

Report to Jefferson County Public Schools Magnet School Review



Magnet Schools of America
National Institute for Magnet School Leadership

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Executive Summary

Background

Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) is a large urban and suburban district in northern Kentucky that serves more than 101,000 students in 172 schools, 59 of which are considered district-wide magnet schools of choice. Since 1977, when Louisville and JCPS merged, JCPS has used magnet schools as a voluntary option to promote diversity. Since 1977, the district has added numerous magnet programs and schools to their portfolio. These programs range in the grade levels served, and are located across the district in an effort to reflect the overall diversity of JCPS students.

In 2011, Dr. Gary Orfield and Dr. Erica Frankenberg conducted a study on JCPS school diversity and, specifically, the student assignment plan following the 2007 Supreme Court Parents Involved decision. Among their recommendations, JCPS should conduct a review of the existing magnet programs and the larger context associated with their operations and management by the district.

In November 2013, Magnet Schools of America (MSA) was requested to submit a proposal to review the district's 59 district magnet programs. In January 2014, MSA was contracted to complete the review process and deliver a report to the Board of Education in March 2014 that answered three essential questions:

- Are JCPS magnet schools diverse?
- Are JCPS magnet schools promoting achievement?
- Are JCPS schools “magnetic” (attractive to students and families)?

The following findings and recommendations are the result of bringing together experts who lead, design, and evaluate nationally recognized magnet programs throughout the United States, as well as through the application of National Standards devised by MSA. The review process used was thorough, comprehensive, and yielded many opportunities for JCPS to continuously improve the magnet school experience for its students and families.

We believe that the Board of Directors, with the support of district administration, will find this report meaningful and use it to guide their work for several years to come. A community like Jefferson County, with its appreciation for diversity and choice, should serve as a lighthouse for others who strive for equity and improvement for all students. There will be some who will work diligently and exercise influence to prevent many of the recommended changes, however, we are optimistic that this report will serve as a foundational document that will make access to opportunity more equitable, transparent, and truly prepare students to thrive in a global society.

Methodology

MSA conducted the review between January and March, 2014. During this time, MSA conducted six community focus groups, site visits to all 59 schools, and interviewed principals and staff from each of the identified schools. MSA also conducted a community survey with more than 1,300 respondents that was promoted by the district, and reviewed student achievement data, demographic data by school, school budgets, application and admission rates, student removal rates, the various application processes used by schools, school survey data, Equity Scorecards, and National Clearinghouse data for high schools. All of the data collected was used to determine which school and programs were promoting diversity, achievement, and were magnetic. In addition, MSA utilized the Five Pillars of Magnet Schools – essential attributes of successful magnet schools – which were officially adopted by MSA in 2012 to assist schools and districts to promote best practices for diversity, equity, access, and academic excellence.

Findings

As a result of spending more than 1,300 hours in schools, conducting interviews, and reviewing data, MSA made the following findings.

MSA believes that there are many great attributes to JCPS schools, especially the committed staff and leadership and the parents who care deeply about their schools and want them to be successful. The overwhelming support for magnet schools in Jefferson County should not diminish the attention given and needed for non-magnet schools and their students. On many occasions, district staff and families addressed the need for all schools to be excellent choices for families, not just those with a thematic or career focus.

Are JCPS magnet schools promoting diversity?

- Most JCPS magnet schools do not recruit students beyond the Showcase of Schools or the publications that the district has produced.
- Magnet schools that started in the 2009 cohort were noticeably less diverse than district magnets overall.
- School diversity varied significantly by region. Schools in the western corridor had higher concentrations of low-income and minority students than the eastern corridor, whereas the central corridor magnet schools were more likely to reflect the diversity of the district.
- Students with special needs and English Language Learners (ELL) were underrepresented in JCPS magnet schools. Some magnet schools do not service ELL or students with special education needs.
- Traditional programs may be preventing the district from achieving greater diversity within its other magnet schools.
- Student selection criteria is not transparent, inconsistently applied, and may be preventing greater diversity within JCPS magnet schools.

Are JCPS magnet schools promoting achievement?

- Some magnets are located in schools and are not accessible to students in the reside area. These schools have larger achievement gaps than the whole school magnet programs.
- There is not necessarily a correlation between student achievement and the magnet curriculum, with few exceptions. Schools with academic criteria are likely choosing students who will do well regardless of whether or not they are in a magnet school or program.
- Whole-school magnets perform better on standardized tests than schools that have a program within them.
- Schools that select students based on academic criteria preclude students who would benefit from and be motivated by the opportunity to attend JCPS magnets.
- Schools with low achievement generally did not attract students from outside their reside areas.

