

Attracting Diverse Students to a Magnet School: Risking Aspirations or Swallowing One's
Beliefs

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Abstract

This case study focuses on the ethics of advocating for a social justice perspective versus jeopardizing one's career aspirations. There are numerous subplots to this case involving the start-up of a new magnet school, including its leaders' concerns for meeting accountability measures and representing racially diverse, limited English proficient, and economically disadvantaged students. Through this case, we illustrate the conflicting choices school leaders may face when trying to balance their own career aspirations with their advocacy of social justice issues for underrepresented groups of students. By using Starratt's ethical framework along with Strike, Haller, and Soltis's and Shapiro and Stefkovich's work on ethical dilemmas, this case highlights the importance of having an ethical framework to base administrative decision making that supports social justice actions for all students.

Keywords: social justice, principals, magnet schools

Attracting Diverse Students to a Magnet School: Risking Aspirations or Swallowing One's Beliefs

Case Narrative

This was Laura Dowling's first administrative job in the public school system. Canyon Academy had opened its doors 4 months earlier as the third full magnet high school in Davis County School District and the only full magnet school built in the district in the last 15 years. Davis County School District had experienced explosive growth in the previous 5 years and was working hard to keep up with its recent designation as 1 of the 10 largest school districts in the country. The county was made up of one extremely large urban city and a few very small outlying towns. With most of the thousands of students moving into the school district every month coming from parents who worked in the city's large service and hospitality industries, many of the students were from poor working-class and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds, the largest of these ethnic groups being Hispanic, many who were Limited English Proficient (LEP).

As part of the school district's plan to better integrate its schools, racially and socio-economically, Davis County School District had unveiled a master plan to build four new full magnet high schools in each corner of the city. Canyon Academy was the first of these new magnet schools to open, and was headed by Principal George Tanner. Prior to becoming the principal of Canyon Academy, Mr. Tanner had worked for several years in the school district's central office and had formed a network of strong connections there. It was no secret that the new magnet schools were a pet project of his while he was in the district office and that he was planning on heading the first one himself. He wanted to ensure that Canyon Academy was a success to prove that the plan for the three other new magnet schools had been a good idea. Therefore, he had spent countless hours and days recruiting teachers and students to his new high

school. He wanted people who were ready to work hard to guarantee the best academic results for students anywhere in the school district. In addition to recruiting a teaching staff with a proven track record of student success, Mr. Tanner had put just as much effort into recruiting highly ambitious students to his new school from around the district. When the school year began, one of his main goals was to ensure that the students at his school lived up to his expectations, and he was very firm in meting out severe disciplinary measures to students he felt were not upholding the highest behavioral and academic standards. He instituted a strict honor code with academic requirements. Any student who had earned less than a C in any course at the end of the first quarter was put on academic probation and given one more quarter to raise his or her grade, or be asked to leave the school and return to a neighborhood school.

Mrs. Dowling had worked in the school district for the past 14 years as a social studies teacher. She had completed her master's degree in educational administration the previous fall as well as a rigorous administrative internship. When she started looking for a job as an assistant principal, she interviewed with Mr. Tanner and was impressed with his vision for the school to lead the district in academics. She was also excited about the prospect of working at a magnet school, in which she had taken a personal interest during her administrative courses. In a social justice class in which she was enrolled during her last semester of coursework, she had centered her semester project on magnet schools and their contribution to social justice for racially and ethnically diverse students, many of whom lived in poverty. She knew that magnet schools were created to help integrate and provide excellent educational resources for such students. When Mr. Tanner informed her that he had chosen her to be his assistant principal at the new magnet high school, Laura was thrilled to be involved in furthering the educational prospects of students from many different backgrounds.

Moreover, Mr. Tanner was well known and regarded in the school district, and Laura was informed by several people in the school district and at the university where she had earned her master's degree that if she worked hard and impressed Mr. Tanner, he would be key in helping her to further her career. Mr. Tanner's recommendations carried a lot of weight with a lot of important people, and many people confided in Laura that if Mr. Tanner liked her, she could be the principal of her own school within a few years. The consensus was that Mr. Tanner had chosen Laura as his new assistant principal, rather than an experienced administrator, so that he could mold her. Laura was determined to work hard and impress Mr. Tanner.

