

Magnet Schools: The First Step Toward School Choice

DURHAM—Durham High School looks like the same old brick fortress that has towered over Duke Street since the early 1920s. But the school now goes by a different name—Durham Magnet Center—and its focus has changed as well.

Starting with the 1995–96 academic year, Durham High will become one of nine new magnet schools in the Durham Public School System. So, instead of drawing from a base district decided by school administrators, the school will be filled with students who have chosen to enroll there because of its unique academic offerings.

“We will have a focus on the visual and performing arts and global studies,” Ed Forsythe, principal of Durham Magnet Center, tells a

crowd of students and parents who have packed into the school’s assembly hall for an open house. Forsythe essentially is delivering a sales pitch to the parents, who have only a few days to decide whether to enroll their children at the Durham Magnet Center, some other magnet school in the system, or the base school for their district of residence.

Some of those parents are impressed by the school’s new approach, some are skeptical, and others seem confused. “I want to thank you for doing this,” one father says during the question-and-answer session. “This is a great idea.” But a mother warns Forsythe to keep the school focused on its arts theme: “I would encourage you to stick with the one program—and try to do that really well.”

A number of parents apparently are struggling with the choice of enrolling their child in the school—which is innovative but unproven. “I have a kid in a really good music program in another school,” says one father. “Now I have to decide within a short period of time whether to pull him out and move him here.”

Many families have been wrestling with similar concerns in the Durham community, but they apparently like having such choices. Durham Public Schools received more than 3,100 applications for placements in the system’s nine magnet schools during the sign-up period in March 1995, representing about 15 percent of the total student enrollment in grades K–8. [All of Durham’s magnets are elementary and middle schools, but



Ed Forsythe, principal of the Durham Magnet Center, tells parents about educational offerings in the new magnet school program at Durham High School.

Tom Mather



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A banner hanging on the front of Durham High School describes the school's new approach as a magnet school.

high-school grades will be phased in at Durham Magnet Center starting with the 1996-97 school year.]

"The parents are very excited," says Anita Tanner, executive director of Durham's magnet school program. "I think when you look at the fact that we had over 3,100 applications—in the first year the magnet program was offered—that shows that the community is very, very interested."

Magnet schools such as the ones in Durham are one of the key ways in which public school systems in North Carolina are trying to give parents more educational choices. About eight percent of the state's public school systems (10 of 119) offer magnet programs, according to the state Department of Public Instruction. Most of the magnet programs have cropped up in school systems in larger cities like Raleigh, Charlotte, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and Wilmington.

For instance, the Wake County Public School System has 29 magnet schools serving about 22,000 (28 percent) of its 77,000 students.¹

The magnet schools are so popular that they don't have openings for all of the applicants. For the 1995-96 school year, the system had to turn away more than 3,000 students.

Magnet Schools Serve a Number of Purposes

Tanner, the director of the Durham magnet program, says that magnet schools serve four primary purposes: (1) to improve student achievement; (2) to offer unique and innovative programs; (3) to bring about internal reform in the operation of public schools; and (4) to increase the diversity of schools in terms of race, gender, disabilities, religion, geography, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In essence, the magnet concept is that by offering innovative programs—such as the focus on arts at Durham Magnet Center—schools will motivate students and teachers to improve achievement. "That's first and foremost in any school," Tanner says.

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One of the key reasons for establishing magnet schools in Durham and other communities has been to help increase racial diversity in schools. For instance, magnet programs have been used to attract white, suburban students to predominantly black, inner city schools. "You're trying to bring together as strong a mix as possible," Tanner says. "The magnet philosophy is: the stronger the mix of student backgrounds, the stronger the educational climate and potential for achievement."

The real drawing card for most parents, however, is the expanded choice in educational offerings. For Robin Watson of Durham, the system's magnet program allowed her to enroll her 4-year-old son, Darius, in a new Montessori school at Morehead Elementary. "I definitely wanted to put him in a Montessori school," Watson says. "The hands-on approach is what I really enjoy. . . . I think if you pick what your child needs, he'll be able to excel and be challenged." The Montessori style of teaching

focuses on hands-on, individualized instruction that promotes independence, creativity, problem-solving, and social skills.

