The year was 1968. Martin Luther King had been assassinated, and American cities were erupting in flames because of King’s violent death and the decades-long smoldering resentments from racism. In a small city far away from the churning ghettos of Detroit and D.C., a small public school was about to enter the racial hubbub and become part of education history.

That fall, McCarver Elementary in Tacoma, Washington, hung out its shingle inviting students from anywhere in the city to enroll, breaking the link between school assignments and residential location and becoming the nation’s first “magnet” school. Thus began a nationwide experiment to integrate public schools using market-like incentives instead of court orders. (See sidebar, “In the Beginning,” page 47.)

The following year, 1969, the country’s second magnet school opened—this one, more appropriately, in Boston, soon to be an epicenter of the race-based school wars. But, like its West Coast
counterpart, the William Monroe Trotter School, in Beantown’s poor Roxbury section, was built as “a showcase for new methods of teaching”—enough of a showcase, it was hoped, to attract white children to a black neighborhood for their schooling. It was an odd idea, but one whose time seemed to have come. Within a decade there would be hundreds of such magnet schools all over the country.

The idea was simple enough: draw white students to predominantly black schools by offering a special education with a focus on a particular aspect of the curriculum, such as performing arts, or Montessori, or advanced math, science, and technology. Federal and state agencies, anxious to avoid the growing messiness of coercive integration measures like forced busing, directed new resources toward these magnets, encouraging their pioneering academic programs and giving grants for new facilities. Glossy brochures were mailed to parents and press releases to local media. The hope was that these well-funded, themed schools would ignite a passion for learning as well as spark a movement to voluntarily integrate schools.

The names alone give a sense of the new schools’ range and optimism—the Thomas Pullham Creative and Performing Arts magnet (in Prince George’s County, Maryland), the Copley Square International High magnet (in Boston), the School 59 Science magnet (also called the “Zoo School,” in Buffalo), the Greenfield Montessori magnet school (in Milwaukee), the Central High School Classical Greek/Computers Unlimited magnet high school (in Kansas City). Even older and well-established “examination schools,” such as Boston Latin and City Honors (in Buffalo), would soon claim magnet status to avail themselves of new students and additional funds.

An Early Experiment in “Choice”
The first magnets appeared as the school desegregation battles were heating up. In 1969, the year William Monroe Trotter opened in Boston, a federal court ordered the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district in North Carolina to use busing to desegregate its schools. The use of crosstown busing to accomplish desegregation was unprecedented—and the case went right to the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the highly controversial forced integration program in 1971. A federal district court in Boston, paying insufficient attention to the ideals of the Trotter school, introduced a forced busing program in 1974 that set off demonstrations and riots. The court order also prompted the city’s educators to include magnets in their formal, citywide forced busing plan the following
year. Thus was born the first “forced busing plan with magnet options.”

Coming as they did, in the midst of several different national desegregation crises, early magnet schools offered a relatively uncontroversial—and peaceful—means of integrating schools. And the magnet movement got an early boost from two federal district court decisions in 1976, in the aftermath of the discord in Charlotte and Boston. In approving magnet-driven, voluntary desegregation programs in Buffalo and Milwaukee, the courts seemed more than willing to accept reasonable alternatives to the forced dissolution of geography-based school assignments.

Though it was another decade before the first southern school district (in Savannah) was allowed to desegregate its school system with a voluntary magnet-school plan, the new schools were soon opening almost everywhere—or, at least, everywhere that public school systems needed to stem the white-flight resegregation that was overtaking many urban school districts, mostly in the North. By 1981, there were some 1,000 such magnet schools in the United States; by 1991, there were over 2,400. (See Figure 1.) These new schools proved to be a remarkably robust and popular trend in school choice. In a study I undertook in 1989, I found that 12 percent of the elementary and middle school magnet programs in my sample specialized in basic skills and/or individualized teaching; 11 percent offered foreign language immersion; 11 percent were science-, math-, or computer-oriented; 10 percent catered to the gifted and talented and 10 percent to the creative and performing arts; 8 percent were traditional, back-to-basics programs (demanding, for instance, dress codes and contracts with parents for supervision of homework); 7 percent were college preparatory; 7 percent were early childhood and Montessori. (The remaining preferences, each under 7 percent, included multicultural/international, life skills/careers, and ecology/environment.) At the high school level, the programs tended to be either career-oriented (medical careers, law and criminal justice, communications and mass media, hotel and restaurant) or schools with some sort of entrance criteria. The Magnet Schools Association of America, based in Washington, D.C., reports a similar distribution of program themes in today’s magnet schools.

