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## Magnet-school resurgence? A Q&A with Richard Kahlenberg

Posted By [Sarah Carr](#) On March 7, 2012 @ 6:35 am In [K-12,News](#) | [6 Comments](#)

Charter schools have become the fastest growing and most politically popular school-choice option over the last two decades. But a group of researchers hope to draw political attention back to what they have described as “the forgotten choice”: magnet schools.

[A report](#) <sup>[2]</sup> last month by UCLA’s Civil Rights Project highlights various strengths of magnet schools, particularly when it comes to their historic purpose of desegregation. Magnets typically enroll students from across a city or region and focus on a particular theme.

The researchers found that, like charter schools, the magnets they surveyed enroll larger percentages of minority students than traditional U.S. public schools. But the students in charters were significantly more likely to attend school in highly segregated settings. In 2008-09, for instance, 70 percent of black charter-school students were in an “intensely segregated minority school,” compared to 50 percent of black students in magnet schools, according to the report.

The reasons for this difference are complex, however, and the authors are quick to point out that their sample size was small. They reached out only to those schools that receive federal magnet-school grants; they heard back from 52 school leaders across the country.

In some cities, including New Orleans, many magnets have competitive admissions processes that require students to submit test-scores and past grades. Therefore, although the magnets might attract more racially diverse student bodies than non-magnets, they are not always accessible to the most disadvantaged students. Of the schools surveyed by The Civil Rights Project, 16 percent considered test-scores in admissions, and 18 percent factored in students’ grade-point averages.

Total magnet-school enrollment still exceeds total charter-school enrollment, which just [passed two million in the fall of 2011](#) <sup>[3]</sup>. But the federal government is spending far more on charter schools. The report points out that in 2010, charters received more than \$250 million in federal funding, compared to about \$100 million for magnets. Federal grants for magnets peaked in 1989 at \$114 million.

[Richard Kahlenberg](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, a senior fellow at The Century Foundation and a proponent of magnet schools, recently answered several questions posed to him by *The Hechinger Report*:

**Q: When, where and why did magnets first appear on the scene in American education?**

A: Magnet schools originated in the 1960s and became popular in the 1970s and 1980s as a way to racially integrate schools through voluntary choice rather than mandatory busing. Magnet schools employ a special theme or pedagogical strategy such as science and technology or a Montessori teaching approach with the goal of attracting a more racially and economically diverse



[1]

Richard Kahlenberg

group of students than would be achieved through compulsory assignment based on where student families can afford to live.

***What are the main reasons you feel the growth and funding for magnet schools have stalled, particularly compared to charters?***

Education policy is particularly susceptible to fads. Even though research finds that the economically diverse student bodies in magnet schools can substantially raise student achievement, many districts flocked to the new idea of charter schools. As a result, annual federal appropriations for magnet schools have remained at about \$100 million per year since 1990, while federal charter-school funding has skyrocketed from nothing in the early 1990s to more than \$250 million today.

***What does the research say overall about student demographics at magnets as opposed to charters?***

According to Genevieve Siegel-Hawley of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA and Erica Frankenberg of Penn State University, magnet and charter schools both enroll larger shares of black and Latino students than regular public schools, but magnets are far more integrated than charter schools. The researchers report, “in general, magnet school students are more likely to enroll in racially and socioeconomically diverse environments than charter school students.” While some charter schools—like the Denver School of Science and Technology, and High Tech High charter schools in San Diego—consciously seek a diverse student body, most charter schools are more segregated than regular public schools.

***What do you see as the major advantages of magnets as a school-choice option?***

The major advantage of magnet schools is that they can, through voluntary choice, achieve a socioeconomically diverse student body, which 40 years of research suggests has substantial benefits for student outcomes. Reviewing six major studies, Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg conclude, “Across multiple dimensions, then—achievement, of course, but also social/emotional indicators and graduation rates—we see that magnet schools are linked to very desirable outcomes for students.”

***What do you see as the major disadvantages of magnets as a school-choice option?***

The major disadvantage of magnet schools is that their initial up-front costs are about 10 percent higher on average than regular public schools. These costs are offset over time, however, because magnet-school teachers tend to stay, producing savings in expenses related to teacher recruitment.

***Do you foresee a political resurgence of interest in magnets at any point down the road? Why or why not?***

There are two reasons to think magnets may see a resurgence politically in coming years. For one thing, as the bloom fades on the charter-school rose, many educators may begin pushing again for a form of public-school choice that has proven outcomes. For another, teacher unions are coming to realize that magnets provide a high-quality [alternative] to non-union charter schools and deserve strong support. In recent months, the Senate education committee added magnet schools as an option along with charters to turn around failing schools. As the nation grows increasingly diverse, magnet schools that seek an economic mix can provide a legally sustainable way to help produce both social mobility and social cohesion.

*This interview has been edited for length.*

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## 6 Comments To "Magnet-school resurgence? A Q&A with Richard Kahlenberg"

**#1 Comment** By [Martha Nesbit](#) On March 9, 2012 @ 12:33 pm

The magnets in our district require an 80 average, above average test scores, and no discipline issues. Guess what that does to your diversity? Our charter school students are selected by lottery. Guess what that does for diversity?

**#2 Comment** By [Carol Fineberg](#) On March 10, 2012 @ 11:08 am

As the co designer and evaluator of ten different magnet schools in New York City, New Rochelle and Teaneck during the 70s and 80s, I am happy to report that almost all of them are still alive and well in 2012. Why? Among many reasons, they have stabilized the communities in which they were established, diminishing "white flight," increasing better inter group cooperation, and providing a rich, self sustaining curriculum that is either arts and humanities-centered or science and math-centered. The magnets have yielded good test results over time and those that have survived have teachers who skillfully support and build upon the magnet's driving philosophies. Students enrolled in magnets were selected by lottery, as required by USDOE guidelines. Magnets need the recognition that they deserve.

**#3 Comment** By [Hannah](#) On March 12, 2012 @ 12:44 pm

Our district has 4 Charter schools. The one at the prison has a diverse population and serves an unusual niche. The others are all rich white enclaves.

**#4 Comment** By [Peggy Patten](#) On March 12, 2012 @ 2:48 pm

There are 2 disadvantages to magnet schools that were not mentioned above.

1st: Magnet schools reduce the total amount of funding for local public schools by siphoning dollars to create "themes" which are clever marketing devices. I am on the school board of our local school district. All parents in my district want their schools to have strong programs in all curricular areas including STEM, foreign languages, & the fine arts. All children deserve such schools.

2nd: By sending families who live in close proximity to various schools in a district, magnet schools disrupt neighborhoods. We know that strong neighborhoods contribute to strong schools.

**#5 Comment** By [Daryl](#) On March 12, 2012 @ 7:01 pm

Parents speak loud and clear when they send their children across town for a more focused education, something they feel they cannot get close to home. School district's need to embrace it rather than fight against it.

**#6 Comment** By [Jason](#) On March 12, 2012 @ 9:51 pm

Cincinnati Public Schools have a VERY "successful" magnet program. Unfortunately, it is a very white system that rewards those willing to camp-out to get a place in line. Guess who can't afford to take 3-5 days off work in order to keep that place in line?

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URLs in this post:

[1] Image: <http://hechingerreport.org/wp-content/uploads/Kahlenberg.jpg>

[2] A report: <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/reviving-magnet-schools-strengthening-a-successful-choice-option>

[3] passed two million in the fall of 2011:

<http://www.publiccharters.org/PressReleasePublic/?id=643>

[4] Richard Kahlenberg: <http://tcf.org/about/fellows/richard-d.-kahlenberg-senior-fellow>

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