



Connecting  
students' interests  
to theme-based  
learning  
experiences

# MSA Program Review Report

## *Synthesized Solutions*

# Context

- In March 2024, a team of magnet experts from the National Institute for Magnet School Leadership (NIMSL), a leadership development platform and technical assistance arm of Magnet Schools of America (MSA), conducted site visits at 59 magnet schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.
- MSA utilized the Five Pillars and Ten Standards of Magnet School Excellence – essential attributes of successful magnet schools, officially adopted to assist magnet schools and districts as they strive to promote best practices for diversity, equity, access and academic excellence.
- These components were used to determine if schools were attracting students and promoting achievement and diversity.
- A report was prepared by Magnet Schools of America that measured each of the magnet schools against the Five Pillars and Ten Standards of Magnet School Excellence.

# Additional Context

The overall findings and recommendations in this document are the discoveries and solutions provided to CMS School Choice by the team of magnet experts from the National Institute for Magnet School Leadership (NIMSL), a leadership development platform and technical assistance arm of Magnet Schools of America (MSA), at the conclusion of their program review of magnet schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

Those findings and recommendations were then reviewed and synthesized by the CMS School Choice team into a set of actionable solutions and next steps that can be achieved immediately (during the current lottery season), in the short term (between the current and next lottery seasons), and in the future (lottery season in 3 years).

Timeline...

# What is Magnet Schools of America?

- Magnet Schools of America (MSA) is the national association of magnet and theme-based schools and serves school districts, individual schools and professionals who are members.
- Today, MSA sponsors programs, events, technical assistance, student scholarships, professional development and leadership through the National Institute for Magnet School Leadership (NIMSL). MSA supports and serves the leaders and teachers of magnet and theme-based schools, while promoting the development of new magnet programs and public schools of choice.
- There are approximately 4,300 magnet and theme-based schools across the U.S.
- The mission of Magnet Schools of America is “providing vision, leadership and support for innovative programs that promote choice, equity, diversity, access and excellence for all students.”

# MSA Pillars at a Glance

MSA has outlined Five Pillars (or critical features) of effective magnet programs:



Diversity

Innovative  
Curriculum  
and  
Professional  
Development

Academic  
Excellence

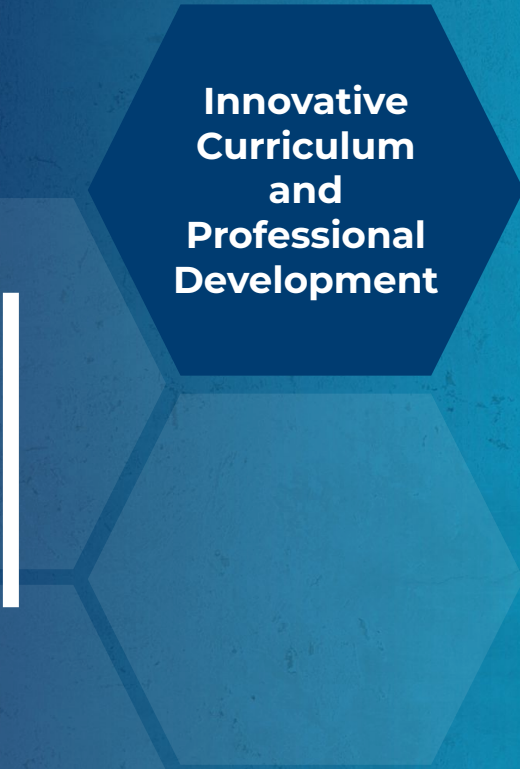
Leadership

Family and  
Community  
Partnerships



## Diversity

**Diversity** is a cornerstone that offers students a global educational experience, which includes equity and access for every child creating a foundation for successful magnet schools. Through marketing, recruitment strategies and a balanced selection process, schools strive to generate student populations that are reflective of their communities. School choice provides educational environments that model empathy, respect, and collaboration and inclusion of all cultures.



