



Benchmarking the impacts of US magnet schools in urban schools

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the range of benchmark applications associated with US magnet schools in urban areas.

Design/methodology/approach – The collection and critical analysis of secondary data from relevant publications are used to evaluate the results of America's magnet schools. Analysis of organizational and leadership theory has been utilized in order to benchmark future successful efforts.

Findings – The paper finds the following key issues: magnet schools have numerous mission goals that prevent them from having a clear strategy, magnet school structures should be customized for the specific communities and promote parental involvement, and magnet schools instruct students who are heavily influenced by pop culture values and challenge traditional values in the school culture.

Research limitations/implications – The paper examines benchmarking applications that are exclusively relevant in US urban schools.

Practical implications – There are several implications for researchers and practitioners related to improving the academic success of low-performing schools in urban areas in America.

Originality/value – This paper is significant because it presents a theoretical framework for interpreting the impacts of magnet schools in urban schools.

Keywords Benchmarking, Schools, Urban areas, United States of America

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Magnet schools were a strategic roadmap for America ridden itself of past segregation. Results-oriented education is the product of a modern era. In fact, the US educational system has evolved from being compliance-driven to performance base over the last 15 years (Wong, 2008). With the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001, legislators began a serious effort toward strategy changes in education. Recently, magnet schools can become mechanisms whereby urban educators can prepare generations for college, stimulate knowledge and values within our economy, and prepare students for the world of work without compromising America's 1990 mission of themed-based schooling. Magnet schools should build a culture that reduces minority group isolation (MGI), strengthen course instruction within an academic area, and innovate educational methods by structuring its strategy to comply with the needs of America's education system. Magnet schools were envisioned to a desegregating theme-based schools that would enhance a student's ability by learning a specialized field. However, the impact of magnet schools in an urban environment has not been sustained.

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Benchmarking the strategic intent of magnet schools will bring justification for much needed improvements. As methods are applied, magnet schools will become more than approved legislation for equality. Benchmarking is the catalyst for changing the educational structure, strategy, and culture of magnet schools thus improving the quality of an urban education. In order for implementing meaningful changes, educators, legislators, parents, and child advocacy groups must take a leading role in this reform. Abu-Tineh *et al.* (2008) suggested that school leadership is a critical component to successful school reform. The purpose of this study is to benchmark the current magnet school strategies and offer possible improvements to combat shortfalls in education in an urban environment. The focus will be on urban magnet schools. Through this process, there are three key areas that will be reviewed: strategy, structure, and culture.

2. Literature review of benchmarking efforts in US schools

Benchmarking is a process applicable to the educational sector. According to Elmuti *et al.* (1997), there are four type of benchmarking: internal, competitive, functional, and generic. Although the four types of benchmarking are widely accepted in education, there are many definitions. The definitions are usually related to key themes: measurement, comparison, identification of best practices, implementation, and improvement (Anand and Kodali, 2008). For example, a study conducted by the National Governors Association (NGA), the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve Inc., used a comparison benchmarking theme to ensure US students receive a world class education (NGA, 2008). In this research, a five-step action plan towards building a global competitive education was developed. Action step two involves leveraging states collective influence to ensure that textbooks, digital media, curricula, and assessments are aligned to internationally benchmarked standards and draw on lessons from high-performing nations and states. This comparison benchmarking theme suggests improvements of schools based on the best practices in the world.

Benchmarking also has a classification scheme (i.e. product benchmarking, process benchmarking, internal benchmarking, strategic benchmarking, best practices benchmarking) which emphasizes selecting a particular benchmark. In benchmarking urban schools the classification scheme most occurring was process. Research found that the USA ranked 25th in math and 21st in science achievement after being benchmarked against international assessments in 2006. Research suggest that the USA is falling behind other countries in human capital and that this should warrant an evaluation of the public schools process for teaching and assessing key subject (NGA, 2008). According to the NGA, top performing countries administer math assessments that are more rigorous and better aligned with standards than the typical multiple-choice assessments of the USA (2008). In review of this benchmark classification scheme of process, US education system should work to develop a common pool of assessments that are more rigorous than multiple-choice exams. This could be achieved by sharing expertise and resources across states that would ensure better developed material thus changing the process of development and design.

Because of the classification schemes, varying definitions of benchmarking has evolved. The most widely used definition of benchmark was developed by R.C. Camp. Camp describes benchmarking as the search for best industry practices which will lead to exceptional performance through the implementation of these best practices

(Anand and Kodali, 2008). However, the most recent definition of benchmarking states: it is the process of identifying, understanding, and adapting outstanding practices from organizations anywhere in the world to help an organization improve its performance. It is an activity that looks outward to find best practices and high performance and then measures actual business operations against those goals (Kumar and Dhakar, 2006). Both definitions seem to indicate that an organization should be in search of best practices in order to improve performance whether internal or external to the organization. Benchmarking magnet schools for improvement will require a close look at the internal and external function of the organization. The only present research focuses on traditional public schools without a specific look into magnet programs. For instance, Jackson Public Schools used internal benchmarking for recommendations involving the development of quality assessments. The study examined assessment scoring, validation, and analysis for the purpose of providing improvement in terms evaluating standardized testing (Niemi *et al.*, 2007). For magnet programs, internal benchmarking should focus far beyond quality assessment.