When the school year began, however, Laura had noticed a definite trend in the type of students who had been admitted to the school. The largest majority of students were from White, middle-class backgrounds, with much lower percentages of the student body coming from racially diverse or low-socioeconomic households. Because the city itself was so incredibly diverse—more diverse, in fact, than the U.S. population as a whole, Laura was confused as to why the school population did not reflect the city's. Moreover, although the magnet schools were being built to serve students from across the school district, Canyon Academy's student demographics did not represent the demographics of the school district itself. Students of color, bilingual students, and students who had experienced poverty were underrepresented at this new school that was meant to serve them. In fact, the percentages of Hispanic students and students who qualified for free and reduced-price lunches at the school were less than half the percentages of those same groups represented in the school district. In addition, while just over 18% of the students in the school district were labeled as LEP, there were no students at the magnet school designated as such. However, there was a substantially larger percentage of White students

enrolled at the school than in the school district, and there was more than double the percentage of Asian students enrolled in the school than in the school district (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 here]

After some research, Laura determined that Hispanic students and their parents were not as well informed about magnet schools and the opportunities and resources they offered than were students and parents from other backgrounds, particularly middle- to upper-class parents who spoke English as their first language. She realized that, in part because many Hispanic students had parents who spoke Spanish as their primary language, they were unlikely to be informed about the resources offered by magnet schools, how to apply to magnet schools, and even the fact that the school district provided transportation free of charge to magnet school students from anywhere in the city directly to the school. Laura decided she would try to remedy this by creating a recruiting plan to specifically target Hispanic students for acceptance to Canyon Academy. In addition to her many assigned duties as assistant principal, she spent her own time working on a recruiting plan she thought would increase the Hispanic student population at the school, thereby offering more educational opportunities to Hispanic students in the city from all socioeconomic classes, while fulfilling one of the major proclaimed missions of magnet schools—to integrate diverse groups of students.

Laura's recruiting plan consisted of contacting academic counselors at middle schools to identify Hispanic students who met the admissions criteria to the magnet high school. She would then invite the parents of those students to evening informational meetings conducted in Spanish, where they would be presented information on the benefits of magnet schools, transportation to the school, admission application materials, and other relevant details. She had also commissioned recruitment brochures and information sheets on Canyon Academy to be created

and published in Spanish. Finally, she was writing a grant for monies to be used to provide dinner for parents and students at the recruitment meetings. She felt that this would be a good way to entice the families to attend, as they would be able to bring their younger children to the meetings as well and enjoy a nice family dinner while getting to know other parents and the magnet school employees. Once she was confident she had a solid strategy, she approached Mr. Tanner to present him with the plan and to obtain his permission to begin contacting the middle school counselors who would provide her with the names of students she was targeting for recruitment.

Laura was proud of all of the groundwork she had done and had high hopes that when implemented, the new recruitment program she had created would be successful and would bring many qualified Hispanic students to the school. She was confident that Mr. Tanner would approve of the plan because it would help accomplish the goal of diversifying the magnet school and also would help so many underprivileged students in the school district who were currently being overlooked by the system. However, when Laura finished explaining to Mr. Tanner everything that she had done to encourage the recruitment and admission of Hispanic students to Canyon Academy, he merely looked at her and said, “But we don’t want those kinds of kids here.” Laura was stunned and dumbfounded to hear this remark, and asked Mr. Tanner to elaborate on what he meant by that statement. Mr. Tanner then shared his apprehension that students from low-economic status with parents who primarily spoke Spanish would hinder the overall academic ratings of his new school. He explained that he did not feel that such students would be achievement oriented or academically proficient on entrance to the school and that they would never exhibit strong academic prowess, at least without significant remediation on the part of the school faculty. Because Mr. Tanner was extremely concerned about making sure his

students' test scores and grades were the best in the district, he felt that students who had experienced poverty would also have parents who would be incapable of or unwilling to help their students succeed and would jeopardize his plans to be recognized as an accomplished leader of the highest achieving school in the area.

