



## “A Bigger Factor Than Realized”: Parent Perceptions of Magnets Concerning Residency, Proximity, and Transportation

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**Abstract:** Public magnet programs offer pathways for parents to exercise school choice, students to increase achievement, and districts to increase student diversity and equity. This qualitative study investigates the parent perceptions that shape decisions for magnet application in a metropolitan district with a thriving lottery-based magnet program. Drawing on 23 interviews with parents, we identify several findings about parents’ perceptions of magnet programs. First, parents lacked knowledge about the lottery and assignment process; moreover, parents felt that they lacked choice and that the location of magnets precluded their consideration; and finally, sacrifice was perceived to be required due to the limits of transportation. Those from the district had deeper historical knowledge about how the magnet application worked and the role residency played in the process; whereas those who were newer to the area expressed confusion. We find that concerns about school proximity and available

transportation were near ubiquitous factors and the location of magnets precludes their consideration as viable options for those not proximate to them. Our findings suggest that magnet programs benefit from targeted transportation measures, intentional school siting policies, and strategic information campaigns that communicate magnet intentions and processes.

**Keywords:** magnet program; magnet school; school choice; proximity; transportation

### **“Un factor más importante de lo que se cree”: Percepciones de los padres acerca de las escuelas *magnet* en relación con la residencia, la proximidad y el transporte**

**Resumen:** Los programas públicos *magnet* ofrecen a los padres la posibilidad de elegir la escuela, a los alumnos la oportunidad de mejorar su rendimiento y a los distritos la posibilidad de aumentar la diversidad y la equidad entre los alumnos. Este estudio cualitativo investiga las percepciones de los padres que influyen en las decisiones de aplicar al programa *magnet* en un distrito metropolitano con un próspero programa *magnet* basado en sorteos. A partir de 23 entrevistas con padres, identificamos varias conclusiones sobre las percepciones de los padres con respecto a los programas *magnet*. En primer lugar, los padres no conocían el proceso de sorteo y asignación; además, los padres sentían que no tenían opciones y que la ubicación de los programas *magnet* les impedía considerarlos; y, por último, percibían que era necesario hacer sacrificios debido a las limitaciones de transporte. Los padres del distrito tenían un conocimiento histórico más profundo sobre cómo funcionaba la inscripción en los programas *magnet* y el papel que desempeñaba la residencia en el proceso, mientras que los que eran más nuevos en la zona expresaron su confusión. Observamos que las preocupaciones sobre la proximidad de la escuela y el transporte disponible eran factores casi omnipresentes y que la ubicación de las escuelas *magnet* impedía que se consideraran opciones viables para quienes no vivían cerca de ellas. Nuestras conclusiones sugieren que los programas *magnet* se benefician de medidas de transporte específicas, políticas intencionadas de ubicación de las escuelas y campañas de información estratégicas que comunican las intenciones y los procesos *magnet*.

**Palabras-clave:** programa *magnet*; escuela *magnet*; elección de escuela; proximidad; transporte

### **“Um fator mais importante do que se imagina”: Percepções dos pais sobre escolas *magnet* em relação à residência, proximidade e transporte**

**Resumo:** Os programas públicos *magnet* oferecem caminhos para os pais exercerem a escolha da escola, os alunos aumentarem o desempenho e os distritos aumentarem a diversidade e a equidade dos alunos. Este estudo qualitativo investiga as percepções dos pais que moldam as decisões para a candidatura ao programa *magnet* num distrito metropolitano com um próspero programa *magnet* baseado em sorteio. Com base em 23 entrevistas com pais, identificamos várias conclusões sobre as percepções dos pais em relação aos programas *magnet*. Primeiro, os pais não tinham conhecimento sobre o processo de loteria e atribuição; além disso, os pais sentiam que não tinham escolha e que a localização dos programas *magnet* os impedia de considerá-los; e, finalmente, percebiam que era necessário fazer sacrificios devido às limitações de transporte. Os pais do distrito tinham um conhecimento histórico mais profundo sobre como funcionava a inscrição em programas *magnet* e o papel que a residência desempenhava no processo; enquanto aqueles que eram mais novos na área expressaram confusão. Constatamos que as preocupações com a proximidade da escola e o transporte disponível eram fatores quase onipresentes e que a localização das escolas *magnet* impedia que fossem consideradas opções viáveis para aqueles que não moravam perto delas. Nossas conclusões sugerem que os programas *magnet* beneficiam de

medidas de transporte direcionadas, políticas intencionais de localização de escolas e campanhas de informação estratégicas que comunicam as intenções e os processos *magnet*.

**Palavra-chave:** programa *magnet*; escola *magnet*; escolha da escola; proximidade; transporte

## **“A Bigger Factor Than Realized”: Parent Perceptions of Magnets Concerning Residency, Proximity, and Transportation**

Student assignments to public schools are often, by default, based on residency (Lareau & Goyette, 2014). However, public school districts may offer options for families to enroll their children voluntarily in a school of choice that is not based on their residency. Magnet programs are one of the original school choice options and are characterized by unique academic offerings along with goals to increase diversity and equity and reduce minority group isolation (Archbald, 2004, Magnet Schools of America, n.d.). While some magnet programs emphasize their unique curricular offerings and more heavily weigh admissions toward those who are academically competitive (Ayscue & Siegel-Hawley, 2018; Finn et al., 2012), other magnets emphasize student diversity and weigh admissions to achieve a desegregated learning environment (Goldring & Smrekar, 2000).

Magnet schools have the potential to attract students from other parts of a district that are not residentially proximate. When sited in areas with large shares of low-income students of color, the design of magnet schools can promote desegregation by drawing in students from other, especially affluent, neighborhoods (Betts et al., 2015; George et al., 2023; Grant, 2009; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013; Parcel & Taylor, 2015).

Existing magnet research has largely focused on desegregation (Ayscue et al., 2023; Bifulco et al., 2009; Blank et al., 1983; George & Darling-Hammond, 2021; Pflieger & Orfield, 2024; Rossell, 2003; Straubhaar et al., 2021) and academic outcomes (Betts et al., 2015; Bifulco et al., 2009; Gamoran, 1996; Wang et al., 2018). While school choice research has examined how and why parents choose in other school choice contexts (Jabbar & Lenhoff, 2019; Roda & Sattin-Bajaj, 2023; Villavicencio, 2013), previous studies have not specifically investigated how residential proximity and access to transportation shape magnet school choice. It is also important to investigate the role of parent knowledge in the school choice process, given that parents may know little about viable options and the magnet application process (Cuddy et al., 2025).