Benchmarking is a management tool that has been studied across several disciplines. It has been applied in the manufacturing, health services, insurance, financial services, construction, academics, airports, banking, and government sectors (Anand and Kodali, 2008). Most importantly, benchmarking becomes an identifier of best practices so that improvement can be made regardless of sector. Seeking improvement for an organization thus links benchmarking to total quality management. It is a subset of total quality activities that has become very useful without being committed to a quality program (Martin, 1990). In benchmarking magnet schools, one could suggest a benchmarking technique that exclusively identify problems with the current strategy and allow this technique to change the face of magnet education. Benchmarking attempts to answer the following questions: how well are we doing compared to others?, How good do we want to be?, Who is doing it the best?, How do they do it?, How can we adapt what they do to our organization?, and How can we be better than the best (Kempner, 1993). In this study, we use these questions to guide our examination of magnet schools strategy and to determine the need for improvements with the way things are currently being done.

Furthermore, benchmarking in education often focuses on assessment – the need for improvement among children as it relates to standardized testing. However, literature was retrieved that indicated benchmarking has also been used to measure achievement, graduation rates, the use of energy by schools, and most importantly testing. Benchmarking has been used to raise student, school, and district achievements and to meet the requirements of the “NCLB” Act of 2001. In Massachusetts, benchmarking was used to measure if math students involved in quarterly benchmark exams showed greater gain in student achievement than schools not having students involved in math benchmarking (Henderson *et al.*, 2007). Similarly, Jackson Public Schools and the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing at UCLA conducted benchmark studies to improve the technical quality of district benchmark test in order to predict student performance on state testing (Niemi *et al.*, 2007). However, in a review of benchmarking literature and schools, no information was found that offered improvement of magnet schools. Therefore, benchmarking can be essential to identifying new strategies and structure, new services, better teaching techniques, better marketing of magnet themes, and ultimately the adoption of more magnet school programs.

3. Research objectives and methodology

The primary objective of this paper is to explore benchmark applications associated with US magnet schools in urban areas. This investigation provides exploratory data by utilizing an extensive literary review of over 20 documents including scholarly opinions and practitioner discussions. The collection and critical analysis of secondary data from relevant publications was used to evaluate the results of America's magnet schools. Analysis of organizational theory has been utilized in order to benchmark future successful efforts. The contributions made by well-known researchers in the fields of leadership theories, such as Bass and Yukl, were investigated. The primary objective of this review of literature is to increase depth of knowledge in this field in order to make a relevant analysis of each theory. Electronic databases such as ABI/INFORM Global, ERIC EBSCO Host, and the internet were searched using key words "magnet schools," "urban schools," "benchmarking," and "organizational theories." There was a significant absence of literature related to urban magnet schools with benchmarking applications in scholarly research. Consequently, there is an opportunity to further cover any research gaps.

The use of internal benchmarking will help identify current magnet schools strategies and help formulate goals to implement for improvements within America's magnet schools. Internal benchmarking is comparing within one's organization by taking a closer look at products, services, and processes. According to the Department of Education's (DOE, 2008) Office of Innovation and Improvement, to keep magnet schools effective and relevant, districts have found it important to use data to guide improvements in teaching and learning, to revisit and evaluate magnet themes over time, and to keep parents and community stakeholder involved in the process of evaluation and improvement. Benchmarking studies are a well-known commodity in private industry. However, Anderson *et al.* (2008) effectively demonstrated the application of benchmarking in the public sector also. As a matter of fact, benchmarking has been used in several educational applications. For example, Pursglove and Simpson (2008) evaluated the effectiveness of teaching and widening participation of English universities by use of the benchmarking technique. Their analysis justified the greater academic effectiveness and academic efficiencies of post-1992 universities compared with members of the Russell Group. Therefore, the benchmarking process can generate significant results. Consequently, internal benchmarking can also aid in the recognition of how the original idea of magnet schools may not have been the best strategy for magnet education to date.

Magnet schools, as a part of a federal school desegregation solution, became a hot commodity during the 1990s. The approach was simple: draw white students to predominantly black schools in the inner city by offering well-funded themed schools, such as performing arts or science and technology, which combined innovative learning with an integrated school. Recently, there are more than 3,000 magnet or theme-based schools (Rossell, 2003). Magnet schools differ in how they implement their programs. Some offer a magnet program to all students in the school that is called a whole school (WS) format while the program within a school (PWS) format offers magnet curricula to some but not all of the students in the school (DOE, 2003). Pegged as a way to integrate urban schools and curb white students from leaving, magnet schools have failed their original mission. Currently, the enrollment of magnet schools includes a high

proportion of minority students (73 percent on average) and students living in poverty (60 percent on average).

