Report Highlights

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. Federal support for magnet schools began in 1972 with the Emergency School Assistance Program, continued until 1981. Support for magnet schools resumed in 1984 with the authorization of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP).[1] In authorizing the MSAP in 1994, Congress concluded that it is in the best interest of the Federal Government to continue to support school districts in implementing court-ordered or voluntary desegregation plans, ensure equitable access to quality education for all students, and assist local educational agencies in implementing innovative programs that contribute to systemic reform.

From 1985 through 1998, 379 MSAP grants were awarded to 171 school districts in 35 states and the District of Columbia. These projects support magnet programs in public elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the country.[2] To evaluate the MSAP, the American Institutes for Research was awarded a four-year contract in 1998, and our focus is on the 57 projects funded by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) for three-year MSAP grants in 1998.

Our evaluation is guided by seven major evaluation questions: I. What are the characteristics of MSAP projects? II. To what extent are federally funded magnet projects reducing the incidence or degree of minority isolation in their programs? III. What are the characteristics of MSAP districts? 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? and VII. How has the MSAP contributed to the development and implementation of magnet projects?

This Year 1 report is based on information we gained from reviews of the MSAP applications for the 57 projects funded in 1998; data that grantees provided in their 1998-99 performance reports to ED; the Common Core of Data and other extant data sources; and data we gathered. Our data collection included interviews with the MSAP Project Directors, project surveys, district data requests, and surveys of the principals of MSAP-supported schools.

In this report, we provide details about the types of districts that are funded by the MSAP and the projects that they establish. We describe the desegregation and achievement objectives that the projects have set, but the data were not yet available to report on the extent to which those objectives have been met. We also describe the systemic reforms that MSAP projects are designed to support, the innovative methods and practices that the projects are implementing in federally funded magnet schools, and the support that is available to MSAP projects from ED and other sources.

Findings in Brief

- **MSAP-funded magnet programs are most commonly found in elementary schools.** Among the 292 schools supported by MSAP grants in 1998, 60 percent are elementary schools, 24 percent are

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[1] 20 U.S.C. 7202

[2] In this report, we refer to the **MSAP** (the ED source of federal funding and assistance for magnet schools), the 57 school **districts** receiving MSAP grants in 1998, the **projects** that the districts developed with MSAP funds, and the **MSAP schools** (with one or more magnet **programs)** supported by the projects.

middle schools, 14 percent are high schools, and 2 percent are combined-level schools (e.g., schools with grades 4-12).

- **MSAP-supported schools most often offer programs to all of the students in a particular school or grade, rather than only some students.** Of the 292 MSAP schools in 1998, 89 percent have whole school programs (i.e., programs that are offered to all students or to specified grades). The remaining 11 percent feature programs-within-schools (e.g., a performing arts program) that are offered to only some students and are generally found in high schools.

- **About three quarters of students enrolled in MSAP programs are members of racial or ethnic minorities.** In 1998-99, over 165,000 students were enrolled in MSAP schools, and, as might be expected in schools that are trying to desegregate, 74 percent of the students in whole school programs and 66 percent of those in PWSs were minority students.

- **A little more than half (54 percent) of the districts funded by MSAP in 1998 operate under a voluntary desegregation plan (i.e., one approved by their Board of Education).** The remainder (46 percent) operate under a required desegregation plan—that is, one required by a court, state agency, or ED's Office for Civil Rights.

- **Of the 57 districts that were funded by MSAP in 1998, nearly all are located in metropolitan areas and have large student populations.** Two thirds (66 percent) of the MSAP districts serve primarily central city students in large metropolitan areas, and almost one third (32 percent) serve mainly suburban students.

- **Almost two thirds of MSAP districts maintain waiting lists for one or more of their MSAP programs.** Nearly all of these districts keep the lists into the school year and admit students if spaces become available.

- **Two thirds of MSAP schools have the desegregation objective of *reducing* minority group isolation.[3]** Ten percent are trying to eliminate it, and six percent are trying to prevent it.

- **Few MSAP programs base student admissions on test scores, demonstrated skills, or past academic records.** Only 10 percent of MSAP programs establish such performance standards, and most of these programs are found at the middle and high school levels, where programs-within-school (PWSs) are more common.

- **Almost all of the MSAP districts report that they place a major emphasis on standards-based reform.** More than 80 percent of MSAP districts report that they place a major emphasis on establishing high standards for students and on aligning curricula with standards.

- **Most MSAP projects report that the themes and goals of their magnet programs are consistent with state and district standards.** Nearly 90 percent of Project Directors indicate that state and district standards match the goals of their MSAP schools to a great extent.

- **MSAP schools have adopted a variety of themes, or focus areas, with many focusing on science, technology, the arts, communication, and careers.** The themes help nurture the development of a

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[3] Minority group isolation refers to schools in which minority group students constitute more than 50 percent of school enrollment. Schools that have the objective of reducing have minority enrollments that exceed 50 percent, and their objective is to lower the percentage.

unique school identity and promote a coherent curriculum and program of instruction. Many MSAP schools have also adopted programs based on externally developed comprehensive models.

- **MSAP schools have reportedly developed programs that respond to individual students' needs.** Nearly all MSAP schools provide additional time for low achievers, individualized instruction, and tutoring by non-school staff. High percentages of MSAP schools also include students with Individual Education Plans and students with limited English proficiency in their regular MSAP activities.

- **Some of the achievement objectives set by MSAP grantees are either changing or unclear.** The overall patterns in the achievement objectives are clear and are described in our report. Because of a variety of factors, however, the objectives may not be those on which student achievement is measured in all projects.[4]

- **Virtually every MSAP program has objectives for student achievement in language arts and mathematics.** Substantial numbers of programs have objectives pertaining to achievement in other academic subjects, performance and applied learning skills, job-related skills, career awareness, and behaviors relating to current and future academic success.

- **Standardized test scores are by far the most common measure of student achievement in MSAP schools.** Over 95 percent of the MSAP programs at all three levels (elementary, middle, and high school) based some or all of their achievement objectives on standardized tests; over 70 percent of the MSAP programs specified alternative assessments.

- **MSAP projects spend about 45 percent of their budgets on staff salaries and fringe benefits, about 20 percent on equipment, and about 20 percent on supplies.** This is also reflected in MSAP principals' reports that the most important thing MSAP grants enable them to do is provide additional staff for their schools.

- **On average, MSAP grants provide about $300,000 to each MSAP school per year.** This amount varies widely across the projects, for example, in 1998-99, school budgets ranged from $11,000 (for a school with a planning year) to more than $800,000 (for a school establishing a technology-based program).

Future Reports

Our Year 2 report will report on our findings as to the extent to which the 57 projects have met their desegregation and achievement objectives. It will also include data from later performance reports that the projects submitted to ED and information from another round of data collection (interviews, project surveys, and principal surveys administered during 2000-01) from the 57 projects.

An important component of our future reports will be case studies based on visits we made to eight MSAP projects in spring 2000 and are re-visiting in spring 2001. In addition to descriptions of our interviews and observations at these project sites, our reports will include data from surveys of principals in comparison schools, surveys of teachers in both MSAP and comparison schools, and student focus groups in the Case Study districts. We also will gather student-level data to permit more rigorous analyses of student achievement in these districts. All of these data sources will enable us to provide in-depth reports of the MSAP projects and their progress in attaining their objectives.

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[4] We will describe changes in achievement objectives and provide data on the extent to which objectives are met in our Year 2 report