

Designing and Funding High Quality, Diverse Magnet Programs

*There are examples across the country of high-quality magnet programs dedicated to reducing racial isolation. Magnet schools present an important opportunity for linking school reform with desegregation, yet there are obstacles to their implementation and sustainability. This session explored the design, funding, and characteristics of magnet schools, including best practices for outreach, admissions, and obtaining financial support.*

- **George Coleman**, *Consultant to the Connecticut Commissioner of Education*
- **Bruce Douglas**, *Executive Director*, Capitol Region Education Council
- **Marilynn Smith**, *Magnet Program Coordinator*, District 197 – West St. Paul
- **Genevieve Siegel-Hawley**, *Assistant Professor*, Educational Leadership, Virginia Commonwealth University (moderator)

Hope and caution were expressed as the session opened with a statement by each of the three panelists regarding the role of magnet schools in public education. George Coleman described a growing demand for school choice and Marilynn Smith explained how all students—not just those with the highest GPAs—are gaining access to high quality magnets. Still, Bruce Douglas pointed out that not all students have access to diverse magnet schools. In Connecticut, for example, several cities have struggling schools, yet only Hartford is receiving magnet school funding from the State because no other cities are facing a court order for desegregation.

With the broad potential and challenges for magnet schools in mind, Genevieve Siegel-Hawley posed four questions to the panelists regarding how to create and sustain successful diverse magnet programs. First, she asked for the key elements of a successful magnet school. The panelists agreed that accountability, community-based programming, and value-added marketing were central factors to creating an effective program. Schools must continuously demonstrate student success, have themes and programs built around the interests of the community they serve, and offer something beyond what is provided by neighborhood schools. These elements are necessary to ensure magnet school sustainability and buy-in from the community.

The next question linked high-quality magnet schools with integration by asking what strategies can be used to foster diversity within magnets. Each of the panelists approached this issue from a slightly different angle. For Mr. Coleman, the key is accountability, and he argued that support for magnet schools must be contingent upon their meeting integration targets. According to Mr. Douglas, employees should view themselves as salespersons, tailoring their marketing strategies to different groups in order to attract students from each of them. Ms. Smith explained the challenge of balancing the need to help disenfranchised students escape failing local schools while also opening magnet programs to a substantial number of students from outside of the neighborhood in order to foster integration.

Building upon the previous two questions, the panel was next asked how structures within magnet schools promote actual learning and socialization among students from diverse backgrounds. The panelists focused their answers on the hiring and training of teachers and on student selection. First, they expressed a need for rigorous interview procedures to ensure that

every magnet school teacher has a belief system that matches the values and vision of the school. Once teachers are hired, they should be thoroughly trained in the school's mission and in diverse forms of student learning so as to embody the qualities that make magnet schools so effective. On the student side, the panelists agreed that there should not be qualifiers that determine which students have access to magnet schools. Just like traditional public schools, magnets have a responsibility for educating all students, and the students themselves should know that they are a part of a movement for diversity and integration in education. The ultimate goal is to create an environment in which both teachers and students are motivated by a common goal.

The final question directed the panelists to address the challenges of actually implementing the strategies they had outlined, particularly in terms of funding and political considerations. Grants for magnet schools are typically short-term and may only support the creation of new programs, not the maintenance of existing schools. Local communities do not have the resources to sustain interdistrict programs on their own, but there is not always political will at the state level. Confronting these challenges, according to the panelists, requires dedicated lobbying efforts and leveraging with the State. Additionally, as can be seen in Connecticut, lawsuits and court orders can be important supporting forces.

The session ended with a few remarks from the audience. One of the final comments came from a representative from a magnet school in Hartford, who eloquently expressed the need for two key elements above all else: passion and dedication.