

DISTINCT *by* DESIGN

THE DIGITAL MAGAZINE OF MAGNET SCHOOLS OF AMERICA SPRING 2026 ISSUE

Forty Years of Magnet Schools of America



INTRODUCING
MAGNET VOICE

The official podcast of Magnet Schools of America

Whether you're a district leader, educator, policymaker, or advocate for public education, Magnet Voice offers insight, inspiration, and practical perspectives from those doing the work every day.

LISTEN ONLINE:

magnet.edu/magnet-voice



CONTENT

ISSUE 1 | 2026

04 Welcome

05 **Forty Years of Purpose: How Leadership Shaped the Growth and Impact of Magnet Schools in America** BY MSA PAST PRESIDENTS

08 **Belonging is at the Heart of It All** BY LEA M. CRUSEY

16 **The Public School Option Americans Prefer Over Vouchers** BY JONATHAN VOSS

20 **Removing Barriers, Expanding Opportunity: A Magnet School Alumna on Designing Education for Equity** BY DR. TERRIS ROSS

25 **A 'Bigger World,' By Design** BY DR. KIMBERLY R. LANE

Diversity

Innovative Curriculum and Professional Development

Academic Excellence

Leadership

Family and Community Partnerships

MSA: 40 Years of Purpose

11



12



Event Overview

24



Student Poster Contest Winners

WELCOME

A Legacy of Purpose. A Future by Design.

The Spring 2026 issue of *Distinct by Design* arrives at a milestone moment—celebrating 40 years of Magnet Schools of America and the enduring impact of magnet education on students, communities, and the future of public education. Across these pages, a common thread emerges: magnet schools are not only a model of innovation and choice, but a powerful, proven strategy for advancing equity, excellence, and opportunity.

We begin by reflecting on four decades of purpose and progress. In **“Forty Years of Purpose,”** readers are taken through the evolution of Magnet Schools of America, from its roots in the Civil Rights Movement to its current role as a national leader in promoting integrated, high-quality public education. This feature highlights the leaders, milestones, and defining moments that have shaped the organization’s growth and strengthened its commitment to diversity, innovation, and academic excellence.

From there, the issue turns to one of the most essential elements of student success: belonging. In **“Belonging is at the Heart of It All,”** readers explore how classroom culture and student relationships directly influence learning outcomes. Grounded in research and real-world practice, this piece challenges educators to view belonging not as a byproduct, but as a prerequisite for academic achievement—and positions magnet schools as uniquely equipped to lead in this area.

The conversation then expands to the national stage with **“The Public School Option Americans Prefer Over Vouchers.”** Drawing on recent survey data, this article underscores the broad, bipartisan support for magnet schools once people understand their purpose.



At a time of heightened debate around school choice, the findings reinforce a powerful message: magnet schools offer a compelling, widely supported path forward within the public education system.

Equity and access take center stage in **“Removing Barriers, Expanding Opportunity,”** an inspiring and insightful interview with Dr. Terris Ross. Through both personal narrative and professional perspective, Dr. Ross illustrates how magnet schools can transform lives and how intentional design, policy, and investment can ensure more students have access to those same opportunities. Her story serves as both a testament to impact and a call to action for educators, policymakers, and advocates alike.

Finally, in **“A ‘Bigger World,’ By Design,”** MSA President Dr. Kimberly Lane offers a powerful reflection on leadership, legacy, and the future of magnet education. Her perspective ties together the themes of the issue, reminding us that magnet schools are, at their core, about expanding what is possible for every student. Together, these stories affirm what magnet educators have long known: when schools are designed with intention—around diversity, innovation, and opportunity—they don’t just change outcomes. They change lives.



Forty Years of Purpose:

How Leadership Shaped the Growth and Impact of Magnet Schools in America

By MSA Past Presidents

Magnet Schools of America was born out of a defining chapter in American history.

Emerging from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, magnet schools were designed as a voluntary pathway to desegregation. The belief was that schools built around innovative themes would attract diverse families and create high-quality, integrated learning environments. This continues to hold true.