Furthermore, Rossell (2005) maintained that most surveys demonstrate that white people prefer majority white schools. Less than 16 percent of the magnet schools have been able to fully integrate the racial makeup of their student bodies (DOE, 2003). There has been little systematic research to support the notion that magnet schools can reduce minority student isolation. Overall, the magnet schools have had modest impact on preventing, eliminating, or reducing MGI, which refers to schools that have minority enrollment of more than 50 percent (DOE, 2003). Unfortunately, inner city schools are becoming browner and poorer. There are a couple of reasons that make magnet schools vulnerable to extinction. Initially, magnet schools were funded as a tool for desegregation under the Emergency School Assistance Act from 1972 to 1981. The national desegregation crisis forced America to consider less intrusive ways for desegregation. The magnet schools provided this solution. Currently, desegregation is not a primary goal of the American education school (Rossell, 2005). One of the greatest issues regarding the survival rate of magnet schools is funding.

Since desegregation has become a secondary goal, magnet schools have not received the same level of support (Rossell, 2005). With the emergence of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) in 1985, federal grants were given to magnet schools as part of the approved desegregation plan to bring students from different socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds together (DOE, 2003). A total of 285 of 292 magnet schools were funded by MSAP grants, representing 98 percent of all magnet schools in the USA since 2003 (DOE, 2003). These grants also provide about \$110 million annually to support magnet schools (Goldring and Smrekar, 2000). Under this new program, magnet schools not only had to desegregate but also improve the quality of education in order to qualify for funding. Currently, magnet schools are also a part of the "NCLB" Act of 2001 (Rossell, 2005). Recently, with tight budgets at the school district level, magnet schools become an easy prey to budget cuts. Finally, magnet schools do not seem to have a clear vision. Neglecting to have a clear vision, suggest that magnet schools are failing to identify strategic intent. Strategic benchmarking can help in this matter and is inherent to total quality.

Strategic benchmarking involves assessment of strategy rather than operational matters and it integrates strategic analysis with best-in-class (Anand and Kodali, 2008). For instance, top performing nations were benchmarked to find multiple mechanisms to monitor school performance thus examining its strategy. Mechanisms found were annual student assessments in key grades, whole-school review, and school inspections (NGA, 2008). Interestingly, inspections evaluated performance of a school against a broad set of criteria to include student achievement and school practices that contribute to student results. Advantages of such benchmarking techniques help identify causes of underperformance thus allowing an intervention to develop from identified needs. Using strategic benchmarking would require magnet schools to benchmark current strategy and form a vision that showcases the best strategy. Once a clear vision is in place, then schools are able to formulate key goals that support the vision. It is important to note that strategic benchmarking is a proactive analysis of emerging trends, options in market, processes, technology, and distribution that could affect strategic direction and deployment (Meybodi, 2006). Recent magnet school could use this analysis to define who they are and what they want to become.

Magnet schools are used to address a multiplicity of goals that sometimes conflict with each other and the vision (DOE, 2003). Under the MSAP, magnet schools focus on several goals, which were:

- the elimination, reduction, or prevention of MGI in elementary and secondary schools with a large number of minority students;
- courses of instruction within magnet schools that will substantially strengthen the knowledge of academic subjects;
- the development and design of innovative educational methods; and
- the development and implementation of magnet school projects that will assist local education agencies in achieving systemic reforms and providing all students the opportunity to meet required performance standards.

4. Resegregation of public school

America must revisit its educational system. Kozol (2006) argued that segregation has returned to public education as a result of several years of federal policies. Currently, the number of black children attending integrated schools has dropped to its lowest levels since 1968. Demographics within the public inner city schools continue to change. These changes impact politics, which in turn, impact culture. In the process, traditional education suffers. When one discusses segregation, people immediately think about the south. Prior to *Brown vs Board of Education* in 1954, most southern public schools were one-race schools, either white or black (Armor and Rossell, 2001). Recently, New York is considered the most segregated state for black and Latino children because seven out of eight children attend a segregated school (Kozol, 2006). Many argue the success of past desegregation strategies. Developing magnet schools as a desegregation strategy needs to be analyzed in hopes of developing a new strategy by conducting the strategic benchmark. The strategic benchmark approach may show promise that help identify upstream and change domain measure (Sarkis, 2001).

Step one of all benchmarking process calls for analyzing your organization practices, procedures, and performance in a given process and to set forth goal and objectives for improving them (Murray *et al.*, 1997). Obviously, the analysis of past strategy is crucial because the black and Latino community have inherently returned to segregated public schools. Therefore, the magnet school must redefine its vision if it ever plans to hold desegregation as one of its strategic intents.

Between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s, federal courts and government agencies demanded race-conscious policies in every portion of school operations (Armor and Rossell, 2001). During this time frame, when racial balance quotas were adopted instead of neighborhood or other geographic rules, one of the most controversial aspects of school desegregation involved assigning students to schools (Armor and Rossell). As a result, many white parents started a massive withdrawal of their children from public schools into private, segregated academies, resulting in the withdrawal of substantial financial support. This withdrawal of white families to the suburbs and away from urban areas is commonly called white flight. This left public schools underfunded and inferior (Levin, 1999). Consequently, although large districts in suburbs were predominately white and middle class, only 3 percent of the nation's white school-aged children were enrolled in the 25 largest urban districts by 1986 (Levin, 1999). Of all racial groups, white students are the most racially isolated;

78 percent of their peers are white. Therefore, not many minorities are exposed to white students as would be expected of the nation's public schools (Orfield and Lee, 2006).

