2019) found that in a post-2007 race-blind policy context, there was no relationship between ethnicity and magnet school choice. Perhaps the most illustrative of the recent localized studies is the work of Harris (2018), who conducted a descriptive demographic study of students within magnet schools in a large urban district in the southwestern United States that includes more than 100 magnet schools. Overall, Harris (2018) found that Latino and Black students attended magnet schools post-2007 less often than White students. She also found that students classified as gifted and talented were more likely to attend magnet schools, while students receiving services as English learners or within special education were less likely to do so.

Several other recent studies have explored segregation as a larger issue in specific school districts, and discussed the role of magnet schools within those systems. For instance, Gamoran and An (2016) studied the state of segregation in Nashville’s public schools post-2007, finding that schools on the whole (including magnets) have become more segregated, with academically selective magnets becoming predominantly White, and non-academically selective magnets becoming predominantly Black. Haynes et al. (2010) similarly examined Nashville schools, with a particular focus on Latino students and magnet school choice. They found that Latino magnet school attendees (who were relatively rare among Nashville’s Latino

students) tended to have higher academic achievement than other Latino students, and tended to report not having friends or family who attended magnet schools.

Cook (2016, 2018) conducted a one-district study of the use of race-blind lottery systems, including on magnet campuses, which resulted in heightened levels of segregation. Several studies (Ayscue et al., 2018; Carlson et al., 2019) have revisited Wake County, North Carolina, discussed in the “1970–2009: Magnet School Desegregation in Local Communities” section above, and found that in the period post-2007 court order, the number of magnet schools has decreased and the magnet schools that have persisted have grown gradually less White (and as a result, more segregated).

Other studies have explored the reasons magnet schools are becoming more racially isolated in the current policy climate. For instance, Saporito (2003) argued that magnet schools can concentrate racial and class-based advantage, as White families tend to choose magnet schools with higher numbers of White students, and high-income families tend to choose magnet schools with fewer low-income students. Similarly, in an analysis based on a large dataset from a survey-based experiment, Billingham and Hunt (2016) found that the proportion of Black students in a school has a consistent and significant inverse association with the likelihood of White parents enrolling their children in that school.

Recommendations for Future Magnet School Research

Although strong research evidence exists to show that racial integration and economic equity combined with sufficient resources at the classroom and school levels benefit all students by improving academic outcomes and enriching their long-term life outcomes, research evidence for the mechanisms through which these relationships flow has been limited. In previous research, one author of this paper has studied *fidelity of magnet plan implementation* and *breadth of magnet school coordination* to examine in detail two implementation issues related to school excellence (Wang et al., 2017). Some related overarching research questions that have not been well explored in the literature include the following: What is the optimal mix of students by race and socioeconomic status in an integrated school? What level of financial and other school-level resources are required to improve academic achievement for all students in a given school?

A focus on implementation variables and their relationship to race, socioeconomic status, school resources, and student academic outcomes may explore and begin to explain the complex interplay of factors that affect students’ academic performance. By focusing on magnet schools, which are a specific subset of public schools, such an exploration could provide insights into factors that could be included in larger regional and national studies of the public school system.

Variables related to academic achievement—in addition to standardized test scores—such as improved grades, student retention rates, access to challenging coursework, and

graduation rates, may enrich understanding in such studies. Psychosocial variables such as expanded social networks and the sharing of cultural capital, which may be related to lifelong impacts of schooling, could also be examined. Additional variables known to have some effect in this context, and that may be considered for future research studies, include a focus on “whole school” magnet programs; geographic context, including district demographics and racial composition; zip codes; selective versus nonselective enrollment; teacher commitment; school culture, especially students taking ownership of their learning; student-directed learning experiences; the accrual of benefits over time, resulting in the benefits being more visible in middle and high school than elementary school; crosscurricular planning and integration of subjects; high-dosage and ongoing professional development and support for teachers, focusing on content-specific pedagogy and including training on how to enhance the teaching of students from diverse cultural backgrounds; strong and consistent school leadership; teachers and school leaders who stay in their positions over time; the presence of culturally sensitive curriculum for all students; the creation of culturally responsive learning environments; and the scope of family engagement (Herman et al., 2020).

To the extent that data sources would allow, such studies could include longitudinal data. Comprehensive longitudinal studies that include a range of variables related to the mechanisms of implementation could reveal actionable evidence about what factors are most predictive of the magnet schools that excel at racial integration and improved student performance for all. Such studies could also suggest additional future avenues for continued research, and inform policy decision making at the school district, regional, and national levels.

Endnotes

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² Through the practice of redlining, people of color and low-income people were systematically denied access to mortgage services when they pursued housing in geographic areas that were predominantly wealthy and/or White (Cloud & Galster, 1993). The term redlining refers to the fact that such clients were limited in their mortgage services to certain geographic areas outlined on maps in red (or “redlined”) that were segregated for people of particular demographic backgrounds (Aalbers, 2011).

³ Racially restrictive covenants were a means of pursuing the same agenda of racial segregation on a more individual level. Specifically, White homeowners would include specific language in legal documents (primarily property deeds) to prevent those properties from being sold, leased, or transferred to people of certain races (Welsh, 2018).

⁴ Blockbusting refers to the predatory practice by which real estate agents persuade White landowners (especially in the suburbs and in transitional neighborhoods) to sell at low prices out of fear that people of color are moving into their neighborhoods. Real estate brokers then resell those same houses “on contract” to people of color for double or triple the assessed value, requiring large down payments of 25% or more of the property’s value. When these families miss payments, their homes are foreclosed, they are evicted, and their down payments become profit for the real estate owners. Some real estate brokers use this method to generate revenue from the same properties over and over (Desmond, 2016).

⁵ Racial steering refers more broadly to the practice of real estate agents directing clients towards or away from particular neighborhoods on the basis of race. Both practices continue commonly to the present day (Meyer, 2000; Rubenstein, 2013).

⁶ San Diego Unified School District being the most prominent example (Koedel et al., 2009).

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