Celebrating 40 years, MSA stands as the national voice of that mission. Its growth has been guided by presidents and others whose leadership aligned strategy with purpose, expanded impact, and ensured the mission never drifted from its roots: diversity, innovation, and excellence in public education.

In the early years, it took volunteers, board presidents, and impactful board members, such as Dr. Phale Hale, Dr. Robert Brooks, Bill Magnotta, Richard Virgin, Dr. Gladys Pack, Dr. MaryEllen Elia, Irv Phillips, and Dr. Judith Stein, to build both credibility and community. Diane Creekmore, Donna Grady-Creer, and Norris Hill were early supporters and served the organization.

Dr. Hale strengthened the federal footprint of magnet schools, co-authoring a successful Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) grant for Chicago Public Schools in 2004. This work demonstrated how federal investment could fuel local innovation.

Chicago Public Schools continues to support equity and innovative learning environments through magnet schools. In 1991, 12 school districts in Connecticut came together to write the first-ever inter-district MSAP grant application; it received funding, and the school is still a success today. These examples demonstrate long-term successes supported by the work of MSA. At the same time, Dr. Brooks and Dr. Stein were recruiting districts, sharing the magnet story, and nurturing an organization that once operated conferences with little more than passion and commitment in the bank.

That spirit of entrepreneurial dedication laid the foundation for growth and solid financial stewardship. As membership expanded, so did the need for professional alignment. MSA leaders began formalizing governance practices, establishing clear goals, and

strengthening board strategy. Caroline Massengill recognized that magnet schools deserved both recognition and leadership development distinct to their model. In partnership with Dr. Brooks, she helped launch the National Institute for Magnet School Leadership (NIMSL), elevating professional learning and reinforcing magnet identity nationwide

The evolution continued as board leaders turned attention to long-term sustainability and resilience. Sandy Day, following the leadership of Ms. Massengill and the creation of NIMSL, helped name the Pillars of Magnet Schools to align with national and local contexts. Dr. Michelle Frazier assumed the presidency during a pivotal transition, leading to the hiring of a new executive director following Dr. Brooks' retirement. She streamlined board operations by ensuring meetings focused less on routine business and more on strategic initiatives. Dr. Frazier was laser-focused on communication and transparency, along with growth. Her leadership strengthened policy engagement, sharpened advocacy messaging, and contributed to the development of the Magnet Standards of Excellence. During Dr. Frazier's and Ms. Massengill's tenure, the board structure shifted to better represent the national landscape, emerging themes in schools, and diverse perspectives.

That alignment continued to take shape during Doreen Marvin's presidency. Under her leadership, MSA undertook a comprehensive strategic design process that further clarified governance, responsibilities, advocacy priorities, and member services.

Most significantly, the organization codified the Pillars of Magnet Schools, defining Diversity; Innovative Curriculum and Professional Development; Academic Excellence; Leadership; and Family and Community Partnerships. These definitions supported the work, initiated by Dr. Frazier and continued by then-Executive Director Dr. Scott Thomas, toward the Standards of Excellence, now a recognized Magnet School Certification Program that codifies the accomplishments of schools within each pillar.

The Pillars became more than guiding principles; they became a national framework. They gave policymakers a clear articulation of magnet schools' value and provided districts with a roadmap for implementation and continuous improvement. With that clarity came stronger advocacy. Federal engagement intensified, bipartisan relationships deepened, and support for MSAP funding grew. National figures such as Congressmen John Lewis, Senator Tim Scott, and Senator Chris Murphy lent their voices to the cause, reinforcing magnet schools as instruments of both educational excellence and social justice.

As MSA matured organizationally, its presidents continued to amplify its personal impact. Sara Wheeler's leadership focused on visibility and connection. Ms. Wheeler, along with then-Executive Director Todd Mann, helped expand membership by elevating national conferences with compelling speakers, such as Sir. Ken Robinson.

Ms. Wheeler focused on strengthening bipartisan advocacy on Capitol Hill. Her emphasis on authentic relationships broadened MSA's reach and reinforced its reputation as a unifying force in public education. No longer was MSA wanting to be invited to the proverbial table; MSA was setting the table and inviting others to join.