## Innovative Curriculum and Professional Development

**Innovative Curriculum and Professional Development** is developed to assure theme-based curriculum is supported by appropriate pedagogy. Effective teaching strategies, emulating from best practices, are implemented through the inclusion of the school's theme. Curriculum is based on high-quality rigorous standards that prepare students for higher education and career success.



## Academic Excellence

**Academic Excellence** is demonstrated through a commitment to multidimensional instruction focused on the learner's needs. Multiple assessment strategies are employed to monitor student learning, progress and success. High expectations are clearly articulated and personalized supports are in place to address the interests and aspirations of all students.





## Leadership

**Leadership** at the school and district level is demonstrated by a commitment to continuous collaboration and monitoring by administrators for effective magnet school organization and systemic improvements. Leadership is rooted in well-educated professional educators. Decisions about hiring, budgets, training and pathways are collaborative and focus on sustainability of high-quality instructional systems.



## Family and Community Partnerships

**Family and Community Partnerships** are mutually beneficial, offer a system of support, shared ownership and a caring spirit and are designed to enhance a theme integrated educational environment. Partnerships with parents are essential for a rich educational experience for students. Community partnerships include a diverse array of stakeholders including business, health and human services and policymakers to support the education of all students. As our magnet school experts reviewed the data and toured the school campuses, they looked for indicators that Charlotte-Mecklenburg magnet schools incorporated each of these Pillars.

# Site Review

- Weeks of March 4-8 and March 11-15, 2024
- 14 highly trained magnet professionals from Florida, South Carolina, California, Nevada, Oregon, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Louisiana.
- Standards folders with artifacts based on the MSA Pillars and Standards of Magnet School Excellence were asked to be completed by each school prior to the visit and reviewed by MSA to fine tune questions for the site visits based on school needs.
- The team members visited each school campus highly engaged with questions based on the Five Pillars and Standards of Magnet School Excellence and the protocols including a leadership interview, a walk-through, an intensive discussion based on each standard, a student focus group and a community focus group.
- **The review had 7 critical components:**
  - **59 Site Visits, Quantitative data analysis, 51 Parent/Community Focus Groups, 58 Student Focus Groups, Interviews, 10,000+ Community Surveys, and District Focus Groups and Interviews**

# About the Findings

The findings in this report are provided to serve as a tool for the cycle of continuous improvement and not as a measure of quality in and of itself. This data should provide the district and schools a unique capacity to identify and leverage their strengths and opportunities for improvement to significantly impact the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District's magnet school program options and ultimately impact student college and career readiness.

# About the Recommendations

Based on the findings, MSA is making the following recommendations. We believe that these overall recommendations should be taken in conjunction with the individual magnet school's recommendations as part of a larger district and school improvement process that will require additional planning and design.

# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 1 - Diversity

### Findings

- 79% of people in the community survey agreed that diversity should be a goal of magnet schools.
- Not having a substantiated marketing plan for individual schools was consistently noted and targeted recruitment was virtually nonexistent for CMS magnet schools.
- It is unclear to what extent district and school-based practices such as recruitment and marketing and activities are designed to attract and retain students to support socioeconomic integration.
- Research shows open enrollment without consideration for student characteristics can further perpetuate segregation; therefore, it is a success the district lottery takes into account socioeconomic status to achieve socioeconomic diversity among schools.

### Recommendations

- Ensure that every magnet school has a marketing plan detailing how the school will target student recruitment and marketing to increase socioeconomic diversity.
- Consider adjusting the **geographic zone preferences\*** of the Montessori magnet schools to help the Montessori magnet schools match the demographics of the district.