Driving home that evening, Laura felt crushed. She had worked so hard, but more important, she felt horrible about Mr. Tanner's blunt assessments of Hispanic students living in impoverished circumstances. She was surprised and hurt to learn that he didn't seem to care about helping students from underprivileged backgrounds, and she was also incredibly offended. Laura herself was the daughter of Mexican migrant workers who had immigrated to the United States right before she was born. They spoke only Spanish while Laura was growing up in some of the poorest areas of the many towns they lived in as they moved from job to job, wherever they could find work in fields and factories. She was sure that Mr. Tanner did not know her ethnic background, otherwise he would not have dared to say what he did after her presentation that afternoon. She knew that because she was light-skinned and used her married name, Dowling, most people did not assume that she was Hispanic, and therefore, she often heard people make racist statements she didn't believe they would have made in her presence otherwise. Normally, Laura didn't have a problem letting people know she was offended by their comments, but today she hadn't said anything to Mr. Tanner about her ethnicity. She contemplated why she had let his comment slide. On taking the assistant principal job, one of her goals had been to impress him to ensure her further career advancement within the school district. But at the same time, her main goal as an educator had always been to ensure educational access and success for all students, including underrepresented students.

As she pulled into her driveway and saw her own two children walking in the front door with their father, she continued to debate whether she should try to convince Mr. Tanner that her plan would be beneficial to the goals of a magnet school. She really wanted to help him see that Hispanic students from all language and socioeconomic backgrounds were just as entitled to and capable of attending his school as any other group of students. He obviously held very strong views on the subject, and she didn't want to make waves, especially if she was going to lose in the end anyway. As she continued to reflect on this situation, she repeatedly asked herself if her position was worth the fight. She considered whether this was a losing battle that she should avoid to obtain a principalship, at which point she could try to affect change on her own terms.

That evening, after her children were asleep, she discussed the day's events with her husband, a principal at Marshall High School (a comprehensive high school located across town). Laura relayed to him her conflicting emotions about following her strong beliefs on making magnet schools more accessible to students from economically disadvantaged and multicultural backgrounds, or not pursuing those beliefs to keep Mr. Tanner happy and to keep intact her aspirations of furthering her own career. Although she did not rely on her husband to make decisions for her, Laura did value his opinion as a practicing principal who was in a unique position to offer insight into her situation. He laid out several scenarios for her to consider. According to him, Laura had three options. She could quit her job; she could keep her mouth shut and support whatever Mr. Tanner said, or she could try to find some sort of middle ground with Mr. Tanner, slowly and covertly attempting to influence his thinking toward a more socially just point of view. As she tried to sleep that night, Laura continued to mull over each of her options to decide what she should do.

Case Analysis

The leadership challenges presented in this case narrative center on discrimination inherent in magnet school structures, the perceptions of school leaders in regard to the academic capabilities and rights to educational access and equity of racial/ethnic and language minority students and students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, and the ethical responsibility of school leaders to promote social justice within school systems. The following section outlines (a) the underlying arguments on magnet school programs and their relationship with issues of social justice, (b) the issues of discrimination inherent to magnet school programs, and (c) the legal implications of magnet school programs. Following these three areas, we provide teaching notes and discussion questions for school leaders who are faced with an internal ethical struggle to promote access and equity for all students.

Desegregation through School Choice

One response by educators to diversify school populations and to promote racial balance in public schools is to implement school choice programs. Magnet school programs are an especially popular component of this theoretical framework, as nearly all large, urban school districts in the United States now include some sort of magnet program, either in whole-school or school-within-a-school forms (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999).