To understand factors that promote and preclude participation in this application process, it is essential to consider parent perceptions regarding magnet programs. While parents' decision making around the broader landscape of school choice has been well researched (Jabbar & Lenhoff, 2019; Roda & Sattin-Bajaj, 2023; Villavicencio, 2013), research specific to magnet programs is limited (Nelson, 2016). Our study is a direct answer to the call for additional research concerning magnet implementation considering factors such as transportation, parent communication, and the application process (Nelson, 2016) and contributes to the continuing line of inquiry investigating disparities between the intentions of magnets and their implementation in practice.

For this study, we pose two research questions. First, how do parents perceive the magnet lottery process? Second, what factors preclude or promote magnet consideration as a viable school choice option? Drawing on 23 interviews with parents, we find that concerns about school proximity and available transportation were near ubiquitous factors for parents when considering magnet programs. Furthermore, because of the location of schools, those who lived closer to the historical downtown center of the school district and the historically affluent north and west side of the district perceived magnets, as well as charter and private schools, as viable options. In contrast, those in the northeast or south and southeast corners of the district perceived that magnet

programs, and other schools of choice in other sectors, were inaccessible. Those who were from the district had a deeper historical knowledge about how the magnet application process worked, and those who were not native expressed confusion about school choice in general. Many newcomers to the district did not understand the lottery processes of the magnet program.

Our findings suggest that magnet programs benefit from targeted transportation measures, intentional school siting policies, and strategic information campaigns that communicate magnet intentions and processes. By providing new insights into how parents perceive one unique form of school choice—magnets—our study illuminates previously unknown nuances about factors shaping parents' perceptions, such as familiarity with magnet programs and level of appetite for negotiating magnet benefits with transportation logistics.

Furthermore, our study contributes to evaluations of district-provided transportation on magnet school enrollment, which is essential to know how to mitigate barriers to equitable access to public schools of choice. What is known about parent concerns surrounding transportation is largely based on studies in the charter school sector (e.g., Hashim & Sattin-Bajaj, 2023; Marshall, 2017; Riel, 2021). Our study focuses on parents considering magnet schools, the role of residency in the application process, and parents' concerns about school proximity and availability of transportation. This study contributes to the need for additional research into parent understanding, perceptions of public school transportation, and subsequent public school choice (Singer & Lenhoff, 2025).

## **Literature Review**

As this study is particularly interested in magnet programs, we review literature about magnets and how they contrast with other schools and integration efforts. We also examine the literature on how parents balance relative proximity to their residency with available transportation, among other factors, when choosing a school. Finally, we contextualize the literature with what is already known about the study site concerning the district and transportation that may be acting on parents' perceptions.

### **Magnet Characteristics**

Magnet programs are housed in public schools and are designed to reduce racial isolation and incorporate thematic curriculum to provide for the diversity of student learning needs. These programs are sources of both voluntary integration and regulated school choice and are often open to applicants across a district or even between districts. In practice, and with this mission in mind, magnets recruit students throughout or even across districts, effectively bypassing school zones and potentially mitigating residential segregation (Frankenberg, 2013; Reardon et al., 2006). Many magnets are initially funded by the Magnet Schools Assistance Program, a federal initiative which has expanded criteria for inclusion beyond the original desegregation intention to include professional development, rigorous coursework, innovative curriculum, and socioeconomic diversity (George & Darling-Hammond, 2021). Because of these added criteria, not all magnet programs have retained integration as a priority; however, the magnet programs that have remained committed to desegregation have similar characteristics including a lottery-based admission, a relevant and desirable theme, provision of transportation, and community outreach to recruit a diverse set of applicants (Ayscue & Siegel-Hawley, 2019).

As part of their effort to foster integrated learning environments, magnets are designed to provide specialized curriculum to meet the diverse learning needs of students. To meet this mission, school boards have traditionally placed magnet programs in low socioeconomic neighborhoods to capture the local population and attract higher income students from outside the school's original attendance boundary by providing enticing themes or curriculum, such as International

Baccalaureate, dual language immersion, or leadership (Golding & Smrekar, 2000; Smerkar & Honey, 2015). Another type of magnet program, called destination magnets, has been located in higher socio-economic areas and attracts students from lower socio-economic areas (Betts et al., 2015).

### **Parent Perceptions of Magnets and Magnet Lotteries**

Local environments may play into parental perceptions of magnet programs. Riel and colleagues (2022) found that the public's support of magnets differed by location and was correlated with a district's historical opposition or support of desegregation efforts. Another differentiator in support for magnets was found along socio-political lines, with citizens who believed that districts should consider what is best for all children, even if policies upset some parents, favoring magnets (Parcel & Taylor, 2015; Riel et al., 2022). This suggests that when residents supported the notion that schools should promote the common good, magnets also received more support. Domina et al. (2021) found that when a district implemented a plan to incorporate parental choice and integration efforts, white students, more than any other subgroup, ended up in majority white schools. These results implied that parental choice contributed to overall segregation patterns, even if it reduced racial isolation for some students (Carlson et al., 2019; Domina et al., 2021).

What little is known about parent perceptions of magnet lotteries is deduced from magnet applications by those who have already entered a magnet lottery. For example, parents who declined a magnet or public choice school offer through Connecticut's Regional School Choice Office lottery cited a lack of information about the application and lottery process as one reason for declining the offer (Cobb & Connery, 2021). Studies about districts' choice school application processes (Faude, 2024) and magnet lotteries (André-Bechely, 2004) found that application processes and magnet lotteries unintentionally perpetuated existing inequities by virtue of their structure. No studies have specifically asked parents about the factors that precluded or promoted their application to a magnet lottery. Our study seeks to provide a foundation for this body of literature.

### **Choice, Proximity, and Transportation**

Two key aspects of local environments may influence what school a parent chooses for their child: a school's proximity to their residency and transportation. While the constraints of school proximity have been documented in the broader education literature (Bell, 2009; Bonilla-Mejia et al., 2019), existing research has not yet examined this phenomenon with regard to parent perceptions of magnet programs. Parents preferred schools that were geographically proximate to their residences but also were willing to sacrifice proximity for a school that met the students' needs as they got older (Bell, 2009). However, convenience has been found to be a preferred factor over academics when it comes to public school choice (Bagley et al., 2001; Hastings et al., 2005; Prieto et al., 2018).

Given that students from a wider geographical area can attend schools of choice, differences in access to transportation can exacerbate inequities. Evidence from New York City suggested that transportation played an important role for Black and Hispanic students attending choice schools. In Cordes and Schwartz's (2018) study of school choice and transportation in New York City, Black and Hispanic students were more likely to attend significantly better schools if they used the school-provided transportation. However, school-provided transportation in public schools of choice could increase barriers to access if the location of the schools was far away and the bus ride was onerously long (Bierbaum et al., 2020).