My analyses of the success of these magnets in actually attracting whites indicate that school structure and racial composition was important. Predictably, the most popular magnet school structure was a dedicated magnet, where everyone in the school had chosen it and all were in the magnet program. These “perfect” magnets, however, were the least common, because creating them requires that an entire school be emptied out and children assigned elsewhere or a new school be built. The next most popular magnet structure, and the most common today, is a program-within-a-school. Only students who chose the magnet program are in it, but there is also a neighborhood population assigned to the school that is not in the magnet program. The racial composition of the magnet program is different from the school that houses it and is usually around 50 percent white. The least-popular magnet structure in black neighborhoods is a “whole-school-attendance-zone” magnet: everyone in the school is in the program, but the school has a neighborhood population assigned to it. That these schools and their magnet programs tend to have a racial composition closer to that of the neighborhood—majority minority—only reduces their attractiveness to whites. However, according to most surveys, although whites prefer majority white schools, a sizable, albeit smaller, number will choose schools where whites make up somewhat less than half of the student body.

### Staying Power and an Evolving Mission

Even as courts across the country began releasing school districts such as Kansas City, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Savannah, Buffalo, and Boston from long-running desegregation orders during the 1990s, magnet schools continued to
thrive. My 1991 randomized national sample of 600 school districts indicated that the 2,400 magnet schools in the United States were operating in 229 different school districts.

And it would appear that their ranks continue to swell despite the declining number of districts operating under court-ordered desegregation plans. The directory published by the Magnet Schools Association of America lists more than 3,000 magnet or theme-based schools as members.

With desegregation waning as a public goal, however, magnet schools have maintained support by attaching themselves to the school-choice movement. For instance, the Magnet Schools of America web site now makes a classic choice-based argument on behalf of magnet schools—that being allowed to choose a school will result in improved satisfaction that translates into better achievement. Thus, although proponents of magnet schools have not disavowed the desegregation goal that is the program’s roots, they currently place almost equal emphasis on magnets as instruments of school choice.

One of the reasons for the sustained growth of magnet schools is the federal government’s steady financial support for the idea. Magnet schools were originally funded as tools of desegregation under the Emergency School Assistance Act from 1972 to 1981. In 1981 they were folded into the Chapter 2 block-grant program, but explicit federal support for magnet schools as desegregation tools resumed in 1985 with the authorization of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP), included in the Education for Economic Security Act. Under the new program, however, magnet schools not only had to aid desegregation, but also had to focus on improving the quality of education in order to qualify for funds. The Magnet Schools Assistance Program still exists, now run by the Office of Innovation and Improvement in the Department of Education, and with the same twin goals of fostering integration and choice.

In the Beginning

How a Small City in the Pacific Northwest Invented Magnet Schools
by Alex Sergienko

Every once in a while things work out. That’s what it seems like today, as I look back to 1968, when my Tacoma, Washington, school district opened a magnet school. Though Tacoma had only about 7,000 blacks—out of a total population of about 160,000—our minority housing, like that in many cities, was concentrated in one area and served by schools then in violation of our state’s de facto segregation rule. The worst “offender” was McCarver Elementary, which was 91 percent African-American.

In fact, we had begun work on segregation issues several years earlier. People were coming to school board meetings complaining about it, and one prominent board member was adamant about integration. We also had a citizens committee, with two African-American members, actively seeking solutions. And, like other cities, we had some racial disturbances in Tacoma after Martin Luther King’s assassination.

We knew we had to do something, but we also wanted alternatives to the coercive methods of integration, such as forced busing, that we saw being talked about elsewhere. That’s when we stumbled on an article about someone in Pittsburgh advocating the establishment of a school that would do something so well that students would want to enroll. They called it a “magnet school.” I’d never heard the term, but suddenly we envisioned McCarver as a school of excellence—good enough to pull in white students from the more affluent neighborhoods. We wrote a proposal, called the “Exemplary Magnet Program,” and in the summer of 1968 we received a $200,000 Title III grant to make it happen.

We then mounted a huge recruitment effort, enlisting counselors from our summer program to make home visits (to talk to parents) and had administrators make calls to the district’s best teachers. We said again and again that we would use exemplary practices, such as team teaching and “continuous progress”—and it worked. Some very good teachers signed up. And we brought in the most popular principal, then at the best elementary school in town, to run things.

With luck, a lot of work, and some key support from members of the upscale North End community, we were able to draw kids from all over, even from suburban schools on the other side of Puget Sound. And we opened that September with a minority enrollment of 64 percent, a 27-point turnaround in just four months. Instead of 50 white kids, we had almost 200.

By 1970, African-American enrollment at McCarver was less than 50 percent, and we had a waiting list for parents seeking to enroll their children.

After 36 years, I’m still struck by what we were able to get done. It is wonderful to think that good things can be accomplished in this world.

Alex Sergienko was an assistant superintendent of schools in Tacoma when McCarver started its magnet program. His grandson Max is a 7th grader at a magnet school, in Portland, Oregon, with “a Japanese emphasis.”
Funding for magnet schools is also part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, housed in the portion of the law bannered “Promoting Informed Parental Choice and Innovative Programs.” Funding has not kept pace with either inflation or the growth in magnet schools, but neither has it withered away. (See Figure 2.) The MSAP appropriation was $75 million in 1984, rose to $108 million in 1994, and remained at $108 million in 2004. Though the program falls under the law’s choice provisions, the federal government still considers magnets an important aspect of desegregation policy, defining a magnet school as one that “offers a special curriculum capable of attracting substantial numbers of students of different racial backgrounds.”

