
Overview: The Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) and This Evaluation

For nearly four decades, magnet schools have been an important element in American public school education, offering innovative programs not generally available in local schools and providing opportunities for students to learn in racially diverse environments. The number of school districts offering magnet schools expanded rapidly during the 1980s: from 138 districts in 1982 to 230 districts in 1991. The number of schools offering magnet programs more than doubled during this time from 1,019 to 2,433 schools; the number of students participating in magnet programs nearly tripled from 441,000 to over 1.2 million.¹ A number of studies have credited magnet schools with contributing to school desegregation.² Several of these studies have credited magnet schools with improving educational quality.³

Magnet schools have been particularly important in districts that are trying to desegregate. Congressional support for desegregation first came in the form of the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA) enacted in the spring of 1972 to “encourage the voluntary reduction, elimination, or prevention of minority-group isolation,”⁴ and the ESAA was amended in 1976 to authorize grants to support the planning and implementation of magnet programs in school districts attempting to desegregate. The ESAA remained in effect until 1981.

Congress resumed support for magnet schools in 1984 with the enactment of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP). MSAP grants are intended to support magnet schools that are part of an approved desegregation plan and that are designed to bring students from different socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds together. Since 1984, MSAP has offered multiple-year grants to school districts through a competitive process administered by the U.S. Department of Education (ED). Grants were awarded in 1998 to 57 school districts across the country, and grants are being awarded again in 2001.

In 1998, the American Institutes for Research (AIR), with The McKenzie Group serving as subcontractor, was given a contract to evaluate the MSAP. This is the first report for our evaluation. It describes data collected from all 57 projects during the 1999–2000 school year and from applications and progress reports that the projects have submitted to ED. A second report, in 2001, will report on data collected during the 2000–01 school year, and a final report, in 2002, will summarize all of the findings from this evaluation. This overview chapter provides a brief description of the MSAP, the evaluation design for this study, and the organization of this report.

¹ Steel, L., and R. Levine. *Educational Innovation in Multiracial Contexts: The Growth of Magnet Schools in American Education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1994.

² See for example, Archbald, D. *Magnet Schools, Voluntary Desegregation, and Public Choice Theory: Limits and Possibilities in a Big City School System*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1988; Blank, R. “Analyzing Education Effects of Magnet Schools Using Local District Data.” *Sociological Practice Review* 1 (1990), 40–41; Rossell, C.M. *The Carrot or the Stick for Desegregation Policy: Magnet Schools or Forced Busing?* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990; Steel, L., and M.S. Eaton. *Reducing, Eliminating, and Preventing Minority Isolation in American Schools: The Impact of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1996; and Witte, J., and D. Walsh. “A Systematic Test of the Effective Schools Model.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 12 2 (1990), 188–212.

³ See for example, Yu, C.M., and W. Taylor, with E. Goldring, C. Smrekar, and D. Piche. *Difficult Choices: Do Magnet Schools Serve Children in Need?* Washington, DC: Citizens’ Commission on Civil Rights, 1997.

⁴ P.L. 92–318, Title VII, Sec. 701-720, June 23, 1972.

The Magnet Schools Assistance Program

By law, the Magnet Schools Assistance Program has four purposes: to support, through financial assistance to eligible LEAs⁵ or consortia of LEAs:

- The elimination, reduction, or prevention of minority group isolation in elementary and secondary schools with substantial portions of minority students
- The development and implementation of magnet school projects that will assist LEAs in achieving systemic reforms and providing all students the opportunity to meet challenging State content standards and challenging State performance standards
- The development and design of innovative educational methods and practices
- Courses of instruction within magnet schools that will substantially strengthen the knowledge of academic subjects and the grasp of tangible and marketable vocational skills of students attending such schools⁶

Districts (LEAs) applying for MSAP grants must describe the ways in which they plan to support these purposes in their MSAP projects.