Advocates of magnet school programs argue that magnets promote racial balance in schools voluntarily rather than through court-ordered busing of children to distant schools in unfamiliar neighborhoods (e.g., Raywid, 1985). Proponents describe magnet schools as enhancing academic excellence by making individual schools more focused on providing quality instruction to attract and keep students, providing unique sets of learning opportunities through their specialized program offerings, and encouraging innovation (e.g., Raywid, 1985). Supporters of school choice see magnet schools as a way to counteract the effects of income level on

educational opportunity by establishing expanded options for lower income families that are typically available only to wealthier families who are able to buy or rent homes in neighborhoods with more desirable schools (e.g., Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). Finally, backers of magnet programs see these schools as a way to attract students of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds with similar educational interests, as well as an effective way to enhance diversity and equity among schools, increase educational quality in school districts, and stabilize enrollments (e.g., McMillan, 1980). These ideas lie in stark contrast, however, to those who believe magnet school programs continue to promote racial segregation within school systems.

For example, detractors of magnet school programs argue that magnets can exacerbate existing class or socioeconomic cleavages, especially when the magnets are academically selective and few in numbers (e.g., Raywid, 1985). Opponents assert that middle-class parents are more motivated and more informed regarding the availability of educational options, while lower income parents end up in conventional attendance area schools with no specialized offerings and fewer resources (e.g., Neild, 2004). Other research has found that magnets tend to “cream off” more academically motivated and able students, as well as more effective and innovative teachers, resulting in reduced educational opportunities (e.g., less rigorous courses, lower expectations by teachers, and different school climates) for those who do not attend them (e.g., Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). Finally, critics of magnet programs claim that they divert resources that should be used for system-wide improvements (e.g., Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). But even inside magnet schools, various types of discrimination, including individual, institutional, and structural discrimination, continue to promote prejudice based on race.

Individual Discrimination in Magnet School Programs

Magnet school programs advance racial segregation in education through individual, institutional, and structural discrimination. Individual discrimination can be defined as the conduct of individuals of one race toward individuals of another race (Pincus, 2000). This type of discrimination can be seen in the low teacher and administrator expectations for minority students in magnet schools. Although low expectations for students of color may not be a problem exclusive to magnet schools, it can be especially prominent in magnet programs because of feelings of jealousy and resentment that often exist among non-magnet teachers and leaders. This resentment may be reflected in their expectations for their own, non-magnet students. For instance, in their qualitative study of an urban magnet school, Murray and Harlin (2006) concluded that the real difference between magnet and non-magnet students in a school-within-a-school program was in how the students were treated. For example, one White student attending regular, non-magnet classes at a school-within-a-school magnet program studied by Bush, Burley, and Causey-Bush (2001) stated, “I had one teacher tell me that the reason I was doing so bad in class was because I was in class with all these lazy Mexicans.”

Institutional Discrimination in Magnet School Programs

Institutional discrimination consists of the policies of dominant race institutions that are meant to have harmful consequences for minority groups (Pincus, 2000). By not informing poor, minority, and/or non-English-speaking parents of magnet school opportunities available to their children, school systems actively practice institutional discrimination. For instance, magnet programs foster resegregation, and therefore institutional racism, through the lack of access to information about magnet schools and other resources related to magnet programs provided for low-income, minority, and/or non-English-speaking parents. Because these parents often lack the social capital necessary to know of magnet school programs, they are generally unaware of the

opportunities their children have to apply to and attend such programs. Even when they are knowledgeable about the programs themselves, they often lack resources such as convenient transportation for their children to utilize to attend the schools, or they are uninformed of a school district's responsibility to provide that transportation for them.

Structural Discrimination in Magnet School Programs

Structural racism is defined as the policies of dominant race institutions that are race neutral in intent but still have harmful effects on minority populations (Pincus, 2000). The admission policies of magnet programs, as well as the tracking of racially diverse students into low-level courses on their admission to magnets, are examples of structural racism in magnet schools. For example, selective magnet schools generally base their admission policies on a combination of student grades and standardized test scores. In their study of 1995 Texas Assessment of Academic Skills mathematics test results in a school district with more than 10 junior high school campuses, Burley and Butner (1998) found that, among eighth-grade students who took the test, 66% of students participating in the free lunch program failed the test, while only 28% of students not participating in the free lunch program failed the test. Of those same students, a little more than 70% of minority students participating in the free lunch program failed the test, as compared with the 44% failure rate of White students participating in the free lunch program. They found that the best predictor of outcomes on a state assessment test is whether the student taking the test participates in the free or reduced-price lunch program, with minority students participating more actively in the free lunch program and scoring lower on the state test than their White peers. Bush et al. (2001) then concluded that, because admission to a magnet program is often based on state test scores, racially and ethnically diverse students from

low-income homes are almost automatically eliminated from admissions to magnet programs based on their free and reduced-price lunch status.