Meanwhile, school boards and state legislatures have tried various tactics to avoid the desegregation decrees. Many experts promote the merits of voluntary compliance for desegregation as opposed to mandatory because it is market driven. In the market-oriented approach, the government provides incentives such as special programs or free transportation (Rossell, 2003). Many detractors of mandatory compliance say it does not work. Studies reveal that half or more white students assigned to black schools do not attend them (Rossell, 2003). Furthermore, magnet schools are seen as an effective way to introduce market incentives to both voluntary and mandatory desegregation plans. School choice is the latest buzzword to hit public schools. School choice includes a variety of programs, such as tuition vouchers for private or public schools, charter schools, magnet schools, inter district transfers, and controlled-choice districts (Levin, 1999). Private schools have been the primary options for most parents. However, parents are now shifting their thinking about school choice. From 2002 to 2007, student enrollment in charter schools has increased by 81 percent. VanderHoff (2008) maintained that charter schools are more popular choice because they are public schools and have less opposition from teacher unions. During economic hard times, more parents are choosing home schooling instead of expensive private school education. For more families, home schooling is the only affordable option in school choice (Radcliffe, 2009). Some researchers declare that blacks are more likely to take a school choice in the public sector while whites and Asian Americans are more likely to take a school choice in the private sector. Levin (1999) maintained that many school choices may perpetuate racial and ethnic stratification and are likely to increase economic segregation.

Some critics, such as the Harvard Project on School Desegregation, assert that resegregation started in the late 1980s and worsened primarily due to the federal courts relinquishing school districts of desegregation mandates (Armor and Rossell, 2001). Traditionally, court orders have focused on racial balance as the measure of desegregation. Mandatory desegregation methods include pairing and clustering, satellite zoning, and voluntary options. Rossell (2003) argued the illogic of the process. Racial balance measures ignore the proportion of whites in a district. Therefore, school systems do not capture the cost of desegregation in terms of white flight. Furthermore, Orfield and Lee (2006) maintained that school segregation is more than race or ethnicity. They explain that it also involves concentrated poverty and linguistic segregation; these multiple factors often form tangible inequality in educational opportunities on multiple dimensions. Rossell (2003) found evidence to support this position. A national study was conducted of 600 school districts drawn from 6,392 school districts. The study found that the willingness of white parents to enroll their children declines as the percentage of minority students in the program increases. Furthermore, racial/ethnic discrimination disproportionately affected blacks, Hispanic, and Asian students. In a study consisting of 177 black, Asian, and Hispanic students in an urban public school, 42 percent of minorities reported being excluded from activities by peers based solely on their race or ethnicity (Coker *et al.*, 2009).

Additionally, some magnet school options are more attractive than others. For example, more whites will volunteer for a magnet in an urban environment if it is a program-within-a-school magnet while the least attractive is the WS magnet (Rossell,

2003). Therefore, white parents fear the interaction of their children with urban children in a magnet school environment. Inner city schools are becoming a changing phenomenon in America. Given the transformation of the nation's public schools, students are enjoying a wealth of diversity. However, blacks and Hispanics comprise 56.1 percent of students in urban areas (Levin, 1999). In this situation, the lack of white students in public schools is not due to white flight but demographic changes. Actually, Hispanics in the 2003-2004 school years became the largest minority group in America, with 19 percent, followed by black students, with 17 percent (Orfield and Lee, 2006). Hispanic students' segregation is more than black segregation in some parts of the south and west areas (Orfield and Lee, 2006). Furthermore, all of the minority populations are growing much faster than whites; therefore, white students will someday become the minority in the public school system. The implications of this cultural shift remain to be seen.

5. Discussion and analysis

Past initiatives for changing the educational structure have proven to be complicated. In restructuring any complex organization, several key components are necessary to ensure success. The key elements of remodeling magnet schools are strategy, structure, and culture (Figure 1).

Strategy

Magnet schools should refocus their strategies. In order to do so, magnet schools must benchmark in an agile environment. Agility is the ability to thrive in an environment of continuous and often unanticipated change. According to Sarkis (2001), agility benchmarking was set forth by diverse firms for improving and maintaining competitive advantage. Benchmarking in this light becomes a magnet schools ability to move beyond its initial strategy (desegregation) to recent strategy which would be defined by each program as it experiences change and a need for improvement. To maintain competitive advantage, agility benchmarking is supported by Knoxville