The first MSAP grants were for two-year periods, with second-year funding contingent on an ED review, and grants were awarded in 1985, 1987, 1989, 1991, and 1993. In 1995, the grant period was extended to three years, to allow districts more time to implement their programs. During the period from 1985 through 1998, 379 MSAP grants were awarded to a total of 171 school districts⁷ in 35 states and the District of Columbia. Figure O-1 presents the number of grants that recipient districts have received and indicates that 39 percent of the grantees (67 districts) have received one MSAP grant; 27 percent (47 districts) have received two MSAP grants; 15 percent (26 districts), three grants; 12 percent (20 districts), four grants; 4 percent (6 districts), five grants; and 3 percent (5 districts), six grants.⁸ From 1985 to 1998, more than half of the funded districts received multiple grants, and just over one third received three to six grants. The average number is 2.2 grants per district.

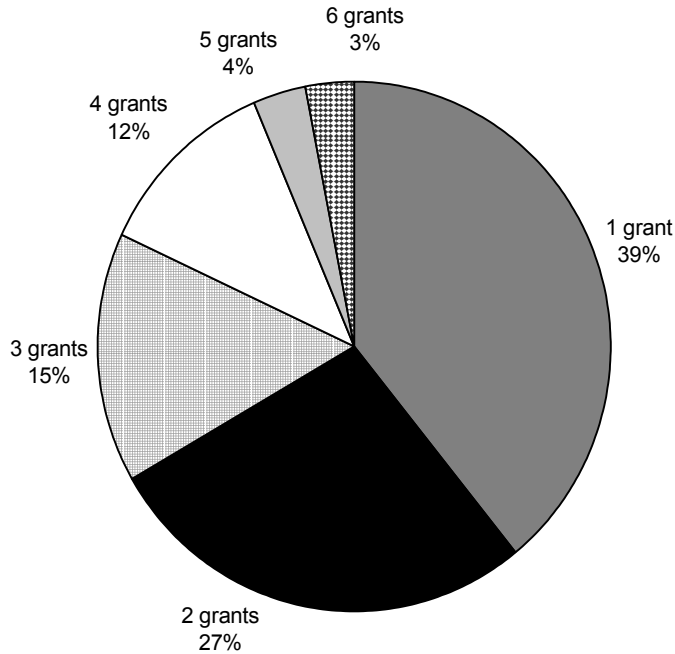
⁵ LEAs are *local education agencies*—public school districts or education centers serving students in some or all of grades K-12. This definition and others are included in the Glossary at the end of this volume.

⁶ 20 U.S.C. 7202

⁷ In a few cases, the grantee is a consortium of school districts.

⁸ For a complete list of the districts and the years of their awards, see Table A-O-1 in the Overview Appendix.

Figure O-1
Number of MSAP Grants Received by District Recipients



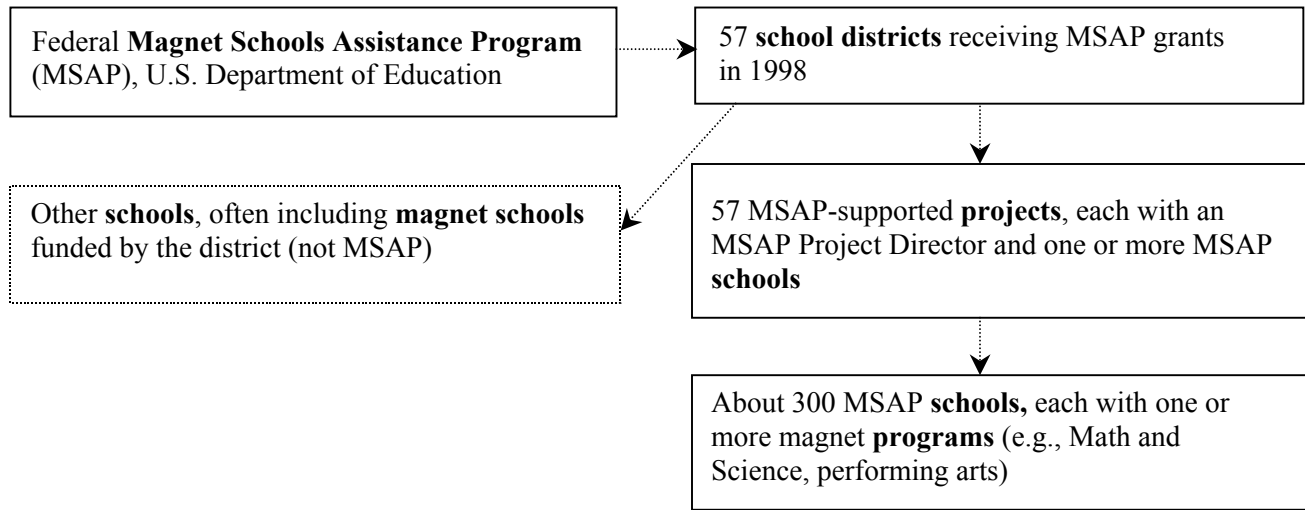
n=171 districts
Source: Department of Education

