

Magnet Schools Find a Renewed Embrace in Cities

by [MOTOKO RICH](#) FEB. 16, 2014 | NY Times

MIAMI — Nearly five decades ago, as racial tension raged in cities, magnet schools were introduced here and elsewhere as an alternative to court-ordered busing in the hope that specialized theme schools would slow white flight and offer options to racial minorities zoned for low-performing schools.

Magnet schools never quite delivered on that desegregation promise, and in the past couple of decades they have largely fallen off the radar. But in this multiracial city — and, increasingly, in other urban districts including Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles, Newark and Washington — public school leaders are refocusing on the idea as traditional public schools come under increasing pressure from charter schools and vouchers for private schools.

The number of children in Miami-Dade County attending magnet programs — which admit students from anywhere in the district and focus on themes like art, law or technology — has grown by 35 percent in the past four years. These children now account for about one in six students in the district.

The pattern is similar across the country. There are now about 2.8 million students attending magnet schools — more than the nearly 2.6 million enrolled in charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately operated.

Magnets have “become kind of a go-to alternative as a way to incorporate some of the popular elements of choice while keeping the choice constrained more explicitly within the traditional district,” said Jeffrey R. Henig, a professor of political science and education at Columbia University. “It’s a recognition on the part of districts that at least some of the enthusiasm and popularity of charters is a resistance to the notion of a one-size-fits-all school.”

Because magnets are fully part of public school systems — their teachers are unionized and they follow district rules, while charters are run by private entities and are typically not unionized — reviving them is seen as part of an effort to save public schools. Still, critics worry that magnets, like charter schools and vouchers, could drain zoned neighborhood schools of the most motivated students and increase racial segregation.

“With completely unregulated choice, there are people who choose and those who choose not to choose,” said Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation. “So the most unmotivated parents will just get assigned to a school, and motivated parents will eyeball a school racially and ethnically to see if their child will ‘fit in.’”

Although students in Miami can still attend zoned schools, scores of parents entered their children last month in a lottery for admission to one of the county’s 363 magnet programs. On the last day to submit paperwork, Susette Holder stood in line in a hallway at the district office downtown to apply for high-school spots for her 13-year-old twins.

“I did not want to send them to the neighborhood school,” Ms. Holder said. “One wants to go into law enforcement and the other wants music, and our area does not provide that.”

The federal government awards grants to districts to open or expand magnet schools with the explicit aim of increasing diversity, but charter schools receive about four times as much federal money and are not required to meet integration goals. The recent push in Miami was spurred in part by growing competition from charters, which have increased enrollment by 48 percent in the past four years. But proponents of magnet schools also say that when students are engaged in classes that reflect their interests, they are more likely to attend school, avoid disciplinary problems and graduate.

Alberto M. Carvalho, superintendent of schools in Miami-Dade County, said it made less and less sense to put students “through the same 7:30 to 2:30, bell-to-bell instruction without allowing them some degree of individuality.”

Three years ago, Mr. Carvalho founded a magnet school called iPreparatory Academy, in which students spend much of their time working independently, often lounging with laptops on Ikea sofas and beanbag chairs. The district has added similar programs on nine campuses around the district.

Supporters of magnet schools say that to increase diversity, districts must make a concerted effort to inform all parents of their options. In some communities, said Scott Thomas, executive director of Magnet Schools of America, “you have to know the secret handshake to even get the application,” a situation that tends to favor the most educated and assertive parents.

In Miami-Dade County — where close to three-quarters of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches and more than two-thirds of students are Hispanic, many with parents who speak little or no English — principals and recruiters from magnet schools attend numerous fairs, talking to families and distributing glossy brochures.

Last year, said Robert Strickland, director of school choice in the district, officials produced video spots that ran in movie theaters and made robocalls to families at home.

Teachers unions argue that districts need to prioritize community-based schools. “I think if every one of the schools in a system are good, the vast majority of people will stay in their neighborhood,” said Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association, the nation’s largest teachers union.

Miami-Dade County is bigger than the state of Rhode Island, so many students opt for their neighborhood school simply because some magnets are so far away. Public transportation is sparse and the school district does not guarantee bus seats for students who select magnet programs, although it has started to replicate the most popular magnet themes across the county.

Most of the magnets admit students through a lottery, but most arts programs require auditions or portfolio submissions, and many schools set prerequisites such as specific math or science courses or a minimum grade point average.

Some of the most coveted magnets, which receive far more applications than they have seats, do not represent the demographics of the district.

At Coral Reef Senior High School, a prestigious magnet that includes programs in the arts, engineering and an International Baccalaureate track, less than half of the 3,229 students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, and close to a fifth are white, compared with just 7.7 percent of the district. African-American students, who represent close to a quarter of the district, are only 13.5 percent of the student body at Coral Reef.

Long-held perceptions can affect who applies to some magnets in the first place. Patrisha Hedgemond, an 18-year-old senior at Coral Reef, said she had applied to the school’s legal academy because she wanted to leave her neighborhood peers.

“Some of those students don’t have the oomph to want to strive,” Ms. Hedgemond said. Most of her friends from middle school did not even apply to Coral Reef: “They didn’t believe they could get in,” she said.

Some parents see magnets as a way to give their children advantages they never had.

Dollie West, a legal secretary, helped her son, Javon Alexander, 14, apply to magnet high schools. He is currently a freshman at a school that opened in the fall on a campus of Florida International University. The program, modeled on the popular Maritime and Science Technology magnet school in the elite community of Key Biscayne, focuses on marine science and biology and will eventually allow students to enroll in college courses.

Ms. West believes that attending school with peers who have similar academic interests will keep Javon motivated. “For me, as a parent of a young black male, and with statistics in the society being against him, I can prove the statistics wrong,” she said.

Javon said he chose the new academy because he enjoyed watching programs about marine science on the Discovery Channel. One morning last month, he was wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with “3LC” that he and his friends had designed.

“It’s the 3 Life Crew,” Javon said during a biology class, where students were learning about the major lobes of the brain. “It’s a group of kids who do well in school.”

-
1. Annotate article.
 2. Complete SOAPStone analysis.
 3. Define terms: magnet school, charter school, private school. What are the differences?
 4. What do you think about charters and magnets?
 5. Which type of schooling—charter, private, magnet, or public—offers the best opportunities for students in the United States? Why?