

 **VIGNETTE: Building a Case for Program Change**

Purpose: You can use your evaluation findings on magnet program implementation—and its impact on student achievement—beyond your magnet school sites. This vignette describes how one district’s evaluation findings were used to build a case with the board and superintendent to start a new magnet school.

Source: Interview with Michael Bell, Assistant Superintendent for Specialized Programs, Curriculum and Instruction, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, FL, August 5, 2008.

Questions for Reflection

1. Data were used to convince the Miami-Dade County school board of the benefits of beginning a new school of choice. What other policy decisions might your school board be making for which data from magnet evaluations would be useful?
2. The Miami-Dade County school board was interested in data on a program’s impact on student achievement, as a means to justify starting a new school of choice. What other magnet school evaluation data might a school board request to inform this decision?
3. Are there magnet program findings that your school board might value for other purposes?



Building a Case for Program Change

Background: Michael Bell is the Assistant Superintendent for Specialized Programs, Curriculum and Instruction, Miami-Dade County Public Schools. This district has a long history of creating schools of choice, including receiving Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) funding in both 2004 and 2007. In this interview, Bell describes how district staff used evaluation findings to influence the school board to support a new school of choice.

Whenever we take new programs to our school board for approval, they want some guarantee of a return-on-investment. We do have data such as the amount of parent demand for magnet programs, based on the length of waiting lists. But the other data they want is the program impact on student achievement. And we can only provide that assurance by looking at achievement data from existing magnet programs. We have to show not just that magnet schools are improving, but that student subgroups are also doing well. It takes some pretty compelling data to persuade the board to expand school choice options to serve other kids in the district.

A successful example is Ada Merritt Elementary School. The school had been planned and funded for construction when it was needed in that neighborhood. But because demographics change so much in south Florida—as a consequence of construction, hurricanes, and other factors—by the time the school was finished, it was no longer needed. So we basically had a new school that was going to open terribly underenrolled. And, if we fully enrolled it, it would further underenroll the surrounding schools. So the concept of a commuter school came up, in which parents, because the school was located in the downtown area, could drop their kids off at school as they were commuting to work and pick them up afterwards. We figured that parents in target families would either be leaving fairly high-performing schools in the suburbs, or would be taking their kids out of lower performing schools.

The big question we got from the board, and wisely so, was: What's your guarantee that this program will be successful? Going back to our data, our answer was the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program. We have the data there in terms of what it was doing for student achievement for all subgroups, as well as the data showing that there were big waiting lists wherever it was offered.

So all of that data really helps the Board get behind what could have just seemed like an experiment without the data. We pretty much went into it knowing that we had all of the pieces to make it a success.