Given that most choice schools are not in a student's neighborhood, one of the most pervasive barriers to public school choice is residential proximity and logistics surrounding available transportation (Sattin-Bajaj, 2018). Studies have shown that parents were willing to travel further to enroll their child in schools of choice, especially if school transportation was available (Glazerman &

Dotter, 2017; Teske et al., 2009). However, even if transportation was provided but bus rides were long, parents were less likely to participate in school choice (Edwards, 2022; Stein et al., 2020). While much of the school transportation literature with regard to school choice has examined charter schools (Cordes, 2018; Hashim & Sattin-Bajaj, 2023; Sattin-Bajaj, 2022), a few studies specifically considered magnets. One study explored the effect of available school bus transportation on proximity of a district choice school, such as a magnet, to a student's residency. Using New York City data, Trajkovski and colleagues (2021) found that proximity to a school mattered, and if school transportation was available, there was an average 1.4 percentage point increase in likelihood of enrollment. One of the only studies focusing on transportation and magnet school attendance found that magnet school students were more likely to take school provided transportation than any other type of transportation (Wilson et al., 2010). However, there were significant differences by age and race, with older and nonwhite students even more likely to participate in school bus-riding (Wilson et al., 2010). Given the unique design of magnets that are intended to draw students from across geographic areas, it is not yet known whether parents' broader perceptions about proximity and transportation concerns would hold true for magnets as well.

### **Context of the Study Site**

The location for this study is a district with a well-established, award-winning magnet program nested within the public school system. Acceptance into the magnet program is lottery based, and siblings are given priority enrollment. Additionally, the magnet program seeks to promote integration and does not employ competitive admissions. Rather, magnets are traditionally located in low-socioeconomic areas of the district and give priority enrollment to applicants who reside in higher socioeconomic residential areas through a voluntary weighted lottery application process. Because this study is part of a larger project answering a call for more research to understand existing thoughts, perceptions, and motivations before a parent chooses to apply to a magnet (Wang & Herman, 2017), we specifically consider the district's magnet lottery process when asking parents about their perceptions.

The site of our study has been a national leader in magnet programming since the 1980s. Currently, the district is one of the largest school districts in the nation and the largest in its state. With almost 200 schools, over a quarter have magnet programs. Themes of the magnets range from leadership and technology to gifted and talented to International Baccalaureate. Furthermore, the district is experiencing resegregation, but the presence of a strong and nationally acclaimed magnet program can be a mechanism for integration if parents utilize magnets and choose to enroll their students. Parents in the district are invited to participate in a voluntary lottery-based magnet application process, but a child's de facto enrollment is almost entirely dependent on their address.

Transportation is provided to students who live beyond one and a half miles from their assigned school unless that assignment is from a parent-requested transfer, in which case transportation is not guaranteed. Children in kindergarten and first grade must have an adult meet them at the bus stop. All magnets provide some level of transportation. Some provide neighborhood busing, meaning regular stops nearer to students' homes and drop-offs at one school. Others only provide express busing, meaning that parents are responsible for a portion of the transportation to a central meeting location. Buses picking up from central meeting locations drop off at multiple schools and often take longer than neighborhood busing. The district has recently been struggling to hire enough staff to run bus routes in a timely fashion, resulting in students arriving at school late and returning home long after the school day has ended.

## Methods

To provide an in-depth description of a phenomenon within its context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), this descriptive qualitative study is bound by location and time. We explored parents' perceptions of and experiences with magnet programs in one school district during the 2023 calendar year.

### Site Selection

We purposefully selected the district due to the strength and growth of its magnet program. The public school district encompasses the entire county, and at the time of this study, student enrollment was approximately 160,000. The district has received Magnet Schools Assistance Program grants from the federal government totaling almost \$100 million and awards from Magnet Schools of America (MSA) for top ranking magnet schools. During the course of this study, the district was awarded additional funding from the Magnet Schools Assistance Program to add two more and revise two existing magnet programs.

The district also has a strong reputation for providing public and private schools of choice. As such, there were almost 100 private schools and approximately 25 charter schools located across the district during this study's timeline. At the time of data collection, the district held the largest number of both private and homeschooled students in the state with an estimated 14,000 homeschooled students and over 21,000 private school students in the 2021-2022 school year. The district is located in a state with a voucher program and at the time of data collection, approximately 60% of the private schools located in the same county accepted the state voucher.

### Participant Selection

Seeking a diverse sample of participants, we posted flyers at libraries, parks, YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, community centers, and private businesses across the metropolitan area. We also handed out flyers at a centrally located park during a weekend when several community events were happening simultaneously. We chose sites and events to maximize the range and diversity of potential participants. We placed flyers in areas frequented by parents on both weekdays, weekends, and evenings and with an aim to achieve maximum variation of race, socioeconomic statuses, and residency across the urban area.

We utilized Meta platforms to post the same recruitment flyer. The largest group of Meta users are female and between the ages of 25 and 55, but given that mothers are more likely than fathers to respond to social media inquiries and make schooling decisions for their children, we theorized it would prove to be a successful tool. Following the methods of prior research using Meta as a recruitment platform (Medley-Rath, 2019), to mitigate sampling bias concerns, we took the algorithm into account. Specifically, we created and used a new profile to distribute the flyer and we conducted searches for groups with multiple internet provider addresses, both within and outside the district. We made posts on public and private school parent and affinity groups. Additionally, the district's incoming kindergartener parent group continually ran the flyer at strategic times, such as when the magnet lottery deadline was approaching, as well as before and after the lottery decisions were announced. We also ran a paid Meta advertisement for eight weeks to an audience geographically bound to the site and age bound to 22-65 years.

Participants primarily identified as married women between the ages of 35 and 49 years old, with more than one child, and had a higher educational attainment such as an associate's, bachelor's, or master's degree, except for one participant who had a high school diploma and two who were not married. Most participants were white ( $n=17$ ), with six participants identifying as Asian, Latina, or Black, and most ( $n= 15$ ) claimed income between \$100,000 to \$299,000, with four claiming more

than \$300,000 and four claiming less than \$100,000. All but one of the participants ( $n=22$ ) had applied or had considered applying for the magnet lottery for at least one of their children. More than half of the participants ( $n=13$ ) reported replying to a Meta post or ad about the study which helps explain the skewness of our participants' characteristics.