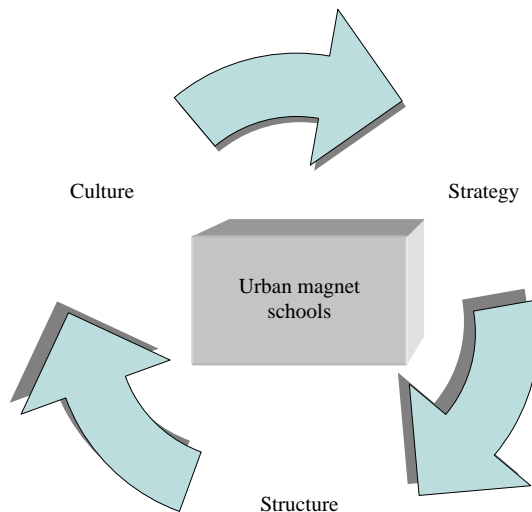


Figure 1.
The key elements for transforming US magnet schools

magnet schools. Emphasis is place on magnet programs that have significant extra funding. This funding supports smaller class sizes, extra computers, specialty classes, business internships, weekly museum trips, and lessons with the Knoxville symphony (William, 2009). Admission testing also ensure competitive advantage thus fulfilling the strategic intent of bettering magnet program by accepting well qualified students. However, benchmarking with agility is the four-phase continuous improvement cycle of plan, do, act, and check (PDAC).

Magnet schools are the poster child for school choice. However, Levin (1999) argued that at least a decade after the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown vs Board of Education* black students still remain segregated in their southern school systems. Magnet schools were set up to initially combat segregation in a market driven fashion without the harsh court mandates. Recently, magnet schools have no clear vision because they are asked to be all things to all people. To structure a magnet school to be all things to all people, it is imperative to benchmark with agility. However, to maintain a school in such away would further collapse any efforts of new strategy, structure, or culture.

Magnet schools need a shared vision. Recent magnet schools do not have a singleness of strategy. They are required to promote racial diversity, improve scholastic standards, and provide a range of programs to satisfy the individual needs of students (Goldring and Smrekar, 2000). Some see the problems in urban areas as a hopeless socioeconomic issue. Traub (2000) maintained that there is no evidence that any existing strategy can close the overall achievement gap between children with low-socioeconomic status and their wealthier, largely suburban counterparts. He further explains that society speaks of the inner city poor as if they were remote tribes instead of citizens of the USA. These inequalities inflicted on inner city students because of their homes, neighborhoods, and peer environments eventually confront them as adults after they complete public school.

Currently, magnet schools are extremely popular and garnish great support from local school systems that provide considerable investments of resources. With this being said, diluting the magnet school scope prevents public schools from achieving any or all of their mission goals. For example, 78 percent of students in districts with magnet schools are in large urban areas; however, the larger proportion of minority students makes it virtually impossible that large districts can achieve any racial desegregation plan, regardless of the strategy (Goldring and Smrekar, 2000). Unfortunately, improving the quality of any urban school will be difficult. Many proponents focus on the enormous amount of federal dollars already spent on large districts, such as the Washington, District of Columbia area. The politics of improving these inner city schools will be a challenge. One clear strategy is to allow magnet schools to serve their communities without regard to race or ethnicity. Demographic shifts are forcing traditional leaders to rethink their strategies and create new paradigms. In America, some 8.6 million students are attending multiracial schools.

Multiracial schools emerged because growing segregation of black and Hispanic students exist in public schools (Orfield and Lee, 2006). The schools are multiracial because they have two or more "historical" minorities with relatively few white students. Although these multiracial schools present a challenge to educators, they represent the evolution of America. Therefore, it is more critical to teach students in inner city schools that are highly segregated than it is to spend time trying to integrate them with suburban students who do not want to attend.

Structure

While there is no magical organizational structure to fit every problem, the revamping of current magnet schools should be designed so that they are appropriate for the challenges of urban areas. Benchmarking can aid in this organizational redesign so that all challenges are combated.

Benchmarking is more than gathering data on the competitor. It can serve as a catalyst for new ideas, thoughts, and concepts (Murray *et al.*, 1997). It is an information tool to support continuous improvements and to gain competitive advantage. Hyatt (2001) agreed that benchmarking is a continuous process of identifying, learning, and implementing best practices to optimize opportunities to gain competitive advantage. Also, benchmarking has an appeal to cost savings in operations and is a support of budget and the strategic planning processes (Elmuti *et al.*, 1997). Although benchmarking research found well-funded magnet schools because of restructuring and program efforts, there are still schools that need benchmarking efforts to help in over crowdedness and limited funding (William, 2009).

According to Elmuti *et al.* (1997), benchmarking has to be purposeful, focused, measurement based, information intensive, objective, action generating, and done to change the existing image. Therefore, magnet school structures should be customized for the specific communities thus changing the existing image. Contemporary educators have been working on novel solutions in order to address the pressing issues of public schools. One of these innovations is chartered schools, which are publicly funded schools that operate without rules, regulations, or statutes by traditional public schools. In exchange for this autonomy, some governmental authority governs them, which is outlined in the school's charter (National Education Association (NEA), 2009). Some of these schools have proven to be community success stories because they offer creative learning, generate empowerment of students, and foster better relationships between school officials and parents. Since 2004, almost 3,000 charter schools have been operating in 37 states plus the Washington, District of Columbia area. However, even charter schools are not perfect. According to the 2004 report by the National Assessment Governing Board, charter school students, on average, score lower than traditional students in public schools (NEA, 2009). The US DOE also found that many charter school governing bodies lack the capacity to adequately oversee charter schools and implement school discipline. Therefore, without effective lines of authority and programmatic expectations on the school and students, innovative schools cannot provide optimum learning for all students.

