Magnet Programs

March 2024

Background

This brief offers a partial overview of the district's magnet program due to inadequate comprehensive data collection and tracking mechanisms. Key findings and recommendations will be presented, focusing on critical areas requiring attention and enhancement based on the compiled data. The evaluation is crucial for assessing program effectiveness and determining its alignment with objectives. The magnet programs evaluated included Math, Science, VPA, International Studies, 3DE, Engineering, Healthcare, and IT, along with the two standalone programs at Global Impact and Innovation Academies.

The evaluation sought to uncover the present status of magnet schools within Fulton County Schools. Additionally, during the evaluation process, documentation revealed discrepancies between the perception and actual implementation of magnet programming. Over the years, management has predominantly been site-based with considerable autonomy, necessitating a systematic approach to policy development based on the evaluation's insights.

Evaluation Questions

1) What is the **goal and purpose** of the magnet program?
2) What is the **target population** for each magnet program?
3) What **services** are offered to address student needs?
4) What is the **structure and organization** of each magnet program?
5) What **resources** are placed into the magnet programs that align with their mission?

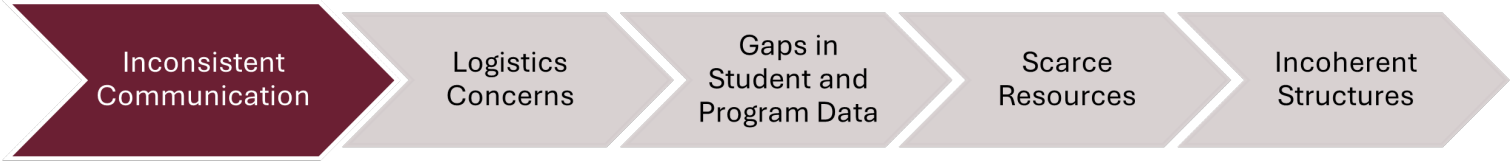
Methodology and Data

This evaluation is a program theory evaluation, which is conducted to establish the foundation for future endeavors and determine what actions should be taken. This evaluation focused on gathering feedback from staff members, including magnet coordinators, principals, and assistant principals, regarding their perceptions of the existing magnet programs in their schools. The evaluation team conducted six focus groups to gather feedback data. The data collected from these focus groups was recorded and organized into thematic categories.

Additionally, the evaluation examined concrete factors such as funding mechanisms and existing student tracking systems to identify disparities. Financial data was sourced from the budget and finance department, while student data was extracted from the student tracking system Infinite Campus.

Results

The patterns in the data highlighted five thematic findings: inconsistent communication, gaps in student and program data, logistics concerns, incoherent structures, and scarce resources. Collectively, these findings highlight the root cause of inconsistent communication among stakeholders.



Inconsistent Communication

Effective communication among stakeholders is crucial for the success of the magnet program. However, the evaluation uncovered a pattern of inconsistent communication district-wide.

Pattern of Inconsistent Communication:

- Among schools and the district
- Between schools and parents
- Within school buildings and programs

Limited Capacity as a Primary Cause:

- Participants note limited capacity contributes to inconsistent communication
- District liaison support appreciated, but leadership and Coordinator of Academics-Specials burdened with complex roles

Lack of Necessary Information:

- Leadership lacks information to maximize effectiveness due to communication gaps
- Schools and participants feel isolated, perceive program as fragmented and paperwork-heavy
- Despite recruitment efforts communication, staff often feel unsupported and face resource shortages

Disparities in Communication:

- Inconsistent communication regarding the defined purpose of the magnet program
- Variability in purposes among and within schools
- Understanding complex programs poses challenges due to inconsistencies

Absence of District-wide Mission and Vision:

- Notable absence of a district-wide mission, vision, and clear purpose for magnet programs

Student and Program Data Gaps

Effective data management is paramount for program success; however, the evaluation highlights significant gaps in the fidelity of capturing both student and program data. Incomplete datasets impede the program's capacity to evaluate its effectiveness, pinpoint areas for enhancement, and make data-based decisions. Ineffective data management stems from the district's failure to communicate reporting requirements to coordinators and administrators clearly. The lack of communication might be attributed to a deficiency in policies and protocols.

Competing processes have emerged due to program data gaps, leading to manual tracking and the creation of custom "magnet flags." Specifically, for the fiscal year 2024, data from budget and finance indicated a total of 3,353 Magnet Students and 1,266 3DE students. However, this data lacks essential demographic information for magnet students, academic records, and other program identifiers. Data entry for individual magnet programs relies on manual input by school data clerks and magnet coordinators. This shortage of data stems from coding discrepancies within Infinite Campus and a lack of clear policy regarding tracking. Additionally, the data fails to consider student mobility in cases where a student unenrolls from a magnet program. From a data perspective, it appears that every high school has a magnet program because student mobility isn’t factored into the current data system.