### Data Collection

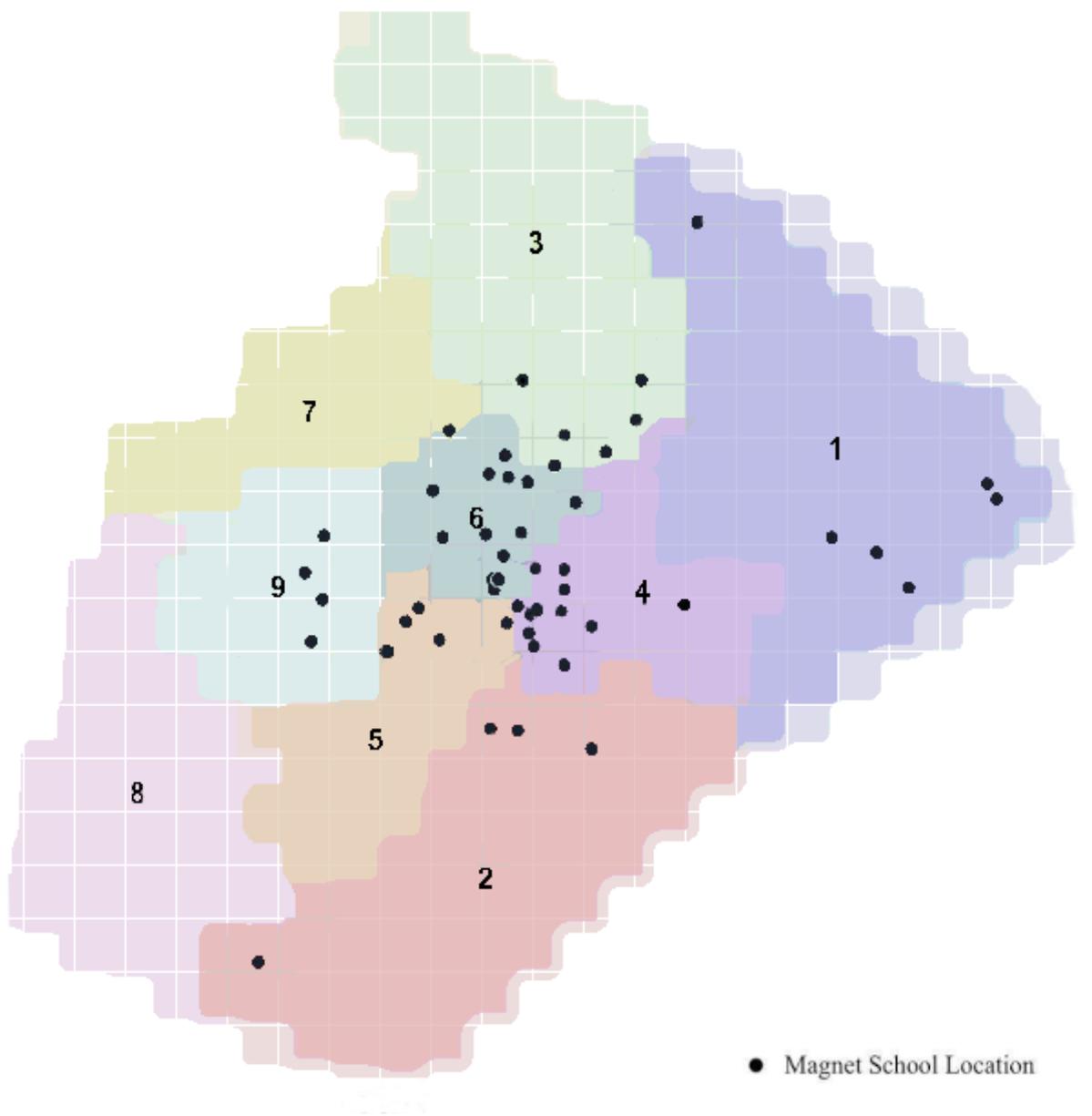
Semi-structured interviews took place via Zoom or by phone call and lasted between 40 minutes and 2 hours, with the mean, median, and mode all approximating 1 hour. Some interviews were conducted before and some were conducted after the magnet lottery was completed and magnet program assignments were announced. This process occurred during the winter months between the fall and spring semesters. Therefore, because data collection occurred across the months-long lottery process, at the time of their interview, some participants did not know where their child or children were attending school for the next school year while some did. Questions explored the following topics: approach, desires, and factors affecting school selection; knowledge about magnet programs and the process for applying to magnets; experience with the application and admissions process; beliefs about magnets' reputations, benefits, and challenges; and perceptions of how well magnets achieve their goals. Participants were not fiscally compensated for their participation. Interviews were audio recorded and human transcribed.

To be able to corroborate participants' understanding of available options near them, we created maps from publicly available information about locations of all school options within the footprint of the school district, including charter, private, magnet, and public schools. Figure 1 shows one such map, with magnet program locations by school board district, that was helpful to visualize the landscape when parents were discussing proximity, available school options, and transportation logistics. The study site is a single school district governed by a school board made up of nine elected officials who serve the constituents of their designated district within the whole school district. Using participants' postal codes, we determined their corresponding school board district and input it as a descriptor. The map shows the concentration of magnet programs near the center of the school district and the differing sizes of the school board districts. For example, Districts 4, 5, 6, and 9 are centrally located, geographically the smallest, and among them, contain most of the district's magnet programs ( $n=36$ ). In contrast, Districts 1, 2, 3, 7, and 8 are geographically large and spread out, at the edges of the district, and contain relatively fewer magnets ( $n=14$ ).

A descriptive table with characteristics of each school board district within the district contextualizes the public school conditions participants may be most familiar with as these data are from those district schools closest to their residence (see Table 1). Because each magnet application is dependent on socioeconomic status of the applicant's residency, assigned school, and sought school, the descriptors for Title 1 school count and free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) percentage provide an idea about the overall socioeconomics of each school board district. For example, District 8 has 24% FRPL, zero Title 1 schools, and zero magnet schools, while District 1 has 54% FRPL, 18 Title 1 schools, and four magnet schools. Additional differences indicated on Table 1 are discussed in the findings.

**Figure 1**

2023 Public School System Magnet Programs, by School Board District



Note. District boundary lines were blurred for de-identification purposes.

**Table 1***Characteristics by School Board District, 2022-2023 School Year*

District	<i>n</i> Schools	Student Enrollment	Student/Teacher Ratio	% FRPL Eligible	% White Students	% Black/Hispanic Students	<i>n</i> Magnet Programs	<i>n</i> Title 1 Schools
1	23	19,789	14	54	32	61	4	18
2	23	17,795	14	53	35	52	4	15
3	21	35,698	15	47	42	49	5	10
4	21	48,783	12	49	37	53	11	17
5	19	64,182	14	47	40	50	6	8
6	22	14,106	12	40	49	44	15	8
7	21	32,963	15	29	45	35	1	3
8	21	56,322	16	24	53	29	0	0
9	26	16,956	14	27	44	30	4	8

Source. CCD Public school data 2022-2023 school year.

Note. Student/Teacher Ratio is an average across all schools in that district. The ‘Title 1 Schools’ column is a count of schools that received any Title 1 funding across all categories.

### Data Analysis

We began memoing during data collection (Patton, 2014), meeting frequently to discuss the collection and analysis process. Using Dedoose, a data analysis program, we applied attributes to each transcript, allowing a comparison of responses across participant characteristics. The demographic characteristics we attached were participant race and ethnicity, age, education, marital status, employment status, district nativity, annual household income, and residential postal code. We also included participants’ number of children, children’s race, ethnicity, and grades in school.