The Durham school system decided to establish a Montessori program—one of the first in a public school in the state—because of requests from parents.² "Some of these children, without having a district magnet, would never have the opportunity to use the kind of choices we offer," says Beverly Honeycutt, the principal at Morehead.

The popularity of the Durham Montessori magnet school highlights one of the drawbacks of magnet programs. Although magnets offer a choice to those parents who want it, the school systems retain the final word on assignments. In other words, students from anywhere in a school system can attend a magnet—unless the school has more applicants than it has spaces. That means that some students don't get to attend their chosen magnet, if the school is a particularly popular one.

Beverly Honeycutt, right, principal of Morehead Montessori Magnet School in Durham, describes the school's innovative programs to a parent at an open house.



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"We had over 200 parents that applied; 160 (students) were accepted," says Honeycutt, the principal at Morehead Montessori. "I have not recruited at all."

At Durham Magnet Center, Principal Ed Forsythe says the school filled all of the 400 slots it had available for the 1995-96 school year. "Right now, they're clamoring to get in," he says. "But you have to deliver on your promises. If you don't, the parents are not naive."

Forsythe and his staff will have their work cut out for them if they want to keep those students coming back. During the open house at Durham Magnet Center, he led a group of visiting parents into a large, oily smelling room. The floor was spotted with grease and painted with stripes like a parking lot. Large, industrial-size lamps and ventilation pipes hung from the ceiling, and a cluttered workbench abutted one of the walls.

"This used to be the old mechanics shop," Forsythe told the parents. "It will go through a renovation and will be used as a black-box theater. We're looking at putting in seating for about 200 in this area. We're going to call it our theater-in-the-round. I wasn't kidding when I said we're going to roll up our sleeves and go to work here. We're going to have to."

—Tom Mather

FOOTNOTES

¹ Personal communication with Patrick Kinlaw, director of magnet programs for Wake County Public Schools. The 22,000 magnet students include those who choose to attend magnet schools, students who live in the district of residence for such schools, and students who choose to attend year-round schools.

² The Charlotte-Mecklenburg public school system has offered a Montessori magnet program at James Elementary since 1992. The Wake County Public School System also established a Montessori program at Poe Elementary in Raleigh, starting with the 1995-96 school year.

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a district can attend magnet schools. But magnet programs offer only a limited amount of choice because participating schools may turn away students—usually through lotteries—if they receive too many applications. For instance, the Wake County public school system received nearly twice as many applications as it had spaces for in its magnet schools for the 1995-96 academic year.¹⁵ (For more on magnet schools, see the articles, "Magnet Schools: The First Step Toward School Choice," on p. 12, and "Neighborhood Schools the Choice for Many Parents," on p. 8.)

Charter schools are the next step toward school choice. As with magnet programs, students from anywhere in a school district can apply to attend charter schools. And, like magnets, charter schools may focus on a particular theme or style of education. The key distinction with charter schools is that, although they are publicly funded, they are largely free from educational controls set by local school boards and the state.¹⁶ Instead, such schools are run by teachers or other groups—such as private contractors or education colleges—that are granted "charters" by the state or some other enabling body.

"It's a magnet school on steroids, basically," says Jim Johnson, a senior analyst with the N.C.

General Assembly's Fiscal Research Division. "The difference is in the flexibility of funding and how they decide to spend their money."

To keep its charter, a charter school has to meet or exceed predetermined standards of performance for student achievement, attendance, and other measures. In theory, that organizational structure spurs teachers and students to excel because the school's existence depends on its performance.

"Charter schools are part of a movement for expanded opportunity, in a careful and thoughtful way. These people are accountable for results. There has to be measurable improvement in student achievement. If there isn't, then the charter school is closed."

—JOE NATHAN,
director, Center for School Change,
University of Minnesota