Are JCPS magnet schools magnetic?

- Waiting lists varied significantly by school, theme, and level.
- Transportation does not appear to be detrimental to the choice process. We did not hear significant complaints around transportation routes, times, etc.
- Overall, principals and teachers are supportive of their respective magnet themes, and district administrators are very committed to the success and viability of magnet programs within JCPS.
- Eighty-one percent of JCPS residents send their students to JCPS schools. This relatively high rate capture rate is, in part, due to the choice options provided to families. Many, many parents stated that they would send their children to private schools if they did not have the option of magnet schools.
- Families viewed magnets more positively than their assigned school.
- Math, science, and technology programs, while popular, are inconsistent across grade levels, like schools, and often lacked industry standard equipment and instructional focus.
- Fine, Visual, and Performing Arts programs, while popular, are inconsistent across grade levels, like schools, and often lacked industry standard equipment and instructional focus.
- The Traditional Magnet Schools are guided by a School Board Policy that originated in 1977 and has not been updated since 1998. This policy is often used to exit students out of the program and offers Traditional Schools an opportunity not to serve all students, wherever they are in their academic development.
- Exiting of large numbers of students from magnet programs, especially Traditional programs at the elementary and middle school level, is of great concern.
- Facilities range in their ability to host magnet programs, as well as in their overall quality and maintenance.
- Many secondary magnets lack the industry standard equipment necessary to effectively prepare students for college and careers.
- Many magnets lacked a school-wide or program-wide instructional focus that supports the theme.
- Some magnet themes are outdated, undersubscribed and no longer viable.
- The magnet curriculum offered in like-schools varied significantly, as did theme fidelity (consistently applied throughout the day) specifically in elementary and middle schools.
- Professional training for teachers around the themes of the schools in which they teach is nearly non-existent with few exceptions.

- Teachers in like-schools are not provided opportunities to collaborate and exchange best-practices and ideas, design lessons, units or assessments.
- Principals have not been provided sufficient, if any, training opportunities to lead magnet schools. As a result, they do not have a strong peer group of experts or schools to look at for examples and models.
- Magnet school principals' understanding of the purpose and goals of magnets varied widely and was often inconsistent.
- The JCPS district office does not have sufficient staff to provide leadership to magnet schools in a manner that would enhance curriculum, instruction, or theme fidelity.
- School staff spends an extraordinary amount of time and energy reviewing applications and selecting students.
- Magnet school achievement is not analyzed comparing students within the magnet program to those who attend the school (non-magnet) from the reside area. This is perpetuating systemic inequities and preventing more students from participating in magnet programs in JCPS who would significantly benefit from them.
- The University of Louisville is a significant partner for many JCPS magnets. These partnerships should be further developed, equitably accessed, and continued in a manner that supports the thematic focus of the schools.
- JCPS magnet schools are extremely limited in their ability to seek partnerships and support beyond the district due to policies and constraints placed upon them by the district.
- Schools do not have equitable access to resources beyond the district. Some schools have robust fundraising mechanisms, alumni, and parent donations, whereas others struggle to raise any additional money to enhance their programs.
- The school choice and selection process in JCPS is extremely complex, difficult for families to navigate, time consuming for families, stressful, and varies widely by school. Families are required to transport copies of sensitive and vulnerable academic records from their home school to the school at which they are applying along with letters of recommendation that may be required.
- Marketing materials are provided in English only, making it unnecessarily difficult for the growing number of non-English speaking families to access choice options.
- Families are often unaware of the multitude of choice options in JCPS and may overlook great options overshadowed by more popular programs.

Based on the above findings, MSA is making the following 26 recommendations. We believe that the recommendations should not be taken individually, but rather, as part of a larger process that will require additional planning and design. JCPS is a complex system, and various factors such as demographics, transportation, displacement, and discontinuation of programs will all have an impact on the district overall and should be considered carefully and holistically.