Next, we applied an indexing technique to obtain a snapshot of the data. Indexing creates codes for each interview question, which “anchor[s] the content to the interview protocol” and by which frequencies can be determined (Deterding & Waters, 2018, p. 722). Index codes indicated residential location, the types of schools participants’ children had ever attended, the types of schools considered for these children, and if transportation or proximity were a factor in these considerations. Indexing allows a multi-member research team to see repetitive relationships among possible concepts. Index codes included six categories with a collective of 72 fields for: participant demographics, information sources, schools considered, schools attended, school choice factors, and lottery process perspectives.

Finally, we used inductive coding for emergent findings. Our three inductive codes included: (1) factors affecting school decisions—with proximity, transportation, information, and student age as sub-codes; (2) the magnet lottery process—with prioritization, process, and knowledge as sub-codes; and (3) the purpose of magnets—with choice, quality, and location as sub-codes. Through an additional cycle of coding, we identified relationships among the indexed and inductive codes, allowing for reduction and refinement of excerpts into four thematic categories of knowledge, choice, transportation, and sacrifice. For example, the thematic category of knowledge included the indexed codes of participant demographics, information sources, and perspectives, and the inductive codes of information, knowledge, process, and prioritization. These thematic categories ultimately led to our four findings.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

Being cognizant of credibility, we became familiar with magnet and parent perceptions literature (Patton, 2014). Regular team meetings allowed critical peer review addressing accuracy and potential bias, ensuring a systematic approach to all stages of the study. Finally, a thick description of the findings, in the participant's own words, adds to the study's authenticity and trustworthiness. Participants were identified using self-chosen pseudonyms.

### **Limitations**

Participants' shared perceptions and experiences may have been limited by the interview protocol and length. The sample was drawn from those who had seen or heard of the study and voluntarily completed the interview without compensation for time or effort. These parameters may have precluded participation of all who were eligible, most importantly, those who do not have the privilege of time or money to engage in voluntary, uncompensated studies. This may explain why the sample identifies as predominantly married, educated, and white. Furthermore, a majority of the sample ( $n=15$ ) reported an income between \$100,000 and \$300,000 and as such may have the resources to better navigate school choice options than those with less income.

### **Positionality**

We engaged in reflections on our own positionality through all stages of the study. Through this process, discussions about each member's consciousness, understanding, and cultural framework allowed us to uncover assumptions and biases as the study developed. Each of the researchers identifies as white, female, and non-native residents of the study site. Two are parents, and during the year of data collection, one was undergoing the same magnet application and school decision-making process as the participants, while another had done so in the past. We acknowledge our own subjective positionality in the context of this study.

## **Findings**

We identified four findings about parents' perceptions of magnet programs. First, parents acknowledged they lacked knowledge about the district's magnet lottery and student assignment process, and they expressed a desire to know more about how it works. Second, there was an overall perception by parents that they lacked choice. Third, parents believed that transportation mattered to school choice viability. Finally, parents felt that even if they won the magnet lottery, a sacrifice would be required on their part or the part of their children in order to access the program due to limited transportation and location of the schools with magnet programs.

## **Wishing to Know More**

There was a split between those who knew and considered how the district prioritizes magnet seats prior to choosing a residence and those who did not know the system or take it into consideration. The participants who used their knowledge to choose where to live in the school district were either from the area, had social connections who shared knowledge, or worked for the school system. Those who did not know about the residency considerations of the magnet lottery process or found out about them after deciding where to live were either not from the area or did not have prior connections to the district. Many newcomers expressed they thought they had equal access to all school options simply by choosing to live within the district borders but then found out differently. When Alexi described applying to and not receiving a spot in the magnet program, she explained why saying, "After the fact, I found out that it's based on your address."

Residents from the area expressed making informed decisions when choosing where to live and so subsequently won magnet lottery seats for their children. Because Sara was from the district and knew the school system, she bought a house in District 3 to increase her school options, "I was fairly sure we had good odds to get something on our list, but I wasn't really sure which [magnet program] we would get." Jennifer moved to the state to work for the school district and learned exactly where to buy a house in District 6:

We also knew that that house had a high chance of getting into a magnet school because it was in that high priority and high base population, and so that did play a role...we were aware of that factor, that that house would open up some opportunities for school choice within the county when we bought it.

Those who did not understand the magnet lottery prioritization expressed regret in not knowing. "I wish I would have thought of [the magnet lottery] before buying this house," Monica reflected as she spoke about moving to a neighborhood in District 2. Faye found out after moving to District 1:

...the lottery system is based on priority of your zip code. So, we didn't really know that when we were moving to the state, and you know, maybe that would have made a difference in where we chose to live.

Parents who did not have connections or insider knowledge and who were not from the area felt their chances of attending a magnet were low due to their uninformed choice of residence.

Some expressed needing to look outside of the local public school district, into charter, private, and homeschooling, to give their children school options rather than send them to the traditional district school. Anna had tried for several years to enroll her children in a magnet program but was never picked for the lottery. She felt this was a result of her District 5 zip code not being desirable for magnet enrollment. She enrolled her children in a private school with the help of a scholarship, but she also moved to a more desirable traditional school zone in case she lost the scholarship and had to return her children to the public school. Charlie expressed similar sentiments. She moved to the border of District 8, close to the neighboring district, but expressed choosing this school district over the other due to its positive reputation. However, had she known more about how residency determined access to the magnets, she said she may have considered the next district over again. Sarah said similarly that she moved to the district for the award-winning magnets but that they were not an option in reality due to their neighborhood prioritization, which was an unknown factor to her prior to moving:

We didn't know that it was a bit of a scramble to try and figure out where your kid would go....So when we got here, and what we've seen happening over the last few years, it was quite a surprise and a bit of a regret.

These parents felt that their full range of school options was limited due to their lack of knowledge.

The school district made the process of the weighted lottery system publicly available on its website by stating the purpose of the magnet programs and the prioritization of seats assigned in the lottery. Some parents remembered receiving emails and mailers advertising the lottery deadline. Others mentioned learning more about the process through magnet fairs and school tours. However, understanding the process was not intuitive to families if they were not already familiar with the historical intention of magnets and the nuances of socioeconomic statuses of particular neighborhoods within the district. Charlie expressed her confusion by ideating that the district could help by explaining more about the different types of schools available:

I feel like they could just have, like almost a little quick spark notes version of all these, or cheat sheet version of all these different schools. That way when they are sending out all these emails about these different schools it'll make their emails make a little bit more sense to people who don't understand. Like, I'm not like, you know I like to think I'm intelligent. But sometimes when they're talking about all the different schools, I feel a little bit lost.