Administrators, principals, and teachers must have the right type of leadership to both guide and understand the needs of urban communities. Current school officials may be negatively impacting the performance of magnet schools with their biases. Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* (1987) suggested that teachers may contribute to parent involvement. Some teachers fear parents because they may blame the teachers for the lack of performance of their child. The National School Boards Association conducted a survey of 4,700 educators from 127 schools in 12 urban districts on school climate. Nearly, one in four teachers in urban school provides a negative picture of school culture (Toppo, 2007). Of public school teachers at all levels, 23 percent feel their inner city students would not do well in college. Furthermore, it gets cloudier when speaking from a cultural perspective. White teachers have the bleakest view (24.5 percent) of these students failing in college, followed by blacks (22.1 percent), and Hispanic (17.6 percent)

teachers. One in eight teachers says that their schools are unsafe. Black administrators say children are bullied regularly at their schools while only 49.3 percent of white and 29.7 percent of Hispanic administrators feel the same (Toppo, 2007). Clearly, leaders in magnet schools can influence the direction, performance, and relationships in urban schools. In addition, Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* maintained higher teacher efficacy may minimize the perception of threat in their roles as experts when dealing with certain parents. Lareau (1987) observed that a teacher's attitude is a critical determinant of parent involvement in a school because the teacher is the school's primary representative. Recently, public schools exist in a postmodern period. As leaders are responsible for discovering and articulating the organization's primary values, understanding leadership theory in the postmodern context is vital (Malphurs, 2004). Yukl (2002) explained that most leadership theories are focused on processes at only one level because it is difficult to develop a multilevel theory for all situations.

Consequently, communications becomes a key ingredient for a leader's effectiveness in a team environment. Kouzes and Posner (1995) maintained that leaders make visions and values meaningful to followers by modeling the way. Recent students want individuals who can relate to them and understand them. Authoritative leaders without any empathy for inner city communities will gain little support from parents or students. Transformational theory provides a more effective method of exchange between school leaders and the urban community of parents and students. Whereas, a transactional leader works within the framework of the self-interest of his or her followers, a transformational leader seeks to change the framework (Bass, 1999). Furthermore, Schmidt (2006) explained that the postmodern leader should have the following characteristics:

- adaptable;
- spiritual focus;
- tolerance for ambiguity in life;
- entrepreneurial in his approach;
- service oriented;
- accountable for action;
- life-long learners;
- upgrading performance; and
- participatory.

Although there are many positive attributes of contemporary leadership theories, school officials should be cautious with implementing them in a postmodern student population.

In addition, magnet schools should use innovative structures that intentionally develop the bond between teachers, students, and parents. The new models of the twenty-first century call for smaller, more fluid, and interactive organizations. Actually, the remake of structures of schools is applied to support small learning communities. They create small, pedagogically autonomous groups in a new school by creating independent learning communities. Davidson (2001) advocated building small learning communities to foster the WS culture. Many educators are resistant to any change of their stable academic environments. However, Nadler and Tushman (1997) maintained

that leaders need to be flexible to market changes as the market relates to organizational structure. Parson (1998) argued for a replacement of traditional elementary and secondary schools with community learning centers that bring individuals, programs, and processes together to create a culture for learning organizations. Benchlearning fosters this process. Benchlearning is another benchmarking technique that refers to cultural change in an effort to become a learning organization. The most widely accepted term for benchlearning is competence benchmarking. Kyro (2003) suggested that competence benchmarking allows an organization to improve their effectiveness by developing competences and skills and by learning how to change attitudes and practices.

In the future, the new structure for successful organizations will center on a small organization with a core of key personnel and a portfolio of support staff around that core (Handy, 1997). In this framework, decentralization and relationships become vital. The organizations may be flattened by more empowerment of stakeholders in the local community. Parson (1998) further maintained that in a community learning center a variety of individuals would share in the power and decision making of learning, including teachers, school support staff, business owners, local churches and synagogues, and community service organizations. Obviously, this new structure will increase participation in schools if leaders allow it. Rossell (2003) argued that magnet schools must be structured so that they motivate demand. Therefore, the two major magnet structural factors include:

- (1) the scope of the program within the school; and
- (2) whether a neighborhood population is assigned.

In summary, how magnet schools are structured becomes a critical ingredient in the academic achievement of inner city children.

Culture

It is somewhat intuitive that school culture can contribute to the betterment of inner city students. Organizations communicate their expectations both formally and informally through their culture. In most educational institutions, school culture has been a domain where institutions try to promote moral values. On a personal level, students in general have a set of core values that dictate how they respond to a situation while a school has a set of core values that guides the organization while it does business (Malphurs, 2004). As organizations continue to be bombarded by pop culture, traditional values are being challenged. Clearly, generational differences challenge leaders with diverse organizations (Harding, 2000). Obviously, incongruent values held by students and teachers damage group dynamics by creating unhealthy conflicts in public school systems, which can easily escalate over time.