*\*SES formula adjustment would be a more appropriate recommendation*

# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 1 - Diversity

### Findings

- For the question “How important were the following sources of information in your initial selection of particular schools of choice to visit?” the highest response rate was “School tours and/or virtual and in person school events” with a total of 5,256 responses followed by “Transportation Services/Level” at 4,410 responses.
- In a community magnet school survey, 64.57% of the respondents applied to a magnet school or program in CMS. When asked “How would you describe the magnet application process?” 21% of respondents that answered that question said it was “Difficult to navigate” or “Very Difficult to navigate.”
- According to some school staff, the shift in the CMS application timeline this year put limitations on some schools’ ability to recruit. Families who were considering school options were forced to make decisions earlier than what they were used to.
- According to the community survey, respondents said that it is difficult to find information about magnet schools on the district and school homepages, including English and Spanish language responses.
- In the community survey, parents and community members feel that many families are unaware of the numerous magnet programs available to them despite district efforts.

### Recommendations

- Consider making magnet school information more prominent on the district homepage.
- Develop and increase district-level marketing and recruitment materials.
- Simplify the magnet choice process so that parents can have a user-friendly resource that helps them determine what their neighborhood school would be, what their magnet options would be, and how to access those options because many parents shared that the lottery process was confusing.

# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 1 - Diversity

### Findings

- For the question “Please rate the importance of the following factors in deciding to apply for a particular magnet school in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools,” 5,351 answered. These were the top rankings (in order from most to least): School Reputation (2,327), Magnet Program Theme (2,116), Diversity of the School Community (1,652) and Type of Transportation Provided (1,647).
- For the question, “In addition to magnet schools, did you apply or consider any other school choice options available in the community?” 30% of respondents answered “Charter School” and 19% answered Private School.”
- There is confusion about the recent changes to not having entrance requirements at some magnet schools that the district has had for many years; some schools have adapted better than others.
- Non-magnet students in the neighborhood of magnet schools do not get a preference to get into the secondary schools of their magnet pathways.

### Recommendations

- Offer similar and equitable programs in each transportation zone so that students do not have to leave their transportation zone and provide their own transportation for certain magnet themes.
- Consider providing some kind of priority for non-magnet students in a magnet school to follow their magnet pathway.

# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 1 - Diversity

### Findings

- Changes in start and end times of some magnet schools, and the shift to express stops for all high schools, created enough of a burden that some schools lost students and staff due to the increased traffic and the need for afternoon/early evening religious and extracurricular activities.
- Although express bussing has presented challenges at other schools, it has made West Charlotte High School somewhat more attractive to families because of the school's closer proximity to the city center in contrast to other IB magnet high schools.

### Recommendations

- Consider targeting under-enrolled magnet high schools for increased levels of transportation to improve enrollment and diversity.



# Synthesized Solutions

## Pillar 1 Diversity

### **Immediate (current lottery season):**

- More accessible placement on the CMS website
- Make lottery platform updates that help make the process easier

### **Short term (between this and next lottery season):**

- Continue to offer marketing workshops and add practices for stimulating diversity.
- Consult with a marketing firm to evaluate and further our strategies
- Take a deeper dive into the comprehensive review to understand county-wide program distribution to evaluate who attends and who they served. (dot maps, elementary feeder patterns)
- Creating strategic support plan for programs to ensure they meet an established standard of excellence for theme based learning
- Target under-enrolled magnet high schools (Hawthorne), for increased levels of transportation to improve enrollment and diversity.

### **Long term (lottery season in 3 years):**

- Work on regulations to adjust the SES formulas based on school's needs
- Work to acquire a new, more user friendly platform to accommodate parents

# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 2 - Innovative Curriculum and Professional Development

Findings	Recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The schools overall do not “scream the theme” from the street or entrance to the magnet schools.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prominently display magnet schools’ themes on school websites, in front of school buildings and street signage</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Magnet theme curriculum fidelity varied widely by like-themed schools.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Further develop the School Choice Standards of excellence for CMS Choice Themes</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some elementary and middle schools consider themselves “partial magnets” even though the district advertises that all K-8 school magnet themes are school-wide.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore ways to make programs within schools school wide. Since all students are supposed to have access to the magnet theme in grades K-8, consider removing branding that refers to the schools as “partial magnet schools.” Despite some students attending a magnet school through the choice office, all students attend the magnet school and should have access to the theme, and are therefore, magnet students.</li></ul>

# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 2 - Innovative Curriculum and Professional Development

### Findings

- While the district supports IB Middle Years Programme (MYP) schools, including all students in the MYP program regardless of their magnet status, only magnet students are part of the program at many MYP schools and not the whole school. This is a missed opportunity to create a school wide cohesive philosophy, enrich instruction, improve learning outcomes, etc.
- Increasing access to the Middle Years Programme (MYP) would increase access to the Diploma Programme (DP) and Career Programme (CP) in high school.
- While the district seems to be increasing their number of IB programs, there is not robust district support for IB training - a necessary component of being an IB school. In some cases, families are fundraising for this training which is not a sustainable or scalable funding source

### Recommendations

- Expand MYP across middle and high school MYPs for school wide implementation and not just for magnet students.

# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 2 - Innovative Curriculum and Professional Development

### Findings

- Parents are confused how CTE Academies operate versus magnet programs and which programs should be applied for through the lottery and which programs are only accessible at a certain high school.
- While there was excellent teaching and learning observed on some site visits, the Learning Immersion/Talent Development theme lacks a clear focus on innovation and primarily emphasizes best practices for learning. This lack of a distinct focus may pose challenges in articulating the theme effectively to attract students to the school to increase diversity.

### Recommendations

- Review magnet themes for uniqueness and attraction versus what should be part of all students' core experience. As part of that process, research what non-magnet schools in the district are doing so that magnet themes are unique from what non-magnet schools are offering.
- Identify exemplary models of other magnet programs across the country to compare notes with and learn from and to ensure magnet schools are relevant and continually improving.

# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 2 - Innovative Curriculum and Professional Development

### Findings

- There is not an opportunity for teachers, principals or magnet coordinators in like-themed schools to collaborate and exchange best practices across campuses and grade levels.
- There is limited CMS principal and teacher training on magnet schools. Essential elements to high-quality magnet schools' professional development in topics such as a school-wide, research-based instructional focus that supports the theme or integrated curriculum into the theme barely exist except for several Montessori and IB schools.
- Principals have not been provided with sufficient training to lead and support theme-based schools.

### Recommendations

- Provide training to magnet principals, coordinators and teachers to increase knowledge of the purpose of a magnet schools, the school's specific socioeconomic diversity goals, and essential elements to high-quality magnet schools.
- Create opportunities for school leaders, magnet coordinators, and teachers for theme-alike professional development and collaboration among other schools in their K-12 pathway (vertical alignment).
- Create a theme-based professional development plan that equips teachers with strategies for integrating their magnet themes across subjects.

# Synthesized Solutions

## Pillar 2

Innovative Curriculum and Professional Development

### **Immediate (current lottery season):**

- Examine MYP implementation to determine how students are engaged in the program (lottery vs homeschool)
- Move forward with prospective candidate with IB experience
- Attain appropriate budget for IB training and implementation

### **Short term (between this and next lottery season):**

- Develop a branding strategy for our schools facilities
- Creating strategic support plan for programs to ensure they meet an established standard of excellence for theme based learning
- Clearly establish the vision for magnet programming in Middle schools
- Reenergize the development of LI/TD to truly distinguish the program
- Potentially have a dedicated CTE liaison for magnet programs
- Create professional learning institutes for theme-alike schools to learn and collaborate around innovative practices.
- Develop clearer communication to families about what makes our programs special
- Develop a plan for the magnet team to identify exemplary models of other magnet programs across the country to compare notes with and learn from and to ensure magnet schools are relevant and continually improving.

### **Long term (lottery season in 3 years):**

- Establish professional learning institutes for theme-alike schools to learn and collaborate around innovative practices.

# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 3 - Academic Excellence

### Findings

- Sometimes more theme-based training is added for schools without helping the schools make the connections between the district-mandated curriculum and the theme-based curriculum.
- In the community survey, 65% of respondents answered "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that CMS magnets offer high quality instruction even though the survey, staff, student and family focus groups and site visits reveal the need for magnet theme integrated supports in magnet school classrooms.

