

**INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE**  
**Los Angeles Unified School District**

**INFORMATIVE**

**TO:** Members, Board of Education

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**FROM:** Randy Ross  
Director of Educational Policy

**SUBJECT: MAGNET SCHOOLS AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

At yesterday's meeting of the Augmented Budget Committee, Board members spent some time exploring the desirability of expanding magnet schools and centers from the current level (over 50,000 students or about 7 percent of the District's total enrollment). The key rationale offered for such action was the idea that magnets perform better than regular schools. In this Informative, I offer a perspective regarding the impact of LAUSD magnets on student achievement.<sup>1</sup>

Findings from prior LAUSD studies may be summarized as follows: Students in magnet schools/centers perform better than students in regular schools; however students in magnets perform no better than they would if they were in regular schools. Let me explain.

During the 1980s, LAUSD rationalized the claim that magnet schools help improve academic achievement with the perennial finding that, on the average, students in magnet programs scored higher on achievement tests than students in regular schools. But the validity of this comparison rested on the assumption that students were admitted into the magnet program at random.

Wary that magnet students differed from the typical district student, around 1991 the Board's IAU conducted a secondary assessment of the performance of magnet schools that controlled statistically for selection effects by comparing magnet schools with schools that were demographically similar. The resulting comparison of test scores revealed no statistically significant difference in the performance of these two groups.

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<sup>1</sup> This Informative is based in part on Randy Ross, "Magnet Schools and Cultural Understanding," *Education Week*, March 30, 1994.  
[http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1994/03/30/27ross.h13.html?qs=Randy\\_Ross](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1994/03/30/27ross.h13.html?qs=Randy_Ross)

Stirred by this finding, District researchers devised a better method for evaluating the effect of magnets on student achievement. Specifically, the evaluators developed a data base that contained background and test-score data for a sample of two student types: (1) students who attended magnet schools and centers; and (2) students who had applied to a magnet but were still on a waiting list. The result: Magnet students performed no better than comparable students who did not participate in the magnet program.

A more recent study by PERB concluded that while virtually all magnets “doubled their three-year API growth target. . . , when compared to similar (non-magnet) schools, magnet performance was not exceptional. Only three of ten elementary magnet schools were ranked at or above the median performance level of their relevant comparison schools. Of the three senior high schools, only one exceeded its three-year growth target, whereas roughly half of the comparison senior high schools met their targets.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, these more recent findings for magnets are consistent with earlier findings.

The results from the 1990’s study also supported the conclusion that the test scores of both magnet-program participants and students on the waiting list were high relative to the district average. If indeed students are selected to participate in magnets on a first-come, first-served basis, I believe this result can be explained largely by differences in parent motivation--some parents know more or work harder than others to make education systems work for their children. These happen to be the same parents who provide the greatest motivation to their children to learn. I doubt that these children possess greater intellectual aptitude than their neighborhood peers. But, willy-nilly, they do possess greater support.

Ironically, because of this dynamic, magnets create a social cost for the District. Because those who opt for magnet placement are members of highly motivated families, their departure potentially hurts neighborhood schools in several ways: (1) these schools lose good students who through their exemplary performance and commendable work habits serve as role models for other students; (2) the schools lose highly motivated parents, which may reveal itself in the form of lower parent participation and less pressure on neighborhood schools to be accountable; and (3) neighborhood schools become less attractive to extant and prospective teachers, most of whom derive part of their work satisfaction from student success. While such forces tend to operate with or without magnet schools, the existence of magnet opportunities quickens their impact.

Despite research findings that magnets do not add value to student achievement, the potential for magnets to promote cultural diversity is perhaps an important potential

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<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey A. White and Steven Cantrell, “Evaluation of Major LAUSD Reform Programs: API Growth from 1999 to 2002,” LAUSD, Program Evaluation and Research Branch, June 30, 2003, p. 9. PERB’s report was undertaken in response to an October 24, 2000 Board resolution that called for the evaluation of the impact of charter schools, magnet schools, LEARN schools, and schools in the Ten Schools Program on student achievement (API). According to the report, the schools in these reforms did no better, on the average, than other comparable regular schools.

benefit. The logic goes as follows. Voluntary magnet schools--partly by design and partly through parent behavior--attract highly motivated, high-achieving students from a district's major racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Children who participate in voluntary magnet programs are children who are more likely to succeed with or without magnets. This is because they are nurtured, motivated, supported by strong, effective advocates, generally (but not necessarily) in the person of their parents. Moreover, these highly motivated parents are willing to expose their children to multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural experiences. If, indeed, such "organic" experiences thrive at the District's magnets, voluntary magnet programs could inadvertently nurture a hefty share of America's future leadership--a leadership that may manifest openness to multiracial, multiethnic inclusion without really thinking about it.

cc: Roy Romer, Jim Morris, Robert Collins, Ronni Ephraim, Dan Isaacs, Sharon Curry, Esther Wong, Jefferson Crain, Jon Fullerton, Maribel Medina