In this school district, magnet applications were considered slightly differently according to certain schools, but in general the lottery prioritized students from district-ranked high-income neighborhoods who were assigned to schools that were also ranked with high socioeconomic status. Parents in our study had different perspectives of the magnet lottery system depending on their level of prior knowledge. Those who knew about the magnet lottery before choosing a residence maintained their high regard for the magnet program. Those who did not know about the magnet lottery before choosing a residency found they did not have a high chance of winning a magnet seat and therefore felt disadvantaged by the application process.

Findings about the perceptions from asymmetric information are exclusive of information about school performance measures such as test scores. Most participants ( $n=13$ ) acknowledged being aware of or looking up schools' test scores through means such as the state report card; however, more than half of these ( $n=7$ ) discredited or downplayed the importance of this factor when considering a school for their child. Only six participants considered test scores as a deciding factor, while 10 did not mention school performance scores as a factor in their decision at all.

### **There is No Choice**

Either because of or despite their level of knowledge about magnets, all but one participant said they had considered or would consider magnets as a school option for their children at some point. Magnets were generally perceived to be desirable educational options. Marilyn summed up the sentiment saying, “[magnets have] lots of options...the band, the orchestra, the choir, drama...and also great STEM programs...robotics and all that stuff, like the arts and academics.” Furthermore, magnets were even more appealing as public schools. As Marilyn added, “the idea of [magnets] being public education is actually very attractive, like... the diversity and being a part of their community, I think that's important.”

However, there was a discernible difference in the perception of the availability of these school options, including magnet programs, according to the residential location of the participant. Some parents perceived a lack of equitably located magnets in the district, feeling that magnets and other school choices were located in a quickly gentrifying downtown and wealthier areas. Those in Districts 1, 2, 5, and 8 expressed a lack of choice. These four districts collectively had 14 magnet programs and District 8 had none (Table 1). Districts 1, 2, and 8 were also located at the

edge of the district and were experiencing the effects of new development and recent urbanization (Figure 1). Parents in Districts 1, 2, 5, and 8 expressed that location was a primary factor when making a decision. While magnet programs were advertised by the public school district, because of the location of these programs, parents in these districts felt no real options beyond their base traditional public school or homeschooling existed. “So, location turned out to be a pretty big challenge, because there's not a whole lot of other options right where we are,” Lauren spoke of her neighborhood in District 5. Parents who resided in school board districts with the least number of magnet programs expressed similar sentiments.

These disparate perceptions were encompassed in the experiences of Laurie, located in District 2, and Violet, located in District 9. Both districts served approximately 17,000 students and had four magnet programs. However, the districts differed regarding FRPL and number of schools receiving some federal Title 1 funding. As shown in Table 1, District 9 had eight Title 1 schools and 27% of their student population received FRPL, while District 2 had 15 Title 1 schools and 53% FRPL.

Both Laurie and Violet had children who experienced bullying and reached out to administrators at the school and district level to find solutions. Violet, in District 9, successfully received a transfer to a magnet nearby, while Laurie, in District 2, did not receive a transfer waiver. She applied for and received a state-funded voucher that provided public money to be used toward private school tuition but was not able to use it. All the private schools near her required statements of faith that did not match her family's religion. She ended up homeschooling the child who had been bullied. Laurie was very clear in her perception, “I've tried so many times to get my kids in any other school, but they have deliberately classed my neighborhood as low socioeconomic status. So, I can't get into any magnet schools.” The lottery system for magnets prioritized students who were already assigned to a school with a designated high socioeconomic status and who lived in areas designated with high socioeconomic statuses. The intention behind this lottery strategy was to allow high income students to transfer to a magnet program in a lower socioeconomic area of the district, and hence the magnet program's enrollment would become more socioeconomically desegregated. Laurie and Violet's differing residential characteristics may have played a role in whether their similarly motivated transfer application was successful.

Many parents in school board districts with fewer magnets also could not find charter or private options near them and subsequently felt left out of all school choices. Lauren in District 5, the largest district serving 64,000 students and housing six magnets, admitted, “I came to realize we're very location bound and like that, just really limited what we could consider and do.” Jenny, in District 8, which had no magnet programs and was located at the edge of the district, expressed a similar sentiment in no uncertain terms, “Residents [here] have always complained about this process, and, like [we're] kind of getting short shift (sic) a little bit...” Parents like Lauren and Jenny, who were not prioritized by the magnet lottery system, had an opinion that the district was not transparent about who was advantaged by the advertised options.

Parents in Districts 1, 2, 5, 7, and 8 perceived that private and charter schools were also not located to their advantage and that the entire landscape of school options in the district was skewed toward Districts 3, 4, 6, and 9. Lauren in District 5, with five magnets and 10 Title 1 schools, expressed that the distance of options precluded the viability of enrollment, saying:

Location was a struggle both for magnet and private....It almost has to be as easy or even easier to make that work and it always felt like it was actually harder with a magnet option or a charter option.

Jenny in District 8, with no magnets, had also looked at school options beyond the district assigned school and found that while “there were some other schools in the county...their distance kind of precluded considering them seriously.” Magnet programs in the school district were concentrated in the historical and centrally located downtown of the district. However, urban development was happening on the edges of the school district, leaving an asymmetrical experience of magnet viability depending on which school board district families lived.

Parents in Districts 3, 4, 6, and 9 perceived a greater availability of magnet programs. Sara was not concerned about school options or getting into a magnet program because she lived “close to downtown and a lot of the magnets we are interested [in] are within like 10 to 15 minutes.” Sara lived in District 3 and as Table 1 indicates, her district plus Districts 4, 6, and 9 housed 35 of the 50 magnet programs available in the school district. As is shown in Figure 1, all these districts were centrally located near the historical urban center.

### **Transportation Matters**

Transportation was a priority for participants when considering viable school options. Several parents expressed that while there were schools other than their assigned public school that were a good fit for their child, they did not consider these schools due to the distance from their home or because of the need for self-provided, school, or public transportation, which was not conducive to their family’s scheduling or logistical needs. Catherine in District 1, which had four magnets, 18 Title 1 schools, and 54% FRPL, summed up this sentiment with, “I’ve known so many people that don’t choose magnet schools because of the transportation.” This perspective was consistent across participants from very different districts including Monica in District 2, with four magnets, 15 Title 1 schools, and 53% FRPL, and Natalia in District 8, with zero magnets, zero Title 1 schools, and 24% FRPL, who shared that transportation was “a bigger factor than...realized.”

Parents also expressed concerns with not being able to depend on the school system for transportation and cited long ride times, staffing shortages, and changes to bus stops as factors that contributed to their perception. Natalia, from District 8, said, “I just wanted to make sure that whatever option we chose [was] something that I could sustain if the buses weren’t available.” During the course of this study, the district was struggling to retain bus drivers and keep routes going. Participants felt this constraint, then adjusted, and subsequently made decisions independent from the school system’s transportation to maintain stability and dependability in their transportation needs.

