

 **VIGNETTE: If You Build It, Will Students Come?**

*Purpose:* Reflecting on the experiences of district staff across the country can help you think strategically about student recruitment for your program. In particular, these vignettes may be useful for surfacing assumptions about how you intend to reduce minority group isolation.

*Source:* These vignettes are drawn from interviews, discussions, and documents from various districts across the country, including St. Paul Public Schools, MN, and Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, NC.

**Discussion Questions**

1. How does your experience of parent perceptions about magnet schools compare with those from **Vignette 1**? What particular challenges do you face in attracting target populations to your magnet schools?
2. In reviewing the district administrators' assumptions in **Vignette 2**, why is it important to surface such statements in the planning stage of a program? What implications does it have for successful implementation of a magnet program that reduces minority group isolation?
3. How does **Vignette 3** illustrate the need to surface assumptions related to recruitment that might change over the course of a three-year implementation period? Have you accounted for differences in assumptions and related strategies between year one and year two of program implementation?



## If You Build It, Will Students Come?

**Background:** Historically, magnet schools have been seen as vehicles for voluntary desegregation and, in fact, a primary objective for magnet programs is reducing minority group isolation. Often, district staff assume that creating or converting a school into a magnet with a new theme will instantly attract diverse families; in other words, “If you build it, they will come.” But as those who plan and implement marketing and recruitment activities can tell you, this assumption needs to be carefully analyzed as you develop your magnet program.

### Vignette 1

#### Composite of various urban district administrators’ comments (Summer 2008)

“Parents from high socioeconomic backgrounds often have misconceptions about the schools that house our magnet programs and this keeps them from sending their children there. So you can’t just have an ‘if you build it, they will come’ mentality where you think that simply implementing a magnet school program will decrease the negative reputation of the school and the students who attend it. In our district, parents are asking school administrators, ‘Why do you keep putting the good programs in the bad schools?’ When making plans for recruitment and marketing, it’s critical to address public perceptions and factor in parents’ notions of urban schools if you’re going to be successful in attracting your target population.”

#### Questions for reflection

1. How does your experience of parent perceptions about magnet schools compare with those from Vignette 1?
2. What particular challenges do you face in attracting target populations to your magnet schools?



## Vignette 2

### St. Paul Public Schools, MN

In the process of writing their 2007 Magnet Schools Assistance Program grant to establish two new magnet schools, district administrators derived the following assumptions, or pre-conditions, they believed to be necessary for developing a successful magnet program in their particular context.

Outlining the pre-assumptions early in the program planning process ensured that reduction of minority group isolation remained a focus of the project and received adequate attention and support. During implementation of the magnet program, this included staffing and training for teachers in the Student Placement Center to help families navigate the enrollment and application process.

- The project must describe specifically **how** the high-quality magnet program will attract more white students to the school.
- The project must show feeder patterns into the school — from other schools within the district, charter schools, private schools, or suburban schools.
- The district must have strong policy components in place to support the establishment of the magnet project (e.g., enrollment policies and procedures; weighted preference for enrollment).

#### Questions for reflection

1. In reviewing the district administrators' assumptions in Vignette 2, why is it important to surface such statements in the planning stage of a program?
2. What implications does it have for successful implementation of a magnet program that reduces minority group isolation?



### Vignette 3

#### Interview with Kim Morrison, Magnet Director, Winston-Salem/Forsyth, NC (July 24, 2008)

Philo Middle School was converted into a magnet as part of a turnaround effort. This summer we sat down with them and looked at their recruiting data from year one. We told them that they only recruited 20 kids, compared with the other two new magnet schools, which were able to recruit over 250 students each. **But** of the 20 sixth-graders Philo recruited, 18 were white. And before last year, they only had 18 white students in the entire school.

So, we looked at everything in the school's action plan in the first year and we asked, which part of the recruitment plan worked, and what didn't? The staff thought the night that people came in for dinner was successful because we were able to bring in a cohort of prospective white parents and kids into a situation where there were lots of other students, a diversity of students: whites and Hispanics and blacks, and they all interacted and dialoged with each other. And at dinner, we actually got to discuss what it was like to come to a school that's largely minority students, and how they would be able to get a high level of education with the magnet theme, international technology. And so at the end of the night, we ended up with 18 folks who were able to say "we are going take a chance from this school."

And so, while we only had 20 kids recruited at Philo that first year, 18 of them were white, which basically doubled the number of white kids we have in the school. And what we've found from previous experience is that once you get a cohort of kids in there, then you can continue to grow those numbers. And it's important for them to hear the testimony of parents and students, which pulls them into the schools and gets them to believe in success and achievement. It's difficult to recruit before that cohort emerges. So this year, we made adjustments to our action plan, and decided that we need to really build our underrepresented groups of parents and kids and make a strong case for why they would want to come down to our program to create diversity. And even though we may have a few less marketing and recruiting events next year, we probably impact more parents because we are more aware of our target population and the strategies that work with them.

#### Questions for reflection

1. How does **Vignette 3** illustrate the need to surface assumptions related to recruitment that might change over the course of a three-year implementation period?
2. Have you accounted for differences in assumptions and related strategies between year one and year two of program implementation?