Susan King brought the mission full circle. She brought a lived understanding of equity into her presidency, informed by her teaching experiences. During her tenure, a national student scholarship initiative, originally championed by Dr. Brooks, flourished.

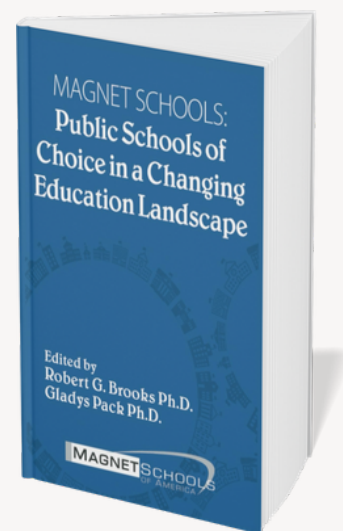
Today, more than sixty students have received scholarships, sharing stories of how magnet schools transformed their academic journeys. By centering student voices, MSA reaffirmed that its policies and pillars ultimately serve children through the strong leadership of the magnet schools and districts.

Simultaneously, leaders such as Dr. Kim Morrison, whose tenure was during the pandemic, strengthened recognition systems and professional resources. Her leadership as a school district superintendent highlighted the need for courageous decision-making, effective communication, and innovation in instruction. As the national awards program expanded, the certification program took root, and practical tools, including the publication *Magnet Schools: Public Schools of Choice in a Changing Education Landscape* (2023), positioned MSA as both a thought leader and practitioner partner. In more recent years, leadership has balanced innovation with resilience.

Dr. Theresa Porter's presidency began in the post-pandemic landscape, when districts were navigating safety protocols and rebuilding in-person engagement. Dr. Porter guided the organization through executive leadership transition while maintaining strong conference participation and celebrating exemplary Merit Award schools across the country. Her tenure reflected financial stability following the pandemic's impacts while maintaining adaptability without mission drift.

Over four decades, a consistent theme emerges: growth anchored in mission. What began as a voluntary desegregation strategy evolved into a comprehensive educational model supported by federal advocacy, strategic governance, leadership development, national recognition programs, and student scholarships. Each president inherited both legacy and responsibility and added new layers of alignment between vision and action.

Today, MSA continues that trajectory under the leadership of current President Dr. Kimberly Lane and CEO Ramin Taheri. Through changing political climates, evolving educational landscapes, and even a global pandemic, MSA's leadership has demonstrated that innovation and equity are not competing priorities; they are complementary commitments. The organization's history reflects a careful alignment of governance, advocacy, and heart.



Belonging is at the Heart of It All

LEA M. CRUSEY
Co-founder and
President of WOOF



They don't talk nicely to each other," groaned Ms. Briggs, a middle school teacher, frustrated that interactions between students were too often laced with antagonism, shaping both classroom culture and the instructional climate.

Magnet schools are built around choice, identity, and shared mission. They bring together diverse students around a theme, often anchored in academic rigor. That foundational diversity and intentionality can foster pride and shared identity. But identity does not automatically produce belonging.

Childhood and adolescence are defined by a search for belonging. Developmentally, students are negotiating the relationship between self and group. Urie Bronfenbrenner's [ecological systems theory](#) reminds us that development unfolds within nested social environments, with the classroom serving as one of the most immediate and influential contexts shaping a young person's growth. Interpersonal dynamics are not peripheral to learning; they are central to it.

Belonging is not a byproduct of strong schools. It is a prerequisite.

At WOOF, a tool created by teachers in Denmark to help schools surface classroom wellbeing dynamics, we have consistently observed that belonging moves first. In adolescence, this tension becomes especially visible. Shifting classrooms, changing peer groups, increasing academic pressure, and the developmentally appropriate desire to fit in converge. Even in schools of choice, group dynamics shape the instructional climate.

Classroom culture is the daily lived experience of belonging. It is the space where students are processing new academic content while navigating profound biological, psychological, and social change. How connected a student feels to their 2nd-period biology class or their advisory group influences their capacity to focus, engage, and problem solve.