Recommendations

1. Magnet schools should analyze student achievement data by demographic groups and conduct ongoing re-search and evaluation of student outcomes in magnet schools and programs, and develop plans that address ways in which the magnet program can become more inclusive, accessible and equitable. The district should explore ways to make programs within schools, school-wide.
2. JCPS should clarify the purpose, mission, and goals of the magnet programs throughout the district. All stakeholders, including parents, business partners and principals should know the purpose they serve for the entire community, not just individual schools.
3. JCPS should create a community task force with various stakeholders to determine the purpose, goals, and types of magnet programs that will serve students in the county. The goals of the task force should be to develop a five-year strategic plan, monitor the implementation, and serve in an advisory capacity upon its implementation.
4. The Traditional School model should be reviewed and updated to reflect current research, and examine the following: purpose, philosophy, goals and expectations of the Traditional Program, academic program, student discipline and removal policies and practices, and feeder patterns.
5. The district should create a process to eliminate redundant, undersubscribed, and low-achieving magnet schools and programs within one year. This process should require affected schools to submit a plan that specifies how the school will address theme integration, targeted student recruitment, and professional development and training. JCPS should determine which schools, based on their plan, have a viable chance of success and provide them with adequate resources to meet their goals, granting an extension on an annual basis if significant progress is being made. Those that are not making progress, fail to submit a plan, or for whom the plan is deemed inadequate, should be discontinued by the 2015-16 academic year.
6. JCPS should create a process for establishing any new magnets or replicating “mirror” magnets based on the following tenants:
 - a. Schools should have a research base that supports their development;
 - b. Building capacity and adequate facilities must be available to accommodate the theme;
 - c. Professional development for principals and staff must be around the theme and instructional focus that supports the theme;
 - d. Demonstrated demand and need should be shown for such a program due to waiting lists or void in offerings;
 - e. Evidence must demonstrate that student achievement and diversity can be sustained, and
 - f. Reasonable and cost effective transportation should be offered.
7. Develop mirror magnets, or replicate popular and successful schools where students apply to the theme, and are then assigned to a school with consideration for distance and diversity. These mirror programs may be split between upper and lower campuses that serve continuous grades at nearby campuses.
8. JCPS should evaluate the Five Star Schools to determine to what extent programs are being duplicated, undersubscribed, overenrolled, etc. in conjunction with the magnet program offerings.
9. Eliminate programs within schools, and either make them whole-school magnets or consider phasing them out.
10. Require all magnet schools to submit to the magnet office for review and approval an annual, publicly available plan that addresses student recruitment, curriculum, instruction, and professional development.

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11. JCPS should adopt a centralized application process and conduct lotteries for all magnet schools that take into consideration existing factors. This central process should also determine eligibility of students if academic criteria is used. Essays and letters of recommendations should be discontinued as a part of the selection process. Academic records should not be transferred by the families.
 - a. Dupont Manual High School should remain a selective school, however, the student selection process should be made available to all families and students via the website and other sources.
 - b. Students should be aware of the score given to their application, cut scores should be made publicly available, and students should be notified where they stand on the waiting list if placed on one.
 12. Redesign the Math, Science and Technology (MST) programs to include engineering and emerge as comprehensive STEM programs that have K-12 articulation between schools and grade levels.
 13. Align the Fine, Visual, and Performing Arts programs K-12 and provide clearly articulated pathways.
 14. All JCPS students should have access to magnet programs, and transportation should (continue to) be provided at all schools with the addition of Brown.
 15. Industry standard equipment specific to the theme should be provided to students in all magnet programs, especially at the secondary level.
 16. JCPS should conduct a facilities assessment to determine the capacity, ability to accommodate the theme and students, and attractiveness to families.
 17. Adopt the Career Academy model at the following schools to ensure greater preparation of students for college and careers: Southern, Central, and Iroquois High schools.
 18. JCPS central office staff responsible for magnets should be organized to collaborate more effectively with Curriculum and Instruction staff to give these areas greater leadership and support within schools.
 19. Magnet schools should analyze student achievement data by demographic groups (race, socioeconomic status, linguistic, etc.) and conduct ongoing research and evaluation of student outcomes in magnet schools and programs.
 20. Provide teachers and magnet coordinators with professional development around the theme and curriculum development.
 21. JCPS should support a full-time position with significant responsibility, resources, and autonomy to coordinate and provide professional development and training to magnet school teachers and principals, as well as coordinate purchasing and oversee all marketing and recruitment efforts.
 22. JCPS should conduct a fiscal analysis of magnet programs to determine what impact program elimination, duplication, and reinvestment would have on the district.
 23. JCPS magnet school and district staff should find exemplary models of like schools to learn from immediately.
 24. Convene an industry advisory board to provide validation, feedback and suggestions to ensure magnet schools are relevant and continually improving.
 25. Marketing materials, applications and choice information should be provided in multiple languages to make them more accessible to families.
 26. JCPS should work to ensure greater inclusion and access for English Language Learners and Special Education students in magnet programs by providing services at all magnet schools to the greatest extent possible.

While implementing these suggestions will be difficult in some cases, we believe that full implementation will lead to greater achievement, magnet authenticity, and equity for students.