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Genevieve Siegel-Hawley

Thomas J. Shields

University of Richmond, tshields@richmond.edu

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Magnet schools promote diversity, opportunity, equity, achievement

BY GENEVIEVE SIEGEL-HAWLEY AND TOM SHIELDS | Posted: Sunday, February 23, 2014
12:00 am

Last spring, nearly 400 people from across the metro area came together over two days at the University of Richmond and Virginia Commonwealth University to learn about our region's troubled public school history ... and how to move forward.

Indicative of significant and communitywide investment, conference attendees expressed interest in solutions that would promote school diversity, equity and opportunity in central Virginia. These included innovative solutions and tested strategies for addressing educational inequalities both within and across area school systems.

One of the key solutions discussed during the conference was the establishment of regional magnet schools. These programs are typically located on or near urban-suburban boundaries and draw students across multiple school districts in order to promote diversity and achievement.

Magnet schools have historical roots in voluntary desegregation strategies. An early form of school choice, magnets are public schools that usually offer a powerful combination of theme-based instruction or curricula — e.g., fine arts, STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), Montessori and International Baccalaureate — free transportation and an explicit emphasis on diversity in order to disrupt the link between segregated schools and segregated neighborhoods. Across the country, magnet schools continue to enroll more students than any other type of choice, including charters.

One contemporary example where regional magnet schools have taken root and are prospering is in Connecticut. During the conference, we heard from Bruce Douglas, a representative from a consortium of school districts in the Hartford region, who helped make the idea concrete for attendees. Douglas described a network of highly popular magnet programs in the greater Hartford area — including schools emphasizing aerospace and engineering, public safety, medical professions and teacher preparation — that foster integration and strong educational and social outcomes.

The federal government continues to support magnets through the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP). Funding helps school systems implement and expand attractive magnet themes, train and develop teachers and provide resources and technology. Importantly, recent MSAP funding cycles have emphasized the value of allowing students to cross district lines in order to encourage diversity. In other words, regional efforts that push localities to come together to establish magnet programs have benefited from significant federal support.

With or without regional cooperation, magnets can work to further integration because many include basic civil rights protections that help make choice attainable for everyone — free transportation, widespread and

carefully orchestrated outreach, diversity goals, lottery-based admissions and inclusive themes. Federally funded magnet schools have normally incorporated most, if not all, of these structures.

Readers may wonder whether we've tried magnet schools in Richmond. The answer is: not really — we have a number of theme-based schools, but they lack the emphasis on intentionally promoting diversity. However, many of our existing programs could easily be transformed into more magnet-like settings. With careful attention to equity and diversity, such programs would be able to attract a wide variety of families to schools that have remained or are becoming racially and socio-economically isolated.

We do have examples of regional schools: the Maggie L. Walker Governor's School in Richmond and the Appomattox Governor's School. These schools, which have been sought-after options for more than two decades, demonstrate how our region has come together around gifted education through cooperative regional governance and inter-divisional collaboration. It stands to reason, then, that similar models emphasizing diversity would offer many of the same positive elements to children from a wide array of backgrounds and interests.

We know this type of change won't be systemic, at least at first. But if our region begins to work together on this important initiative, then we might begin to develop schools that are equitable, diverse and provide opportunity for all students.

We know several things for sure: Our swiftly changing global economy needs workers who have been educated in diverse schools; our segregated schools with pervasive opportunity and achievement gaps are scattered across multiple divisions in our region; and finally, our school divisions have and will continue to become much more diverse both socio-economically and racially.

Magnet schools offer one path toward leveraging these trends. There is clearly interest in the concept of magnet schools as a way to offer diverse, equitable and quality learning opportunities to more students in our region. The upcoming dialogue will illustrate how regional magnet schools might look, what it would take and why the time is right to discuss this option.