The MSAP grants for 1998 totaled almost \$96.5 million and ranged in size from \$350,000 to \$2,856,392. The average amount was \$1,692,982 per district. Awards in 1999 and 2000 were for similar amounts, with some variation based on grantee plans (e.g., the timing of heavy equipment purchases or the use of a planning year for some schools in 1998).⁹

In each school district receiving MSAP funds, MSAP projects are developed to support the four purposes in one or more magnet schools. Figure O-2 below illustrates the relationship between the MSAP program in the U.S. Department of Education, the districts that receive MSAP grants, the schools that the MSAP grants support, and other schools in the MSAP grantee districts. Accordingly, in this report we refer to the **MSAP** (the U.S. Department of Education source of funding and assistance), the **57 districts** receiving MSAP grants in 1998, the **projects** that the districts developed with MSAP funds, and the **MSAP schools** and **programs** supported by the projects.

⁹ Additional information about funding and budgets is included in Chapter VII.

Figure O-2
Relationships among ED's Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP), MSAP-funded Districts, and MSAP-supported Schools



Evaluation of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program

To determine whether the MSAP is fulfilling its purposes and to provide information on the uses, successes, and problems associated with federal funding of magnet schools, AIR began a comprehensive, four-year evaluation of the MSAP in September 1998. Conducted under the authority of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program, Title VI of the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA)¹⁰ and sponsored by ED's Planning and Evaluation Service, the evaluation focuses on the 57 school districts that received funding for MSAP projects in 1998 for a three-year grant cycle.

In applying for MSAP grants, each of the 57 MSAP projects sets **desegregation objectives** for reducing, eliminating, or preventing minority group isolation in each their MSAP schools and **achievement objectives** for strengthening student knowledge and skills in those schools. This Year 1 report describes the desegregation and achievement objectives that MSAP projects have set. (Data on the extent to which the MSAP projects have met their objectives will be included in our Year 2 report.) Our Year 1 report also includes information gathered from the 57 districts' grantee applications and annual reports to ED and the findings from our Year 1 data collection (in 1999-2000) to provide district context and to describe the strategies that projects are implementing to support systemic reform and implement innovative practices and to help them attain their desegregation and achievement objectives.

Evaluation Questions

Our evaluation is guided by these major evaluation questions:

- I. What are the characteristics of MSAP projects?
- II. What are the characteristics of MSAP districts?
- III. To what extent are federally funded magnet projects reducing the incidence or degree of minority isolation in their programs?