Neild (2004) found that even in nonselective, lottery-based programs, low-achieving students rarely applied for admission to magnets based on the variety of factors that hinder economically challenged students' access to magnet programs, such as less-educated, lower income, non-English-speaking parents and their scarce resources, transportation, and otherwise.

In addition, even in cases when racially diverse students living in poverty are admitted to magnet school programs, huge disparities still exist in the racial makeup of honors and regular classes in these schools (e.g., Gersti-Pepin, 2002), as well as the tracking of minority students into less rigorous courses (e.g., Bush et al., 2001), and the lower adult expectations for these students (e.g., Conchas, 2001; Murray & Harlin, 2006). All of these examples of structural racism can be further explained by the theory of multicultural competence within the context of cultural capital, which proposes that even when underrepresented groups attain a level of education that is competitive with that of the dominant group, the dominant group designs methods that systematically continue to keep others from attaining an even higher level of education (Bourdieu & Passeron, as cited in Neal, 2008). Currently, however, lawmakers have begun to strike down the efforts of any group trying to make magnet schools more racially balanced.

Legal Implications of School Integration

Although magnet school programs were originally created in direct response to court-ordered desegregation in schools without the use of mandatory reassignment or forced busing (Goldring & Smrekar, 2000), interpretations of law and policy have recently contributed to educational resegregation by disallowing the use of race as an admission criterion in magnet

school application processes, as federal courts have blocked school district efforts to maintain race-conscious admission policies to promote racial diversity in magnet schools. In 1995, the Supreme Court ruled in *Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Peña* (115 S. Ct. 2113) that race-conscious programs that promote diversity through strategies construed to involve racial balancing are “constitutionally suspect” and subject to “strict scrutiny” (Smrekar & Goldring, 2002). More recently, in June 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision, ruled that race cannot be a factor in the assignment of children to public schools. This case specifically dealt with voluntary education plans in Seattle, Washington, and Louisville, Kentucky, and concluded that the public school choice plans in these cities “relied on an unconstitutional use of racial criteria.” Chief Justice John Roberts compared the case with *Brown* when he surmised that the school districts in these court cases had not demonstrated that the courts should allow children to be told where they could and could not attend school based solely on the color of their skin (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 2005). Justice Clarence Thomas agreed with Roberts that merely putting students of different races in the same building could not guarantee that they would interact or learn together, and that he was not convinced that contact between races would improve interracial social relations (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 2005).

In his dissenting vote, Justice John Paul Stevens stated that the Court reversed course from *Brown* and, by doing so,

it distorts precedent, it misapplies the relevant constitutional principles, it announces legal rules that will obstruct efforts by state and local governments to deal effectively with the growing re-segregation of public schools, it threatens to substitute for present

calm a disruptive round of race-related litigation. (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 2005)

Although magnet schools were originally described as a desegregation effort, they are now often described mainly as providers of academic excellence. In a study of the social construction of school desegregation, Straus (2004) examined how magnet schools were presented to the public in Los Angeles, California, in the local press for more than three decades. This research showed that, through the years, the public discourse changed from the importance of quality, integrated education to standards, achievement, and accountability, and that the social construction of local magnet schools changed with the discourse. Studies such as this one, along with legal rulings such as those described above, illustrate that, with discussions of desegregation and racial balance in schools being pushed to the background of educational agendas, magnet schools are acceptably being allowed to fail at their original goal of integrating students.