### Recommendations

- Provide flexibility and collaboration in relation to district mandated, scripted curriculum and instructional practices and support schools with integrating these practices into their magnet themes.\*

*\*This recommendation connects to Pillar 2 in providing professional development regarding magnet theme integration.*

# Synthesized Solutions

## Pillar 3

Academic  
Excellence

### **Immediate (current lottery season):**

- Move forward with prospective candidate with IB experience
- Attain appropriate budget for programmatic training and implementation
- Continue and expand theme-based alignment work to support integration with district curriculum

### **Short term (between this and next lottery season):**

- Expand the magnet team to allow for specialized support for more structured integration with district curriculum. A larger team would allow for schools to receive guidance that is more strategic and intentional.

### **Long term (lottery season in 3 years):**

- Establish professional learning institutes for theme-alike schools to learn and collaborate around innovative practices.



# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 4 - Leadership

### Findings

- The CMS community (teachers, parents, business partners, principals, district leadership, etc.) does not have a common understanding of the purpose of magnet schools in the district (change family enrollment patterns to increase socioeconomic diversity).

### Recommendations

- Clarify the purpose, mission and goals of magnet programs in CMS. The entire community should know the purpose of magnets and the history of their inception. Create a community task force, if necessary, to help with this process.
- Ensure that each magnet school's School Improvement Plan includes specifics on how the school will address theme integration, targeted student recruitment to increase socioeconomic diversity and professional development and training.
- Create a framework for each magnet theme and what key positions, professional development, theme essentials, etc. that each theme requires to be successful and ensure all magnet schools have access to the document for transparency.

# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 4 - Leadership

### Findings

- In the publicly shared district strategic plan, there is an opening statement supporting magnet schools as an opportunity to nurture student talent and interest; however, the district strategic plan does not specifically address magnet schools in goals and action steps.
- Compared to other districts with successful and sustainable magnet schools, the CMS magnet office is understaffed to serve the number of magnet programs, magnet school leaders and magnet students needing support with magnet theme integration, magnet theme professional development, and marketing and recruiting.

### Recommendations

- Include the operation of magnet schools in the district's strategic plan and outline goals, objectives and action steps specific to magnet schools in creating socioeconomic diversity.
- Develop a strategic process for magnetizing, demagnetizing and determining the location and magnet theme of magnet schools to increase socioeconomic diversity.
- Provide additional funding for magnet district personnel positions to support magnet school themes, professional development, recruitment and marketing.

# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 4 - Leadership

### Findings

- The district has not developed and implemented a viable and sustainable financial plan for the magnet programs.
- Currently, the district office does not have sufficient resources to provide leadership or training for magnet schools.
- Although schools did not mention magnet schools being part of the district strategic plan, the overall feeling was that CMS values its magnet schools, but a variety of factors (financial, political, leadership changes over time) have presented challenges to sustaining magnet program integrity.

### Recommendations

- Develop a transparent, comprehensive financial sustainability plan for magnet programs that outlines dedicated funding sources, budget allocation and resource allocation strategies.
- Research applying for a federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program Grant (MSAP) during the next grant cycle that if awarded provides \$15 million over five years.
- Create a budget plan to equitably provide teachers and magnet coordinators at each magnet school with professional development around the magnet theme and theme integration particularly, but not limited to school themes with required training such as IB, Montessori, etc. to ensure that the magnet theme is implemented with fidelity.

# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 4 - Leadership

### Findings

- There is inconsistency and a lack of transparency around some magnet schools having magnet coordinators to assist in theme implementation, marketing and recruiting. While some principals were creative in finding ways to fund this position, it was a challenge. Schools with these positions were much further ahead in their theme implementation.
- Principals are not specifically chosen to head magnet schools and magnet theme questions are not part of the interview process for hiring for magnet leadership.
- District consideration of theme needs is secondary when placing teachers.

