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To: Assistant Secretary Russlyn Ali
General Counsel Carmel Martin

From: Prof. Gary Orfield

Re: Basic Importance of Magnet Schools and the Need for Federal Support

Magnet schools are by far America's largest system of choice. They combine the flexibility and innovation of good charter schools with the civil rights requirements and public accountability charters often lack. The fact that magnet schools have been neglected in budget decisions while charters expand rapidly in federal and state funding is a reflection of a bias in thinking about choice and not recognizing that it can be-- and often is-- more effectively developed within a public system freed of the normal constraints of needing to offer something to everyone uniformly within a large system. In contrast to charters, which may or may not offer a distinctive curriculum, that is the hallmark of magnet schools, and magnets tend to have more stability and continuity than choice schools that may depend on a founding leader and have trouble both with succession and with retaining faculty.

We think that the practice of ignoring magnet school successes and pushing charters as the only major focus of choice in federal initiatives on choice ignores some strong evidence about their benefits. In thinking about school choice and innovation we recommend that magnets and charters be considered together, that increases in resources be competitively available between both options, and that civil rights policies common in magnets be extended to charters. Serious attention should also be given to a form of public school charters, known as pilot schools, in which the schools remain part a a public system but operate with broad autonomy, often have special educational approaches, and with a much more flexible agreement with the teacher's union. Research has shown considerable success in Boston, where this model was developed, and it is spreading to other districts.

The distinctive features of magnet schools include the fact that most originated as part of desegregation plans and many continue to have an explicit commitment to diversity as a basic goal. On average they are more

diverse than other public schools in the districts while charter schools tend to be more segregated. Magnet schools, in contrast to most charter schools tend to have key equity provisions including free transportation and recruitment outside their residential area. Though they are part of public school systems their trademarks are distinctive curricula and educational approaches not part of regular public schools. Unlike charter and private school systems, which show substantial flows of teachers into regular public school employment, magnet schools tend to be quite successful in holding their faculties.

Below we describe briefly recent studies of magnet schools. Some parts are excerpted from the recent Civil Rights Project report, *The Forgotten Choice: Rethinking Magnet Schools in a Changing Landscape.*

- San Diego (8th largest district) research comparing different kinds of choice shows significant gains in math achievement in years 2 & 3 for high school magnet students (vs. those who applied and weren't accepted), which authors suggest is likely a causal relationship. The researchers also report that magnet programs increase integration in SDUSD.[1]
- A 2008 UCLA study showed that attending a magnet school in the massive Los Angeles district more than doubled the probability that a student would graduate from high school.[2]
- The experience of several metropolitan areas in Connecticut in developing interdistrict magnet schools offers one possible model for dealing with the reality that most segreation and inequality today is between rather than within districts. The magnet schools provide more integrated experiences than would be the case in students' home districts. Researchers have further found that these schools provide more supportive environments and those where students report improved cross-cultural skills.[3] There are long waiting lists of white suburbanites for some of these schools.
- One of the more widely disseminated analyses on the educational benefits of magnet programs found evidence to support higher rates of student achievement in magnets than in regular public high schools, private or Catholic schools. The study also found that magnet students made faster achievement gains in most subjects – with the exception of mathematics – than high school students in other types of schools.[4]
- A comprehensive 1998 study of magnet schools in Jacksonville –Duval County, Florida found that while magnet programs were struggling to effectively desegregate the school system, comparisons of the district's

[1] Julian R. Betts et al., *Does School Choice Work? Effects on Student Integration and Achievement* (San Francisco: Public Policy Inst. of California, August 2006).

[2] D. Silver, D., M. Saunders, "What Factors Predict High School Graduation in the Los Angeles Unified School District?" California Dropout Research Project Report #14, June 2008.

[3] Bifulco et al presented at UNC Conference; similar findings published with National Center for Privatization of Education in Fall 2008

[4] Gamoran, A. (1996). Student achievement in public magnet, public comprehensive, and private city high schools. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 18, 1–18.

norm-referenced achievement tests yielded evidence of higher achievement for magnet students at all grade levels.[5]

- A study of some 1,800 public elementary schools in dozens of districts in metropolitan Chicago in the l980s showed that there was a very high relationship between poverty composition, racial composition and school test scores. After controlling for either poverty or racial composition (very highly inter-correlated), there was no significant difference in outcomes between the Chicago and suburban schools, and that most of the small number of schools in the metro which prepared students better than would be predicted on those demographic factors were magnet schools.[6]
- Through a comparison of magnet lottery "winners" and "losers", a recent analysis of the achievement of students in Connecticut's interdistrict magnet schools found that magnet and high schools have positive effects on students' reading and math scores. Among middle schools, the effects are largest--the magnet school reduces the racial isolation by at least 40 points in comparison to district schools the city students would otherwise be attending.[7]
- Another example is research conducted in school districts in the mid 1980s and early 1990s pointing to higher reading scores for students participating in career magnet programs in New York City.[8]
- A study released in Clark County, NV (Las Vegas) this week showed that low income students of color transferring to magnet schools in the inner city did substantially better than those remaining in neighborhood schools, in spite of very substantial additional funding of the neighborhood schools. The study also showed that the magnets were more successful in retaining teachers with substantial levels of experience.[9]
- There is increasing evidence that dual language magnets provide benefits both to EL students and to English-speaking students able to acquire a second language in the company of a native speaking peer group.[10]

An obvious difficulty in evaluating magnet school impacts is that they are likely to attract students who are different in some important respects from normal public school students. Even when one controls statistically for key factors like poverty, race, and parent education, there may be important unmeasured differences, since the families were motivated to find out about

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[5] Poppell, J. and Hague, S. (2001, April). Examining indicators to assess the overall effectiveness of magnet schools: A study of magnet schools in Jacksonville, Florida. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, Washington, 10-14.