¹⁰ 20 U.S.C. 7212

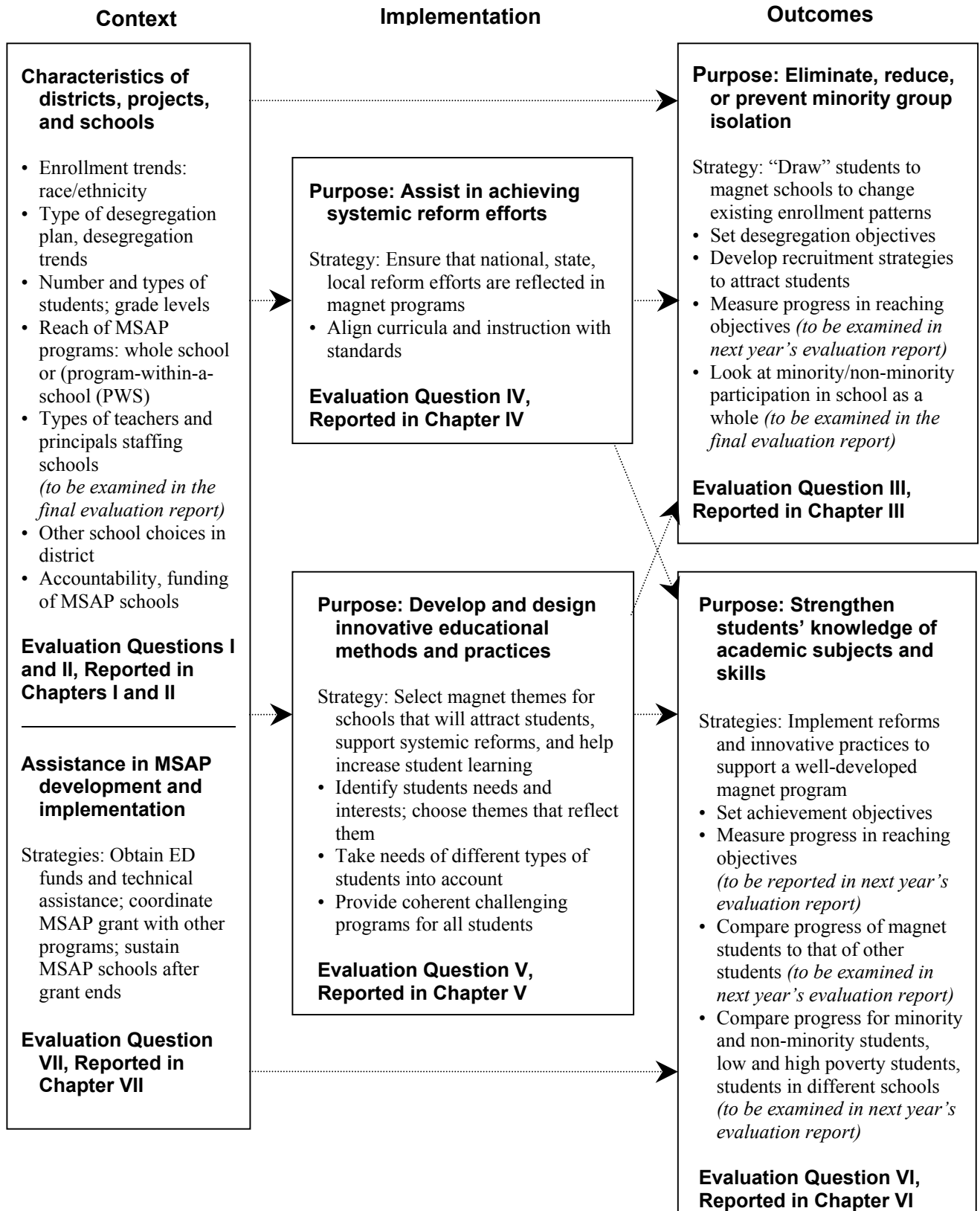
- IV. To what extent are federally funded magnet projects promoting systemic, standards-based reform?
- V. To what extent do federally funded magnet projects feature innovative educational methods and practices that meet identified student needs and interests?
- VI. To what extent do federally funded magnet projects strengthen students' knowledge of academic subjects and skills needed for successful careers in the future?
- VII. How has the MSAP contributed to the development and implementation of magnet projects?

Each of the seven major evaluation questions includes more specific subquestions, for a total of 52 evaluation questions in all.¹¹ This report is intended as an introduction to the evaluation. It provides background information on the MSAP program and grantees, and initial information on the seven evaluation questions. Chapters I and II of the report address evaluation questions I and II, providing information on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of MSAP districts and schools. The next four chapters concern the four mandated purposes of the program. Two of these purposes pertain to key program outcomes—preventing, eliminating, or reducing minority student isolation, and strengthening student knowledge and skills. In Chapters III and VI, we describe the objectives MSAP projects have set with respect to these outcomes. We will report the progress projects have made in subsequent reports. The remaining program purposes focus on innovative practices and support for systemic reform—two key strategies designed to support improved outcomes in terms of minority student isolation and student knowledge and skills. In Chapters IV and V, we discuss the status of the MSAP projects and schools with respect to the implementation of innovative practices and the support of systemic reform, as of the 1999-2000 school year. Finally in Chapter VII, we focus on the ways in which the MSAP program office awards grants and the ways in which MSAP projects provide and receive technical assistance.