One of the adjustments parents expressed making was a compromise between school location and family logistics. If an assigned school, which was usually proximate to residence, was perceived to be good enough already, there was no incentive to figure out more complex or complicated transportation to a magnet. Participants expressed this sentiment in terms of convenience. Charlie in District 8 looked no further than down the road, “We have no reason to switch their elementary school. I mean, it’s right here.” Faye, in District 3 with five magnets, 10 Title 1 schools, and 47% FRPL, took school proximity into consideration when buying a house so that transportation was not needed, “The convenience of having that school less than a mile from us was important in that decision.” Marilyn from District 6, the smallest district by enrollment and with 15 magnets “didn’t look at anything further than 15 minutes away,” because it was “just too inconvenient to go so far.” However, parents like Ariel in District 2 and Francis in District 1 expressed the inconvenience of driving “halfway across town” to access a magnet. School board Districts 1 and 2 were on the edges of the district and were geographically larger than the others.

The prioritization of residential proximity and transportation was more prominent with parents of younger children, who acknowledged safety as a concern. When speaking about

elementary-aged children she knew, Lauren in District 5 said, “I mean just thinking about putting your kindergartener on a public school bus is a little scary. My heart always breaks for them a little bit when they're spending all day on a bus.” Sarah, of District 2, found that, “Especially out this way, [they] would be on the bus for so long. It seemed like, even if it was offered, it wasn't really an option.” And Taylor in District 7, on the edge of the district and with one magnet, was adamant, “I'm not going to put a 5-year-old on the bus for an hour and a half in the morning and an hour and a half in the afternoon.” These parents were not willing to sacrifice long commute times, but perceptions of what was worth sacrificing to gain access to school options was another finding that emerged from the data.

### **Sacrifice is Necessary**

Parents expressed that when children become older and the educational stakes become higher, they may consider sacrifices to access educational opportunity. This sacrifice could come in the form of time commitment to commuting by the parent or the child, moving residences, or not having shared experiences with other neighborhood children; however, these sacrifices were seen as palatable if the educational opportunity was worth the cost. Taylor in District 7 expressed that she would be open to sacrificing commute time and a long bus ride if her child had “an opportunity to really embrace an environment that's uniquely challenging for them, and if the programming was worth it.” Several parents expressed similar sentiments with Anna explaining, “I was willing to drive anywhere that I felt was the best option, and that's the reason why we ended up choosing magnets.” But Anna, who lived in District 5, never won the magnet lottery.

Therefore, moving residences was also a sacrifice parents were willing to consider in order to access school options. Jennifer, who ended up moving from District 9 to District 6 after her son was accepted into a magnet program, knew before entering the lottery this sacrifice was necessary: “So we realized that we were going to be driving him or moving in an area that had neighborhood transportation.” Sarah in District 2, whose son did not win the magnet lottery, but who had a disability which prevented her from driving, was willing to make the same type of move: “We would probably move to be closer to wherever he ended up going to school, if he had gone into one of the magnets.” What some participants, like District 2 residents Ariel and Laurie, realized is that where one's residence was located was the predominant factor in school option viability. Therefore, even in a school district with lots of choice, they were seeking to move to access options.

Children's time and social needs were also held in balance with age, availability of transportation, and logistical considerations such as childcare. As previously discussed, there was a question with several participants as to whether the sacrifice of public school bussing was worth it for younger children. Parents also expressed doubt if going to a magnet program was worth the effort if younger children had not yet expressed an interest in or affinity for a particular theme. As Eleanor put it:

Magnet schools are a specialized school, right? They focus on an area, whether that be Spanish language, dance, science, mathematics, and it's really hard when they're younger to pigeonhole them. When they're young, it's good that they get exposed to everything, and then you can start in more on that specialization as they get older.

Parents had a perception that magnet programs were more worth the sacrifice as children progressed in their schooling. Laurie explained that:

At the elementary level, magnets are not much of a priority. Middle school is where we find that we begin to wish we could have our children in a magnet school, so that they have more opportunities. But high school is where it really feels like a priority.

There were parents who were convinced of the value differential between their base school and a magnet at all levels of schooling, and that any amount of time sacrificed was worthwhile. Charlie, in District 8, felt:

If you had the chance to send your kids to a school like that, why wouldn't you want to take it? Like even, okay, fine, you're gonna have to ride the bus for half an hour today. So, take it. Like, that's a great opportunity. Like, why would you not want to give your kids the best opportunity, the best start in life that you can?

Similarly, Anna, who believed she has never won the magnet lottery because of her residence in District 5, shared her background and experience:

I learned from my parents. They spoke very little English, and they fought until I went to a high school that was better than where I was, and that was an hour and a half away from our house that I had to do for four years....So you can imagine, to me, [proximity] is not a barrier if the quality of education matters, right?

Anna also shared that her parents' sacrifice came after learning about educational opportunity, something they regretfully did not know about for her older sister. Anna applied every year to the magnet lottery and was willing to drive as far as she needed if she ever won a spot for her children.

## **Discussion**

This study examined 23 parents' perceptions of magnets during the winter and spring of 2023. For magnet programs to succeed as public tools for integration, it is essential for parents to voluntarily enroll their students in these public schools of choice. By focusing on magnet programs, we have contributed to the conversation about parents' perceptions of school choice and barriers to accessing schools of choice, namely transportation, proximity, and the role of residency in the lottery process. Despite the prominence of magnets across the country, a foundational contribution of our study is that parents do not fully understand what magnets are or how they work. Our study also provides unique insight into a tension that exists regarding enrolling young children in magnets, when they have the greatest chance of enrollment, but when parents have the least appetite for enrolling children in schools located further from their residency. Finally, our study unveils how a lottery application process can preclude participation by parents otherwise attracted to magnet programming. This is consistent with a recent analysis of Chicago's public school choice lottery, which suggests that lottery application processes can even preclude participation in public schools altogether (Cuddy et al., 2025).

We were surprised to find that—in a school district with such an abundance of award-winning magnet programs—parents expressed experiencing information asymmetry. This experience was not similar for all and differed by familiarity with the school district's processes rather than by other demographic factors such as income. Lack of information or limited access to inaccurate information also partially explained why location played an important role in choice of residency. Parents who were in the know were aided by enrollment systems based on residential location and individual action and interest (Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2018). Our analysis finds that parents' knowledge and understanding of the magnet lottery resulted in a feeling that their children were advantaged or disadvantaged by the options the public school system provided. Parents with disadvantaged perceptions sought options outside of public district schools in the form of charter, private, and homeschooling.