[6] Peter Scheirer, "Poverty, Not Bureaucracy: Poverty, Segregation, and Inequality in Metropolitan Chicago Schools,". (University of Chicago: Metropolitan Opportunity Project, l989.)

[7] Bifulco, R., Cobb, C. D., Bell, C. (2008). Do magnet schools outperform traditional public schools and reduce the achievement gap? The case of Connecticut's interdistrict magnet school program. Occasional Paper No. 167. New York: National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education.

[8] Crain, R. L. (1992). The effectiveness of New York City's career magnet schools: An evaluation of ninth grade performance using an experimental design. Berkeley, CA: National Center for Research in Vocational Education.

[9] Veronica Terriquez, Jennifer Flashman, and Sarah Schuler-Brown, *Expanding Student Opportunities: Prime 6 Program Review. Los Angeles*: Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles, August 2009.

[10] Mexican American Legal Defense Fund and the Civil Rights Project/ Proyecto Derechos Civiles, *Preserving Integration Options for Latino Children*, Feb. 2008.

the schools, to register their children, and to undertake the efforts to get them ready for transportation in the mornings. It is in the nature of magnet schools that both the students - and often the teachers - choose to be there and enroll because of interest in the program. There are, of course, similar problems in assessing any system of choice. Magnet school studies have typically tried to control for such differences by statistically controlling for measured differences in backgrounds.

"Gold standard" research on educational innovations attempts to control for background differences by randomly assigning students to different educational opportunities. The randomness of the assignment should control for unmeasured differences in student background. Since magnets are choice programs, there would be obvious difficulties in assigning people randomly to choose. Some studies like Crain, 1992 have attempted to account for selection bias by examining achievement results for "winners" and "losers" in lotteries used to determine magnet and choice school admissions. For example, the first study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education examining the quality of education in magnets, found that over 80% of schools surveyed had higher average achievement scores than the district average.[11]

In a certain important way, however, the research debate on magnets and math and reading test scores is beside the point and ignores three of the principal purposes and values of magnet schools. Most magnets were created during desegregation battles in order to transform a key problem—getting students to transfer out of segregated communities, into an educational opportunity producing voluntary integration, by offering them special educational programs and approaches not available in typical schools. Another central objective was to attract and retain middle-class urban students and families who might otherwise abandon the urban district and move to suburbs or private schools. Attracting students who would otherwise leave and teachers who are highly motivated by the opportunity to teach what they most love strengthens communities and creates positive peer group impacts for the students who would otherwise attend less competitive classes in schools with less powerful networks.

Another basic flaw in the evaluations, which tends to underestimate the educational impacts of magnets is that many of the magnets are explicitly designed to go beyond traditional schools, for example by fostering the development of visual and performing arts talent, but those outcomes are not measured in comparative studies, though they are obviously of great importance to the students and parents and reflect a richer vision of educational goals/

[11] Blank, R. (1989). Educational effects of magnet high schools. Madison, WI: National Center on Effective Secondary Schools; Blank, R. K., Dentler, R., Baltzell, D. C., Chabotar, K (1983). Survey of magnet schools. Analyzing a model for quality integrated education. Final Report of a National Study 10-11 (U.S. Dept. of Ed.).

Creating integration viewed as mutually beneficial though choice mechanisms produced an educational and social benefit for students without coercing families to transfer to a school they did not choose. Holding middle class students of any race increases the both the quality of peer group relations and the network of opportunity for poor and minority children previously excluded, for example, from a college-bound culture that is rich with information and models of how to prepare for higher education. The dropout rate is significantly lower for such children in diverse schools. The more successful magnet schools typically draw intense parent interest and involvement and are more successful than other schools in urban districts in attracting and holding experienced teachers. When one sees the incredible involvement and activity and excitement about a performing arts high school or an I.B. program in an old school building in a deteriorated part of a city, one senses these impacts very clearly. The basic point of magnet schools is to create diversity voluntarily in spite of residential segregation and the unequal and segregated education that neighborhood segregation by race and poverty normally produces.

Note: this research only refers to magnet school-specific studies but a great deal of other research syntheses detail the benefits that tend to accrue to students in diverse schools, particularly when structured according to certain conditions of equal status interaction, which magnet schools could help to produce.[12]

[12] Linn, R. L., & Welner, K. G. (Eds.). (2007). Race-conscious policies for assigning students to schools: Social science research and the Supreme Court cases. Washington, DC: National Academy of Education; Brief of 553 Social Scientists in Support of Respondents, Parents Involved in Community Schs. v. Seattle Sch. Dist. No. 1 and Crystal D. Meredith v. Jefferson County Bd. of Educ., Nos. 05 908 & 05-915 (Sp. Ct. 2006); Roslyn Arlin Mickelson. (2008). "Twenty-First Century Social Science on School Racial Diversity and Educational Outcomes." *Ohio State Law Journal* 69(6):1173-1228.