Figure O-3 below summarizes the relationships between the MSAP purposes, the strategies that projects implement to try to fulfill those purposes, the evaluation questions, and our evaluation report.

¹¹ For a complete list of the evaluation questions, see Table A-O-2 in the Overview Appendix.

Figure O-3
Purposes and Strategies of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program and Associated Evaluation Questions and Report Chapters



Five Studies

To provide answers to the evaluation questions, we have designed an evaluation that encompasses five interrelated studies:

- *Study 1, Profile of All 57 MSAP Projects*—descriptive analyses of program context, program characteristics, and enrollment and achievement outcomes for all 57 of the MSAP projects funded in 1998
- *Study 2, Profile of All MSAP-supported Schools*—a focus on the 292 schools that receive program funds in MSAP-funded districts: the school context, program characteristics, and enrollment and achievement outcomes
- *Study 3, In-depth Case Studies*—extensive reviews of eight selected MSAP projects to illuminate the aggregate results obtained from the national data collection (Studies 1 and 2). Case study districts were not drawn at random but rather were selected to reflect the variety among the 57 projects (e.g., geographic region, size).
- *Study 4, In-depth Case Studies of MSAP Schools*—detailed reports on four MSAP-supported schools in each of the eight Case Study MSAP projects, selected to include elementary, middle, and high school levels and a variety of program themes. Also included in each district are two non-magnet schools that serve students with racial-ethnic backgrounds similar to those in the MSAP schools, to permit comparisons of school programs in general and student achievement in particular.
- *Study 5, Review of MSAP Guidance and Technical Assistance*—examinations of the role of the U.S. Department of Education in promoting high quality magnet schools and an assessment of the federally supported technical assistance provided to grantees

Data Collected in 1999–2000

During 1999–2000, we collected and analyzed data on all 57 projects through interviews with the MSAP Project Directors, Project Surveys, and District Data Requests, and we gathered data on the 292 MSAP schools through Principal Surveys.¹² As the response rates shown in Table O-1 below indicate, high levels of cooperation were obtained from respondents. All 57 Project Directors participated in interviews, and all but one submitted Project Surveys. All but three projects submitted data on the District Data Request list; however, some districts were unable to provide all of the data. For the 284 MSAP schools that were operating in 1999–2000¹³, 267 principals completed Principal Surveys.

¹² For more information, see the Methodology section and the 1999–2000 evaluation instruments in the Appendix-Overview.

¹³ Although 292 schools are included in the MSAP projects funded in 1998, eight had a planning year and therefore were not yet open in 1999–2000.

Table O-1
Response Rates for Year 1 Data Collection from 57 MSAP Projects and 284 MSAP Schools

Data Collection Instrument	N	Responses	Response Rate
MSAP Project Director Interview	57	57	100.0%
Project Survey	57	56	98.2
District Data Request	57	54	94.7
Principal Survey	284	267	94.0

In addition, interviews were conducted with ED staff and relevant documents (e.g., review documents for 1998 MSAP applications, grantee budgets) were examined. Site visits were made to eight MSAP projects selected for in-depth Case Studies, with interviews at the district level and observations and interviews in four MSAP schools and two comparison schools in each district.

What This Report Includes and How It Is Organized

This report summarizes our 1999–2000 findings for the national sample of 57 projects (Study 1) and 284 MSAP schools (Study 2), and it provides the initial results for Study 5 (assessment of ED’s supporting role). Because Case Study visits will be repeated in 2001, when projects are fully implemented, the Case Studies (Studies 3 and 4) will not be completed until after those visits.

During preparation of this report, our guiding principle has been to make the report chapters as succinct as possible, with an emphasis on key findings and a judicious use of charts and graphs. In a separate document,¹⁴ we have included an Appendix for each chapter, with data tables to support the chapter’s charts and graphs. References to the relevant data tables appear in footnotes to each chapter. The appendices also include supplemental information, which is referenced in chapter footnotes. For example, the Appendix–Overview includes a list of all of the districts awarded MSAP grants over the years, a list of all of the evaluation’s questions, a section on Methodology, and copies of the instruments that we used during our 1999–2000 data collection.