Parents' feelings of advantage or disadvantage were exposed when sharing their perceptions about student age and magnet consideration. Parents shared that the two unique aspects of magnets—that they are intended to draw students across the district but therefore require longer travel times and that they have themes that offer specialized curriculum—are considerations for not enrolling younger students in magnets. However, this logic may limit parents' choices due to the way the magnet enrollment process works. Most seats are available in kindergarten and then it is more difficult to get into magnets later. Parents expressed a willingness to sacrifice for a longer commute when children are older but did not seem to connect that the chances of getting into a magnet would be lower in higher grades. Exposing this tension in parental perceptions and magnet lottery calculations is a unique contribution to the literature.

Our analysis of perceptions of magnets found that parents who were located further from a concentration of magnet programs felt there were limited schooling options. Residential proximity and transportation played a prominent role when examining school options. The site locations in relation to applicants' residency determined if schools were viable choices. While charter schools and private schools do not intentionally seek to draw students from across large geographic areas, this feature of magnet programs is unique among the broader set of school choice options, and it underscores the importance of exploring perceptions about transportation related specifically to magnet schools.

While magnets enjoy differentiation from other school options by their provision of transportation, they are often located further from residences, making transportation an important factor for student enrollment. When magnets provided school transportation, they were more likely to fulfill their intention to promote integration (Frankenberg et al., 2008; Weinstein et al., 2022). Additionally, with school-provided transportation for magnets, parents—especially those of color—were more likely to enroll their students (Smrekar & Golding, 1999). However, our study adds that simply the availability of school-provided transportation is not enough to mitigate consideration of a school further from a residency.

Transportation availability and transport time mattered greatly to parents, especially to those with younger children because the length of the bus ride was also weighed as a deciding factor. Like Wilson and colleagues (2010), we found differences in viability of bus riding by age of student, but as Bierbaum and colleagues (2020) theorized, residential proximity determined length of bus ride, which factored into parents' perceptions of magnet accessibility. We found that when a district was experiencing difficulties with transit time efficiency (Ayscue et al., 2023), parents made adjustments to schooling decisions. Our study further contributes to this line of inquiry by connecting how parents interpreted transit times to perceptions of the viability of all school options, not just magnets. While parents were willing to sacrifice their or their child's commuting time and logistical complexity, parents deemed sacrifice as worthy if the fit or quality of the school was apparently better than a more convenient option. A systematic review of school transportation and academic achievement reflects these sentiments, showing that the negative experiences of long transit may be mitigated by the positive experiences of attending a higher quality school (Hopson et al., 2022). Parents may be willing to drive a further distance to meet a student's need or interest or to find a school that "fits" their student (Bahena et al., 2015).

## **Implications**

Parents need more information about public school choice options in plain language. Lack of familiarity is a barrier when making decisions about one's student. Magnets are not so ubiquitous across the nation or globe that knowledge of their history, intention, purpose, and lottery process

can be assumed. Rapidly expanding districts serving diverse populations can target information to manage perceptions of new residents, highlighting the total landscape of school options, differences between these options, and processes for their consideration (Parcel & Taylor, 2015). Expanding access to information will mean investing in greater community engagement through social media posts, local news articles and advertisements, flyers in public spaces such as parks and libraries, and representation at local businesses and public events targeting certain student populations. To reach new residents, just as Pasadena United School District has done, magnet programs can create custom one-pagers for real estate sites and groups that can then pass along the information to new parents moving into the district (Miyake-Trapp, 2018). However, targeted information campaigns alone may not be enough to change parent perspectives or magnet accessibility (Cuddy et al., 2025); other limitations to access, like relieving limited district-provided transportation and onerous lottery processes, must be simultaneously addressed.

Given that proximity to residency and availability of transportation are unanimous factors for parents' consideration of schools, and that accessible school transportation increases public choice school enrollment (Singer & Lenhoff, 2025), districts with magnet programs should prioritize investing in efficient and reliable bussing service to magnets. The Federal Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 eliminated previous restrictions that prevented the use of federal school transportation funds to support school integration (Francies & Kelley, 2021). Increased funding will likely improve transportation reliability and routes and act as a policy lever that could incentivize parents to consider magnet schools. Given that transportation is costly and many districts have additional human resource challenges, partnerships with existing public transit routes may be one part of a solution to provide more and shorter bus routes to school for older students (United State Department of Education & United States Department of Transportation, 2024). Other creative solutions recommended by school transportation professionals to increase service may include adding van routes, contracting with alternative providers, or even reimbursing parents for their mileage (Huggett, 2025).

Another policy lever is the strategic consideration of future magnet program locations. During the course of this study, the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) issued grants to promote diversity and increase educational choices. Grants such as these can be used to strategically transition schools to magnet programming in areas previously not served by innovative public education options. With the help of such a grant, our study site district is in the process of establishing two new magnet programs in District 1. These new magnets will be located in a part of the school district that was of concern to our participants regarding accessible school options. Because easing minority group isolation and increasing equitable access—such as transportation—are two of the six key components of MSAP, districts should specifically consider each when planning future magnets and applying for MSAP grants (United States Department of Education, 2025).

Though many magnet programs run traditional lotteries, meaning they prioritize high income students from high socioeconomic schools, destination magnets should also be established (Morrill et al., 2023). Destination magnets pull students the other way and give priority choice to low-income students usually assigned to low-income schools. In a 7-year study comparing traditional and destination magnets, results measuring increases in student achievement and diversity were mixed, indicating that one magnet model is not statistically preferable over the other (Betts et al., 2015). Therefore, establishing destination magnets can increase opportunity for enrollment across a district's socioeconomic spectrum. Increasing the chances for parents in low-socioeconomic areas to win the lottery can achieve the integration aims of the magnet program while promoting the perception that magnets are an equitable choice across socioeconomic statuses and residencies in a district.

More research is needed on how magnet lotteries are implemented, how parents are engaging with and perceiving magnet applications, who is not, and why. For example, a case study mapping district communications alongside parental decision matrices could inform what information districts disseminate, if parents receive the information, how they perceive it, and ultimately how they act upon the information. Our findings suggest that magnet programs cannot assume that the community knows about them, their intention, or how they enroll students. As such, our study contributes to a new line of inquiry questioning discrepancies within public school choice enrollment systems between how they are intended to work and how they actually work and for whom (Cuddy et al., 2025).

Simply the existence of public schools of choice such as magnets does not ensure equitable access despite the positive regard and desire parents may have for them. Magnet programs depend on parent participation in the application process and parents want to apply for and enroll their children in these innovative, integrated educational options. However, factors that preclude or promote this participation are in place from the moment parents decide where to live. From understanding about the lottery process to considerations of residency, school proximity, and transportation logistics, parents perceived that magnet programs were inequitable and favored those who had fiscal or informational capital. Our study contributes novel insights to what is known about how magnets are perceived by parents in the current context of expanded school options.

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