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Editorial: St. Louis magnet-school experiment still isn't yielding desegregation results

By the Editorial Board

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Suhaira Ahmad takes a selfie with some of her classmates in 2017 as they prepared to take part in the graduation ceremonies for the Collegiate School of Medicine and Bioscience, a St. Louis magnet school. Their class was the first class to graduate from the school.

Photo by J.B. Forbes, jforbes@post-dispatch.com

J.B. Forbes, Post-Dispatch

Like many school districts across the country, St. Louis has turned to magnet high schools to boost its struggling student enrollment and reverse the tide of segregation. Actually, St. Louis hasn't merely boosted emphasis on magnet high schools; the district is almost dominated by those schools, eclipsing those that don't offer specialty emphasis. The school district offers 10 "magnet and choice" high schools, compared with just three neighborhood/conventional schools.

If desegregation and diversity are the goals, then the school district has failed. Clear disparities persist, and instead of attracting students from around the city, magnet schools tend to reflect the racial profile of the communities where they are based.

These schools, which require students to apply, are designed to provide training in subjects such as military preparation, visual and performing arts, or science and technology. The idea is to provide advanced education to students who can't afford a private education. Students normally have to meet a grade-point average threshold, submit essays, and even conduct interviews, depending on the school's requirements. Once the students qualify for their desired schools, they are then entered into a lottery.

St. Louis Public Schools says the magnet program strives for “area-wide desegregation” with a “goal of being racially integrated.” The reality is that the schools in the largely black areas are dominated by black students. The schools in white areas have higher percentages of white students. And the few schools with more diversity, all of which are in south St. Louis and the Central West End, have the highest performance scores.

According to the **City Parents League of St. Louis**, all three magnet high schools in north St. Louis were over 85% black. Based off of numbers collected by the **St. Louis Post-Dispatch School Guide**, the highest performing north St. Louis high school was Soldan, which in 2017-18, only 31.95% of whose students tested proficient or advanced in English, math and social studies. Students at Northwest Academy of Law, the lowest performing school, were only 15% proficient or advanced.

On the diversity scale, the City Parents League ranks schools as either lacking, somewhat or highly diverse. Only three magnet schools ranked as highly diverse, and all three had white student enrollment of 30% or more and are located in south St. Louis or the Central West End. Among those three schools, the lowest performing school was Collegiate, near St. Louis University, whose performance rating was 76.6% proficient. That is more than 40 percentage points higher than the top north St. Louis school.

Despite the district's substantial **efforts to improve** performance and diversity, north St. Louis magnet schools still reflect the segregation that plagues non-specialty schools, with their test scores lagging behind. We suspect that result is due less to the district's efforts than the reluctance of parents to explore new options for their kids on unfamiliar turf. Sadly, old habits die hard.

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