The greatest challenge to magnet schools now comes from fiscal constraints at the state level. States such as Missouri, Ohio, and Michigan have challenged court-ordered desegregation plans in order to reduce their financial and legal liability. But even states such as Massachusetts, Maryland, and California that were never parties to a desegregation lawsuit have been cutting funds for magnet schools. The Prince George’s County, Maryland, school district, for example, eliminated magnet programs at 33 schools in the fall of 2004 because of state funding cutbacks. The only theme programs that will be kept are the Montessori, French immersion, and creative and performing arts, and they will no longer be called magnets.

Indeed, there is probably no school district with an extensive system of magnet programs that has not closed at least one or two magnets because of a budget crunch. In fact, many magnets are the victims of their own success: by the 1990s most neighborhood schools had the science labs and computer technology that had once made magnets unique. Even McCarver in Tacoma removed “magnet” from its name in 1998 and, as a result of No Child Left Behind, became a School in Need of Improvement.

Connecticut is an important exception to this trend, but that is because since 1996, the entire state has been under a state supreme court order to desegregate. Using a complicated formula approved by the court, the state funds magnet schools that accept students from several different districts (at a minimum there must be two) at a per-pupil rate that increases as the number of districts sending students increases—an attempt to bring central-city minority students and white suburban students together in the same school. Thus the scheme eschews outright racial quotas, but achieves some of the diversity that quotas would create.

Challenges for the Future

Though finances will always be a magnet school’s primary concern, the greatest threat to the magnet system going forward is the same as that which gave magnets their early jump-start: the courts. Even the No Child Left Behind Act’s requirement that school districts adopt a voluntary desegregation plan,
for instance, may conflict with legal precedents set in most federal appeals courts. In 2001 only the federal appeals court covering the states of Connecticut, New York, and Vermont had upheld the use of race in student assignment or magnet school admissions in school districts not already under court order; it did so on the grounds that the state had a compelling interest in racial diversity. But even in that circuit, several school districts and one state (Connecticut) have continued to avoid the use of racial quotas in magnet admissions because they believe using them invites a legal challenge.

The 2002 U.S. Supreme Court decision outlawing the use of racial quotas at the University of Michigan—but approving the use of race as one of many factors in admissions decisions—has had little impact on magnet schools, mainly because most had already abandoned the use of quotas. And most school districts now recognize that using explicit racial quotas in magnet admissions when desegregation orders have been lifted is risky. When the court-ordered desegregation plan in Prince George’s County was ended in 2002, the superintendent formed a panel of experts on magnet schools that was thought to be politically and ideologically diverse. Our task was to figure out what to do about magnet school admissions criteria.

All of us were in agreement that race could no longer be used in magnet admissions. We devised a plan in which the district was divided into three subdistricts of roughly similar racial and socioeconomic balance. Students, regardless of their race, could choose any magnet school in their subdistrict. We hoped that racially diverse student bodies would result from the individual choices of students, but there was no way to guarantee it. Since then, as noted above, state funding cuts have prompted the district’s administration to dramatically reduce the number of magnet schools, keeping only the most popular. Similar choices are being made in other districts, where some magnets survive while others are being closed.

Districts throughout the country are responding in one of two ways: either adopting a race-blind system of admissions, thus converting the magnet to a themed school of choice; or constructing a system whereby race is only one of several factors considered in admission. The former is more likely to happen in school districts that have very few whites left and in districts that have had strong appeals court opinions rejecting the use of race altogether. The latter is more likely to occur in school districts such as Fort Wayne, Indiana, that have enough whites left to actually integrate a number of magnet schools and where there has been no strong circuit court decision rejecting the use of race.

It is remarkable, perhaps, that despite the reduction in state funding and the elimination of explicit racial quotas, the total number of magnet schools has not declined. I would suggest three reasons for their resilience. First, the great triumph of the civil-rights movement was its success in getting whites to support the principle of racial diversity in the schools. In districts that still have enough whites to make integration feasible, magnet schools are viewed as an effective way to achieve that diversity, even in districts where court orders have been lifted or never existed. Second, magnet schools have been incorporated into the school choice movement as a means of improving achievement and into No Child Left Behind as a way of increasing the opportunities available to children in low-performing schools. Third, parents like school choice. Although undoubtedly there are some who enroll their children in a theme-based school in order to enable them to pursue a passion, most parents are probably interested in theme-based education as a means of igniting a passion. Magnets have thus developed strong constituencies locally and nationally and, for the foreseeable future, remain an important, if less often noticed, feature of the American education landscape.

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