The evaluation also found that there exists a lack of uniformity concerning target populations, with varying criteria observed within and among schools. These inconsistencies in data also result in inequalities in the application processes. On the magnet program page, which has seen significant improvements in recent years, various criteria are specified. For instance, one school requires a minimum GPA for admission, a detail uniquely listed on their website. In contrast, other schools emphasize auditions to evaluate performance and skill, while some prioritize geographical considerations. This variability underscores the absence of a district-wide definition of the target population and a unified strategy for attracting applicants to the program.

Some of the perception data gathered pertained to the application processes. Schools lack clarity regarding their enrollment caps, and there were mentions of the application timeline being too broad. For instance, students who are accepted might wait until the last minute to inform the school of their decision not to attend, potentially denying admission to another qualified student due to the enrollment cap. Many schools also expressed a need for marketing support to effectively promote their programs, not only to students but also to business partners such as performing arts groups and community organizations. This would facilitate student engagement in after-school and extracurricular opportunities.

Services Defined Through Logistics

Services within the program appear to be primarily defined by logistical considerations rather than educational or developmental goals. This may result in a misalignment between the program's intended outcomes and the services provided.

This issue can be divided into two main areas: problems and ambiguity. The main problem is a lack of transportation options from a student's home school to a Magnet program. Even if a bus does exist, early pick-up times often present a significant barrier to entry for students. Other transportation issues include the lack of access to a "Sweep Bus" that would provide after-hours transportation. Even if a student had access to district-provided transportation, the lack of a "sweep bus" prevents students from participating fully in their Magnet program.

Next, long commute times for self-transported students and an overreliance on discounted MARTA cards for students and families present other transportation issues. Students from economically disadvantaged households still have to pay a portion of their transportation on MARTA, which is often a considerable expense for these families.

There are issues of ambiguity that include a lack of specific policy guidance on transportation to magnet schools, different rules for different schools, and a general lack of understanding of what is allowed. Currently, the district does not have a set policy on providing transportation to magnet programs. This has led to a non-uniform approach to transportation based on location. Some schools provide transportation to students only enrolled in a dual magnet program, and others offer transportation to all students in their magnet programs regardless of the number of enrolled programs a student is in. Lastly, the lack of understanding of transportation options and availability hurts the magnet program's ability to market and recruit students. Program administrators additionally find it challenging to communicate this information when asked by students and parents.

Lack of coherent structures

A key concern has been the lack of coherent organizational structures within the Magnet Program. The evaluation found a lack of teacher training, a lack of knowledge among teachers regarding the difference between magnet and non-magnet courses, and a lack of specific job classification for magnet teachers. These problems result in inconsistent course delivery and siloed pedagogy.

Furthermore, the evaluation found that program stakeholders did not have clear guidance regarding "magnet seals," resulting in only four schools issuing them on diplomas. This lack of guidance has financial implications because a school receives $133 per magnet seal. Thus, when a magnet program fails to encourage its students to apply for a magnet seal, it forfeits potential funding that could significantly benefit its program.

Finally, without district structures, magnet programs have resorted to creating their own program marketing and recruitment materials and strategies. Programs also lack centralized guidance on forming partnerships with outside organizations and businesses.

Perception of Scarce Resources

Stakeholders expressed a perception of scarce resources even though each program receives funding from multiple sources. Funding consists of a base allocation of $268,830 per fiscal year in addition to $135 per student and $133 per magnet seal. Each program receives funding equivalent to an expansion teacher of $107,532. Although schools are not required to hire for this position, they still receive this allocation. Stakeholders expressed concern that the amount of funding received for personnel does not increase at the same rate as projected labor costs. Table 1 shows district magnet program funding for FY 2024 by funding source.

Table 1 Magnet Program Funding by Source

Funding Source	Amount
Base Allocation	$2,688,305
Magnet Seals	$58,121
Per Student	$648,135
Personnel	$1,075,330
Total	**$4,469,891**

Conclusion

Upon reviewing the program evaluation, several recommendations and next steps have been identified to ensure the continuity of magnet programs in Fulton County School. These include:

- Conducting nationwide benchmarking analysis of other choice policies in collaboration with a third-party company to inform the drafting of appropriate policies.
- Revisiting the policy in September 2023 to initiate further discussions and refinements.
- "Right-sizing" the policy, which may involve adjustments such as shrinking, expanding, or maintaining the current framework.

- Scheduling regular meetings between the district and magnet coordinators, principals, and assistant principals to discuss program goals, missions, partnerships, and specific concerns.
- Increasing transportation options for magnet program students and developing a dedicated transportation policy.
- Reallocating funding for magnet schools/programs to support staff recruitment, training, and the hiring of professionals to fully staff programs where needed.
- Implement measures to enhance magnet program effectiveness, including establishing a clear district message and standardized marketing materials, standardizing data gathering requirements, and streamlining approval processes across district offices for improved program efficiency.

Implementing these recommendations will contribute to the ongoing success and sustainability of magnet programs within Fulton County Schools.