Kemmerer and Arnold (1993) presented benchmarking as a tool to ensure that cultural diversity exists in the work place. This form of benchmarking is generic in nature. However, generic benchmarking could solve a number of problems within inner city schools. Generic benchmarking is comparing with an organization which extends beyond organizational boundaries. There is certainly a strategic perspective to this type of benchmarking. Public schools would be required to go beyond their inner city communities and determine how positive culture is cultivated in other places. Also, public schools can use this form of benchmarking to insure that school culture help

change the attitude of its children. Subculture greatly impacts the relationship of students with schools. Furthermore, postmodernism creates a climate of rebellion, generates a lack of respect for authority, and places no one at the center of reality (Kelm, 1999). Postmodern influences are clearly seen in urban subcultures where students question everything and challenge school authority. Therefore, Smith and Jackson (2005) advocated that organizational leaders need to be real, relevant, and respectful to gain credibility with this subculture. Given this premise, organizations should adopt the following recommendations to improve the value system gap between leaders and followers:

- share corporate values;
- assist students with self-discovery; and
- model the way of proper cultural values.

Every individual has a critical role to play in improving magnet schools in various urban areas. In addition, leaders need to model the right values to students. School leaders such as principals and teachers have an immediate impact on school culture. Hackman and Johnson (2000) explained that leaders exert a great degree of influence in an organization; therefore, leaders must take more responsibility for the overall direction of the organization.

Currently, school culture perpetuates second-class citizenship of urban children by treating them as insignificant. Magnet schools in urban areas offer incentives to attract suburban white children in order to desegregate these schools yet leave predominately white schools in the suburbs untouched. In these magnet schools, white students are often in a PWS format where they are isolated from the majority population of black and Hispanic students, thereby creating an informal caste system. Many times, administrators and teachers are forced to be in urban schools against their will. This forces them to deal with little resources, unsupportive parents, rebellious students, and a lack of energetic support from school board officials. Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* stressed the importance of teacher efficacy in parent involvement in school activities. Efficacy relates to the teachers' beliefs that they can teach, that their students can learn, and that they can access a body of professional knowledge when they need it. Therefore, if teachers do not believe in the students, it creates an unhealthy "self-fulfilling prophecy" environment.

Parents and guardians are major contributors to the success of children in school. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) maintained that parental decision making about school involvement occurs in both an explicit and implicit manner. Furthermore, parents are often reflective, aware, and active in their decisions to become involved in their child's education. Unfortunately, there has been too little research focused on parent involvement in schools. However, quantitative studies imply that it is a critical step in educational performance (Lareau, 1987). Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* suggested with good teacher-parent interaction, there is improved student achievement, improved student behavior, lower student absenteeism, and more positive attitude toward school. However, meeting this objective is extremely difficult for inner city schools. First, several factors prevent urban parents from getting involved at school: lack of time, limited opportunities for involvement, and indifferent or antagonistic attitudes on the part of the school staff (Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 1987). Furthermore, the parent's lack of education may also be a contributing factor in disengagement of parents with teachers.

Lareau (1987) argued that many of these studies subscribed to the culture-of-poverty thesis, which suggests that lower class families do not value education as highly as middle class families. This prescribed outlook creates bias in the parent-teacher interaction.

However, Lareau's research of two contrasting schools with different communities revealed something different. In the poorer district, parents with less education turned the educational responsibilities over to the school and had less involvement while the more educated parents in a more affluent district viewed their children's learning as a partnership with the schools. They were heavily involved. Contrary to popular belief, both parents valued a good education. Lareau's research demonstrated that the level of parental involvement is linked to the class position of the parents and the social class position of the parents, and to the social and cultural resources available to different social classes in American society. Middle-class status provides parents with more school information and promotes social ties among parents in the school community (Lareau, 1987). Therefore, parental involvement is connected to school culture and affects how both student and parent will be treated and accepted in the academic institution.

Any discussion of culture and the school system would be incomplete without some consideration of attitudes. Students need to have a positive attitude for success. While some may see many things to praise in hip-hop culture, the negative attributes which foster bad culture in public, urban schools cannot be ignored. Postmodern influences on attitude are clearly seen in urban subculture where its followers are characterized by:

- questioning everything;
- viewing truth as relative;
- valuing relationships over institutions;
- valuing the ability of storytelling; and
- demonstrating emotion and experience (Smith and Jackson, 2005).

Black students associate learning and making good grades with being white because it is viewed as supporting the overall majority system. Beachum and McCray (2004) declared that values dictated by negative hip-hop culture and the media often conflicts with school values because students often bring these values to school. Furthermore, it is complicated by the composition of school leaders and student bodies. In most inner city schools, there is a conflict between (female?) teachers, who are predominately white and black male students. Since slavery times, there has been a peculiar relationship between black males and white females in America. This reality is heightened in inner city schools where individuals seem powerless over their circumstances.