Comparison Groups Used in this Report

For information on the MSAP schools to be most meaningful, it is helpful to know how they compare to other schools. The comparisons used in this report vary, depending on what is being compared (e.g., demographics, school practices, student outcomes) and what comparison seems most appropriate. The following list describes possible comparison groups for MSAP *schools*, our use of those groups in this report, and their limitations:

- *Other schools in the same district.* Non-magnet schools operating in the same districts as MSAP schools and serving similar students provide one potential basis for comparison. With the exception of demographic and socioeconomic data on non-MSAP schools, only limited data are available on non-magnet schools in MSAP districts. The scope of the study did not permit the extensive data collection that would be required to gather data (e.g., on teacher and principal characteristics, student achievement data) on comparison schools in each of the MSAP districts. Even if that were possible, some MSAP districts have only a few schools like the

¹⁴ DuBois, P. et al. (2001). *Evaluation of the Magnet School Assistance Program, 1998 Grantees: Year 1 Interim Report Appendices.*

MSAP schools, so comparisons might be problematic. We have administered surveys and are gathering data on non-magnet comparison schools in our eight Case Study districts, but we are gathering such data for only two or three schools per district. They will not be representative of non-MSAP schools in all of the MSAP districts.

- *National sample of schools.* Survey data on a nationally representative sample of elementary, middle, and high schools provide another potential comparison for MSAP schools. Three main data sources are available for a national sample of schools: the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and the Follow-up Survey of Schools conducted in 1997-98, and the National Longitudinal Survey of Schools (NLSS) conducted in 1998-99, 1999-2000, and 2000-01. The SASS was conducted again in 1999-2000, but the data are not yet available. The 1998-99 NLSS is the only one for which data are now available, and it includes only Title I schools.¹⁵ Our surveys include some of the items from SASS and NLSS, and we use data from those surveys for comparisons when appropriate.
- *National data on all schools.* Data on the full national population of schools provides a third potential comparison group. The Common Core of Data (CCD) collected by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) provides information on all public schools in the United States, and we have utilized those data to the extent possible. They are limited, however, in that they do not include information on teacher and principal characteristics, for example, or on some of the other characteristics of schools salient to this evaluation.

For *district* comparisons, data are available from the CCD (just described) and from a study by the Urban Institute.¹⁶ Problems arise, however, in identifying the types of districts to use as the basis of comparison for MSAP districts; for example, on the basis of size of district, urbanicity, or other factors. Overall, MSAP districts are larger than other school districts in the United States, so we have used large districts as the basis for comparison in some instances. As discussed in Chapter II, the 57 projects include small districts as well; hence comparisons to large districts have some limitations. For other district comparisons, we have also used national comparison data from NCES for 1997-98, the most recent available.¹⁷ In all cases, we have endeavored to use the most appropriate comparison group for the data being presented, and we have identified the comparison groups cited.

Organization of the Report

In general, the content of this report is organized according to the seven major evaluation questions; for example, Chapter I addresses evaluation question 1, Characteristics of MSAP Projects.¹⁸ Chapters I-VII each conclude with sections on What We Have Learned, summarizing our findings, and

¹⁵ Later samples included a small number of non-Title I schools, making national estimates available.

¹⁶ Turnbull, B., Hannaway, J., and McKay, S. *Local Implementation Study: District Survey Results*. Washington, DC: Planning and Evaluation Service, U.S. Department of Education, 1999, 77-78.

¹⁷ National Center for Education Statistics. *Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary Districts in the United States: 1997-98*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1999.

¹⁸ In some cases, evaluation questions within one of the seven major evaluation questions seemed to fit more logically in a chapter concerning a different major evaluation question. For example, under evaluation question I, "What are the characteristics of MSAP projects?" is the question "In addition to MSAP grants, what other sources of support are available to and accessed by MSAP projects and schools?" We examine the support question in Chapter VII because it is related to evaluation question VII's questions about how MSAP projects spend their funds. The list of evaluation questions in the Overview Appendix (Table A-O-2) identifies the sections of this report in which each evaluation question is addressed. If a question is not yet addressed, the list indicates the future report in which it will be included.

What We Hope to Learn, indicating further information needed. Chapter VIII (the last) provides a brief preview of future activities and reports for this evaluation. A glossary and bibliography are provided at the end of the report.