



# Data & Accountability Department

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## **WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM MAGNET PROGRAM REVIEW: 2011-12 FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY**

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In response to a request made by the Superintendent of the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) and the Wake County Board of Education, the WCPSS Magnet Programs Office initiated a review of the district's magnet programs. One of the data collection methods employed by the Magnet Program staff included conducting focus groups with a variety of stakeholders. The primary purpose of the focus groups was to obtain comprehensive feedback on the current magnet program objectives, gather input on other possible objectives, and identify methods of magnetizing and demagnetizing schools. The Magnet Program staff and the Data and Accountability Department (D&A) staff collaborated in the planning, implementing, and facilitation of the focus groups, which were conducted between March and June of 2012. This bulletin synthesizes the focus group discussions by identifying common themes across the different stakeholder groups. The focus group results presented in this bulletin are intended to be one component of the comprehensive Magnet Program evaluation.

### **METHOD**

The Magnet Program staff felt that it was important to gather feedback from a diverse population of individuals who all have a stake in the district's magnet programs. As such, they collaborated with D&A staff to conduct focus groups with a wide range of stakeholders, as shown in Table 1. A total of 244 people participated.

Groups with a large number of participants were divided into smaller focus group settings. For instance, magnet school coordinators were divided into two groups: 1) elementary and 2) middle and high. Magnet school principals were similarly divided. The Superintendent's Summit consisted of members from the Superintendent's Leadership Team, Wake Education Partnership, and WCPSS principals, teachers, support staff, and parents. This group was divided into focus groups with approximately 10 representative members. Wake Education Partnership facilitated the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce focus group which was divided into four group settings: 1) Apex, Fuquay-Varina, and Holly Springs; 2) Cary and Morrisville; 3) Garner, Raleigh and Wake Education Partnership Boards; and 4) Knightdale, Wake Forest, Wendell, Rolesville, and Zebulon.

Participants of each focus group were asked a similar set of questions and the discussions were transcribed and summarized by Magnet Program staff and D&A staff. The focus groups with the Division of Principals and Assistant Principals and WCPSS High School Student Council Presidents were conducted somewhat differently in that respondents were asked to provide written feedback to the questions. All focus group discussions were summarized and participants were told that all individual responses would be kept confidential.

**Table 1**  
**Focus Group Participants (N= 244)**

Stakeholder Focus Groups		Number Participating
Central Services	Area and Assistant Superintendents	11
	Central Service Administrators	10
Schools	Division of Principals and Assistant Principals	5
	High School Student Council Presidents	6
	Magnet School Coordinators	30
	Magnet School Principals	27
Parent and Community Groups	Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce Members	46
	Parents from the Wake County Board Advisory Committees	14
	Superintendent's Summit Members	95

## RESULTS

The questions posed in each focus group gave participants the opportunity to provide feedback on a variety of issues pertaining to WCPSS Magnet Programs. First, participants discussed the relevance of the current Magnet Program objectives and were asked to propose other objectives. Second, participants talked about whether there is a need to create more magnet schools and had the chance to suggest factors that should be considered when magnetizing and demagnetizing schools. The major themes that emerged from the discussions pertaining to the major topics are presented below.

### *District Magnet Program Objectives*

The focus group discussions began by reviewing the current Magnet Program objectives.

WCPSS Magnet Programs will continue to be an important mechanism helping to:

- Reduce high concentrations of poverty and support diverse populations
- Maximize use of school facilities
- Provide expanded educational opportunities

Participants were then asked to share their thoughts on what the Magnet Program objectives should be in the district. Generally, focus group participants supported the current Magnet Program objectives. A common theme across the focus groups was the importance of using magnet schools to help reduce high concentrations of poverty and support diverse populations, although participants were unsure of the impact the current student assignment policy might have on the standing of this objective. Participants also supported the objective of providing expanded educational opportunities; however, they discussed the complications of marketing the

unique opportunities that students might gain from magnet school attendance compared to other schools such as Global Schools, STEM Schools, and Renaissance Schools. Comments from participants revealed the need for creating a distinct description of magnet schools and clearly communicating their purpose to the public and other stakeholders.