In fact, Ingraffia (1995) maintained post modernism leads Millennial students to reject hierarchically defined organizational knowledge and resist the notion of organizationally defined truth developed by school leaders. Finally, although pop culture attacks the heart of traditional organizations and provides an avenue for organizational conflict between school leaders and students, school culture can affect student identity (Beachum and McCray, 2004). Therefore, the creation of a positive school culture fostering a positive value system in students may offer some hope for improving the lives of students in inner city communities (Table I).

6. Strategic implication: lesson learned for future magnet schools

Schools across the country can benefit from understanding the nature of magnet schools. Wong (2008) maintained that the US school system has undergone significant changes due to addressing policy fragmentation with the adoption of the NCLB Act. Many states have also identified the need for educational reform. For example, California received \$3.1 billion in economic stimulus funding to reform schools and align academic standards with other states (Mehta and Blume, 2009). This magnet school study has significance ramifications for future schools in urban areas (Table II). The paper found the following key issues:

- magnet schools have numerous mission goals that prevent them for having a clear strategy;
- magnet school structures should be customized for the specific communities and promote parental involvement; and
- magnet schools instruct students who are heavily influenced by pop culture values and challenge traditional values in the school culture.

Table I.
Current magnet school climate

Strategy	Structure	Culture
Multiple goals and objectives	Ineffective leadership	Unhealthy learning environment for students
Unclear vision	Centralized, bureaucratic system	Parents and guardian detached from school
Polarizing racial environment	Harsh, urban environments	Unsupportive administrators and educators in urban areas
Inconsistent financial resources	Large learning environments for students	

Table II.
Magnet school findings and recommendations

Findings	Recommendations
Magnet schools have numerous mission goals that prevent them for having a clear strategy	Magnet schools should have only one or two goals to achieve so that they can be more effectively monitored and guided toward the achievement of focused goals Magnet schools should build on multiracial schools in ways that improve the quality of schools without eroding the benefits of cultural diversity
Magnet school structures should be customized for the specific communities and promote parental involvement	Magnet schools should seek to foster a culture that is more closely supportive of the institution's vision School systems should seek to determine if it is a better option to develop charter schools in lieu of magnet schools
Magnet schools instruct students who are heavily influenced by pop culture values and challenge traditional values in the school culture	Magnet schools should seek to create school culture where parents can be involved Magnet school should communicate formally and informally the organizational values to employees on a routine basis

Several recommendations for improving magnet schools were offered which include:

- magnet schools should have only one or two goals to achieve so that they can be more effectively monitored and guided toward the achievement of focused goals;
- magnet schools should seek to foster a culture that is more closely supportive of the institution's vision;
- school systems should seek to determine if it is a better option to develop charter schools in lieu of magnet schools;
- magnet schools should seek to create school culture where parents can be involved;
- communicate formally and informally the organizational values to employees on a routine basis; and
- magnet schools should build on multiracial schools in ways that improve the quality of schools without eroding the benefits of cultural diversity.

The following strategic implications emerged as a result of this investigation and are offered to enhance the effectiveness of magnet schools:

- Magnet schools should have only one or two goals to achieve which will bring greater focus and increase opportunities for effective monitoring and achievement of set targets.
- Magnet schools should seek to increase a culture that is supportive of their vision.
- School systems should seek to determine if it is a better option to develop charter schools in lieu of magnet schools.
- Magnet schools should seek to create a school culture where parents can be meaningfully involved.
- Communicate formally and informally the organizational values to employees on a routine basis.
- Magnet schools should build multiracial schools in ways that improve the quality of schools without destroying the inherent benefits of cultural diversity.

Internal, strategic, and generic benchmarking tools were used to formulate these strategic implications. Benchmarking tools can be categorized by the purpose of their function within the benchmarking process. However, benchmarking tools were either prescriptive (prescribe a solution) or descriptive (describe a solution) based on the benchmarking data. Regardless of tools, this process has generated an outcome for magnet schools to move beyond its current state. These strategic implications can now become best practices for magnet schools thus giving students competitive advantage as they prepare for college or work environments.

7. Conclusion

In 1968, *Kerner Commission Report* (Eisenhower Foundation, 2009) remarks:

By 1985, the Negro population in central cities is expected to increase by 72 percent to approximately 20.8 million. Coupled with the continued exodus of white families to the suburbs, this growth will produce majority Negro populations in many of the nation's largest

cities. The future of these cities, and of their burgeoning Negro populations, is grim [...] This trend will continue unless important changes in public policy are made.

Recently, society must recalibrate its efforts to give equal opportunity for all as it again deals with segregation in America's public schools.

This requires a critical evaluation of magnet schools programs in order to meet the pressing needs of students trapped in urban environments. Political leaders, academics, and parents must be willing to make hard choices in this situation. If they are to be successful then magnet schools need a clear focus. The jury is still out on whether an innovative structure can help integrate schools; Renzulli and Evans (2005) suggested that school choice and charter school options may have future consequences for racial integration given the potential of white flight similar to the 1960s.

The benchmarking application of these recommendations could help increase the success rate of urban schools by modifying traditional magnet schools. More significantly, adoption of these recommendations will feed into broader policy initiatives and specific efforts to reduce the widening gap between urban and suburban students in America.

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