Research reinforces what teachers see every day. When students trust that they will not be dismissed or embarrassed, they are more likely to participate openly and take intellectual risks. The CDC has [identified](#) school connectedness as a powerful protective factor linked to engagement, persistence, and reduced risk behaviors. Psychological safety is not the absence of challenge. It is the confidence that one can take risks without social penalty.

The global pandemic heightened national attention on youth mental health. From broad public discourse to the expansion of socio-emotional programs, there is widespread acknowledgement that a child's emotional state influences learning. [Decades of meta-analyses](#) demonstrate that social and emotional learning interventions are associated with improved academic outcomes, including gains in achievement and long-term benefits .

Yet many interventions focus primarily on the individual student. Belonging, by contrast, is inherently relational. It is experienced and reinforced in groups. Barbara Fredrickson's [broaden and build theory](#) suggests that positive emotional experiences expand cognitive capacity and build durable personal and social resources . In classrooms, those positive emotional experiences are shaped collectively.

The group is the unit where belonging is lived.

In schools, classroom-level insight often reveals more actionable opportunities than annual surveys. About 18 months ago, we partnered with researchers Dr. Greg Norman and Anita Restrepo Lachman, PhD candidate at the University of Chicago, to launch a quasi-experimental study using the validated School Belongingness Scale. Students in treatment and control classrooms respond monthly to statements such as "I can really be myself in this school" and "I think people care about me here."

In the first year, classrooms reporting stronger belonging also demonstrated greater gains in math over the school year.

While correlational, this finding aligns with decades of [research](#) showing that peer relationships, emotional regulation, and cooperative classroom structures are associated with engagement and academic persistence. Academic rigor and relational climate are not competing priorities. Belonging does not replace instruction; it enables it.

Families do not default into magnet schools. They choose them. That choice fosters shared identity and aspiration. But, identity alone does not ensure belonging.

We are excited to continue learning through this multi-year partnership with Dr. Norman, Ms. Lachman, and our participating school partners. Could belonging data complement academic dashboards? How might teachers use insight into group dynamics to inform instructional practice, individually and across grade level or content teams?

Given magnet schools' intentional design, they are well-positioned to lead. They have already demonstrated a commitment to innovation, diversity, and rigor. By treating belonging as a leading indicator rather than a peripheral sentiment, magnet schools can advance equity and excellence together.

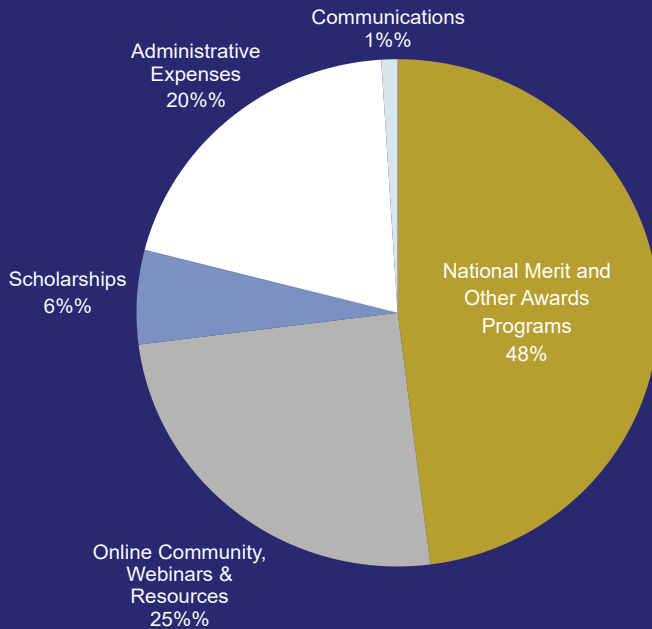
When asked what shifts she had observed as a result of check-ins and activities, Ms. Briggs reflected, "Whether you like to participate or not on a regular day in class, this is something everyone wants to participate in." She described students interacting more with one another and, over time, stronger academic performance emerging alongside improved classroom climate.

If belonging moves first, magnet schools are uniquely positioned to lead the way.