### Recommendations

- Provide district financial resources for a dedicated magnet coordinator position at each school to oversee theme integration, marketing and recruiting.
- Ensure that district hiring practices consider knowledge of the magnet theme, marketing skills and commitment to the purpose of magnets in the district when matching school leaders to schools.

# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 4 - Leadership

### Findings

### Recommendations

- Learning Immersion/Talent Development magnet schools do not have a direct K-12 Pathway, they feed to IB secondary schools. Families want to stay together in a pathway beyond elementary school rather than go into the IB secondary magnet schools and some of the IB middle schools are very competitive to get into.
- Early and Middle College principals would like more support from the district to market their programs, receive their allotment numbers sooner to plan for staffing, continue to have the flexibility they have had in the past to convert money for staffing and professional development, and improve communication between their programs and the district.

# Synthesized Solutions

## Pillar 4 Leadership

### **Immediate (current lottery season):**

- Create a viable and sustainable financial plan to provide sufficient training, staffing, programmatic support and innovative resources for magnet programs.
- Build strong relationships with LC Superintendents to ensure shared vision and goals for magnet programs are a part of school improvement efforts.

### **Short term (between this and next lottery season):**

- Clarify the purpose, mission and goals of magnet programs in CMS.
- Expand the magnet team to allow for specialized support for more structured integration with district curriculum. A larger team would allow for schools to receive guidance that is more strategic and intentional.
- Create more equitable opportunity for high quality program implementation by providing a dedicated magnet coordinator position at each school to oversee theme integration, marketing and recruiting.
- Ensure that district hiring practices consider knowledge of the magnet theme, marketing skills and commitment to the purpose of magnets in the district when matching school leaders to schools.

### **Long term (lottery season in 3 years):**

- Develop a community task force to support with community understanding of magnet programs
- Include the operation of magnet schools in the district's strategic plan and outline goals, objectives and action steps specific to magnet schools in creating socioeconomic diversity.

# Overall MSA Findings & Recommendations

## Pillar 5 - Family and Community Partnerships

Findings	Recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• While many schools had family engagement and some had magnet theme-based partnerships, there was little to no district supported theme-based partnerships.</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• District changes are sometimes made quickly and without a lot of communication to families. Families in many schools' focus groups have said that while they love their school, they dislike that the district makes decisions without their input.</li><li>• There has been a lack of communication from the district around magnet realignment ex. Arts, Montessori.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure there is collaborative input from school leaders and families in district-wide change initiatives such as moving magnet schools to new facilities.</li></ul>

# Synthesized Solutions

## Pillar 5

Family and  
Community  
Partnerships

### **Immediate (current lottery season):**

- Plan and implement a robust lottery campaign to fully engage families

### **Short term (between this and next lottery season):**

- Ensure there is collaborative input between district and families in district-wide change initiatives
- Increase collaboration with CMS strategic partnerships department to coordinate intentional theme-based partnerships with schools and programs.
- Develop a plan for incorporating theme-based parent advisory groups



# Conclusion

MSA commends Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools for their commitment to ensuring strong magnet schools by adhering to the Five Pillars and Ten Standards of Magnet Schools of America. The objective of this report and the site visits have been to highlight strengths, challenges and recommendations for each school as well as to highlight the overall district findings and recommendations and their commitment to magnet programs and diversity. The implementation of the recommendations in this report will demand diligent work and exercise, but it will serve as a cornerstone and a foundational document for the CMS community.

MSA encourages CMS to consider this report's recommendations as they support schools in school improvement planning and make decisions about adding, removing and supporting magnet programs in the district. CMS is a complex system; factors such as demographics, transportation, displacement and discontinuation of programs will all have an impact on CMS overall and should be considered carefully and holistically.

# Relevant Links

- [MSA Report Part 1](#)
- [MSA Blueprint/Pillars](#)
- [What are Magnet Schools](#)