Teaching Notes

While it is important to recognize the complexity of achieving racial balance in schools through magnet programs, it is also necessary to ensure that educators make resource-rich schools a priority for students of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds. This case addresses the difficult ethical dilemma that up-and-coming administrators experience; that is, should they speak up and express their concerns about an issue or remain silent and compliant to their supervisor's direction? In this case, Laura Dowling is faced with confronting her principal, Mr. Tanner, with her concerns about student recruitment and the composition of the magnet school where she works, as well as her perception that Mr. Tanner is a gatekeeper to her future principalship. This case illustrates an excellent example of ethics of care and justice as articulated by Starratt (1994).

To fully prepare students to address the ethical issues involved in this case, the instructor should require students to read Starratt's (1994) *Educational Administration Quarterly* article as well as Strike, Haller, and Soltis's (2005) book on *Ethics in School Administration* (3rd ed.), and Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2010) book on *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education: Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Complex Dilemmas* (3rd ed.). These three resources will provide students with multiple frameworks to view ethical dilemmas such as those involved in this case. Another resource is the Dalai Lama's (2001) *Ethics for the New Millennium*. This nontraditional resource provides a framework for examining ethical dilemmas from an Eastern Asian perspective.

Discussion Questions

1. What ethic(s) does Laura display in this case? What about Mr. Tanner? Are their positions on this issue mutually exclusive?
2. Strike et al. (2005) addressed the principles of benefit maximization and equal respect. On which principle is Mr. Tanner standing and on which principle is Laura basing her position?
3. If Laura decided to hold to a nonnegotiable social justice stance, she feels that she may jeopardize her opportunity to become a principal. What kinds of concerns should she consider when deciding to either give up her advocacy for her plan or continue to fight for her beliefs?
4. Consider the options Laura's husband has described to her. Should Laura quit her job over this issue, keep her mouth shut and support Mr. Tanner's ideas, or try to find some sort of middle ground with Mr. Tanner while subtly attempting to influence his thinking

about students of color and students who have experienced poverty? What other options may Laura consider?

5. Should Laura decide to work toward a middle ground with Mr. Tanner, what should that middle ground be and what might she do to try to change his perceptions of educational access and equity for students from poverty and students from diverse backgrounds?
6. Through individual, institutional, and structural discrimination, as well as legal and societal discrimination as evidenced through public and private discourse, how are magnet schools upholding or dismantling the segregation that has historically existed in U.S. schools?
7. Because U.S. schools, including magnet schools, are publicly funded entities that affect the national population, what role do school leaders play in advancing civil rights and social justice in this country?
8. In what ways is our current system of voluntary desegregation through school choice and magnet schools accomplishing or not accomplishing that goal (i.e., advancing civil rights and social justice)?
9. What responsibilities do school leaders have to fight for access and equity in their schools, regardless of any legal implications that do not force them to do so?
10. In this case, Mr. Tanner is concerned about his legacy and how the school's performance would reflect on him as the principal. He often refers to Canyon Academy as "his" school. How do you deal with school leaders who are more concerned about their legacy than doing what is best for disadvantaged students?

In-Class Activity

Have students read the case prior to coming to class and ask them to write a brief one-page decision and rationale for their decision based on their readings on ethical decision making. In class, place students in small groups of three to four and have them share their responses. Instruct the group members to construct a group response with supporting rationale. They will then share their group responses with the large group. Invite two to three acting principals to attend class and have them listen to the responses and provide their assessments of the quality of the decisions and their rationales.

Out-of-Class Activities

Provide students with enough time to create multimedia videos that illustrate multiple ways Laura might address this issue and discuss the pros and cons of each option. As part of this out-of-class activity, have students share this scenario with their own principals and ask them what they would do in such a situation and why they would make that decision.

A second out-of-class activity is to interview parents who have participated in a lottery for a magnet or charter school slot for their child and inquire whether they felt the process was fair. Students should try to interview parents who were successful and unsuccessful at the lottery and try to determine how they feel the result will impact their child's education and future.

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Table 1*School and District Student Demographics*

	School (%)	District (%)
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.2	0.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	20.5	9.6
Hispanic	19.4	41.0
Black or African American	11.0	14.1
White	48.9	34.6
Limited English Proficient (LEP)	–	18.4
Free/reduced lunch (FRL)	15.9	43.7