Middle and high school magnet coordinators and central office administrators mentioned the possibility of emphasizing the magnet pathways or theme continuation across grades K-12 in the Magnet Program objectives. Members of the Superintendent's Summit spoke about the importance of using the district's magnet programs to help increase the utilization of schools that are under enrolled. Consideration of what criteria are needed to receive federal funding was also mentioned by Chamber members and parents.

### *Student Achievement as a Magnet Program Objective*

Members of each focus group were invited to comment on whether student achievement should be explicitly stated in the Magnet Program objectives. In general, there was consensus among all stakeholder groups that magnet schools should support student achievement, although there were differences in opinion on whether it is necessary to specify this goal as one of several Magnet Program objectives. For instance, area and assistant superintendents, magnet school principals and coordinators, members of the Division of Principals and Assistant Principals, members of the Superintendent's Summit, Chamber members, and parents typically thought that it was unnecessary to highlight student achievement within the Magnet Program objectives because magnet schools are under the umbrella of WCPSS, which promotes the academic achievement of all students. Central service administrators thought that student achievement should be specifically stated as an objective.

Central service administrators, magnet school principals and coordinators, and parents did discuss the preference of using student growth as an indicator of student achievement rather than proficiency. Promoting the academic growth of *all* students who attend a magnet school was also central to the discussions of central service administrators and parents. Magnet school principals and coordinators also suggested that achievement could be measured in other ways that might be tied to the theme of the magnet school or 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Area and assistant superintendents spoke about their expectation that magnet schools should enhance the district's standards through program offerings.

### *A Need for More Magnet Schools*

Focus group participants were asked to respond to the question "Is there a need to create more magnet schools?" Members of the Superintendent's Summit were especially divided on this issue with about half in favor and about half opposed to creating more magnet schools. Chamber members also provided varied views. That being said, a generally expressed opinion among focus group participants was to focus on supporting and enhancing the current magnet schools rather than simply creating new ones, especially given the district's current economic status. Participants also expressed concern about the effect that the innovative efforts being promoted in non-magnet schools will have on current magnet schools and suggested the need to define and even reinvent magnet schools. Parents were particularly concerned with the potential impact of

the new student assignment policy on magnet school applications and speculated about whether families favored or opposed a K-12 feeder pattern.

### *Creating New Magnet Schools*

Focus group participants mentioned some common factors that should be considered in identifying new magnet schools: the popularity and demand of program themes and the location of the school; and whether magnet status would increase the school's utilization by drawing students from other locations while also meeting the educational needs of the surrounding community. Chamber members and parents were supportive of creating more magnet schools in peripheral parts of the county.

Other important points were brought out by several focus groups. Magnet school principals and members of the Superintendent's Summit mentioned that current magnet program objectives should be used to identify whether there is a need for a new magnet school. Elementary magnet school coordinators and members of the Superintendent's Summit stated that new magnet schools should be created to establish a K-12 pathway for program themes.

### *Demagnetizing Schools*

Focus group members suggested a range of factors that could be considered when removing themes or programs from the magnet schools. Some of the comments that were mentioned included considering how competitive the magnet theme is compared to other types of non-magnet schools such as Global and STEM schools, how the demagnetization of a school might impact the K-12 programmatic pathway, and whether the magnet theme is still a draw for parents. Another consideration brought forth by participants was whether the magnet schools are meeting current magnet program objectives.

Area and assistant superintendents, Superintendent's Summit members, Chamber members, and parents mentioned looking at whether a magnet school was being fully utilized and whether the program is drawing applicants and creating a balanced student population given the demographic composition of the neighborhood. They also thought it important to consider how a withdrawal of the magnet program would impact the school, especially in terms of student academic performance. Members of the Superintendent's Summit mentioned looking at the costs of certain programs.

## **CONCLUSION**

The focus group interviews afforded the various stakeholders an opportunity to discuss the current state of the Magnet Program as well as its future. Although the results from qualitative research methods, like focus group interviews, do not allow for generalization, the emerging themes and general comments yielded from the discussions should inform conversations and decisions about the issues under consideration. These results, taken together with the other data collected and presented, have the potential to yield information that may help to bolster the district's magnet program in its efforts to support the students of WCPSS.