By treating belonging as a leading indicator rather than a peripheral sentiment, magnet schools can advance equity and excellence together.

HOW YOUR MEMBERSHIP DUES SUPPORT MSA



MSA is committed to transparency in how we invest your membership dues to advance the goals of magnet schools and provide value to your district, school, and staff.

For every dollar in membership dues received, MSA strategically allocates the funds across five core areas that directly support the magnet school community nationwide:

Program Area	Purpose and Impact
National Merit and Other Awards Programs	Recognizing Excellence: Funds the intensive application review process, recognition materials, and outreach for the annual National Merit Awards, which validates the quality of your programs and drives community support. Dues also support additional awards, like Magnet Mania, our Student Poster Contest, and our Teacher of the Year and Principal of the Year.
Online Community, Webinars, & Resources	Professional Development, Collaboration, & Networking: Supports the development and delivery of high-quality training webinars, virtual conferences, and resources tailored to magnet school leaders and educators, and maintains the exclusive online platform, resource libraries, and discussion forums that allow members to share best practices, seek advice, and collaborate instantly.
Publications & Communications	Communications: Publications like the Magnet Minute and Distinct by Design provide members with valuable insights, best practices, and updates on innovative magnet school programs to support professional growth and student success.
Scholarships	Investing in Future Leaders: Provides financial assistance to students and educators to attend the National Conference and participate in other professional development opportunities.
Administrative Expenses	Operational Support: Covers essential costs required to keep the organization running, including staff salaries, insurance, legal fees, and financial reporting.

Welcome to





SCHEDULE OVERVIEW

Here's an overview of what's happening at the event!
All times are listed in Pacific Standard Time (PST).

[Check the conference app for the most up-to-date schedule of events!](#)

Monday, April 13

- 5:00 - 9:00 pm: Check-In: Pre-Registration
- 5:00 - 9:00 pm: Onsite Support

Tuesday, April 14

- 6:00 - 9:00 am: Check-In: Pre-Registration
- 11:00 am - 4:00 pm: Exhibitor Move-In
- 7:30 am - 5:00 pm: School Tours (Additional \$49 fee)
- 11:00 am - 7:00 pm: Check-In: Pre-Registration • Onsite Support
- 5:00 - 7:00 pm: Networking Reception (Hors d'oeuvres will be served)
- Evening on your own

Wednesday, April 15

- 7:30 am - 5:30 pm: Check-In: Pre-Registration • Onsite Support
- 8:00 am: Breakfast on your own
- 9:00 - 10:30 am: Pre-Conference Workshops (1 of 2)
- 10:45 am - 12:15 pm: Pre-Conference Workshops (2 of 2)
- Lunch on your own

- 1:45 - 3:15 pm: Opening Session
 - Keynote: Rafael Lopez, Illustrator & Artist
 - Certified Demonstration Magnet School Recognition
 - Magnet Mania Award Winner
 - Closing Remarks from Dr. Fabi Bagula, Superintendent, San Diego USD
- 3:45 - 5:15 pm: Breakout Session (1 of 7)
- Evening on your own

Thursday, April 16

- 7:30 am - 5:30 pm: Check-In: Pre-Registration • Onsite Support
- 8:30 - 10:00 am: Regional Meetings Regions I & IV, III (Breakfast served for Region meeting attendees only)
 - Regional POY/TOY Awards
 - Student Poster
 - Schools of Distinction
- 10:30 am - 12:00 pm: Opening Session
 - National Student Poster Winner
 - Certified Magnet School Recognition
 - National Scholarships
 - MSA Past Presidents
- 12:15 pm: Community Connections Space by Role • Grab N' Go Boxed Lunch

Opportunities to connect with other attendees:

The Magnet Lab powered by Braintree hosted Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday at the top of the hour (check the app for specific times)
Ignite Curiosity • Community Connections by Role



SCHEDULE OVERVIEW

Thursday, April 16 (con't.)

- 1:30 - 3:00 pm: Breakout Session (2 of 7)
- 3:30 - 4:20 pm: Breakout Session (3 of 7)
- 4:40 - 5:50 pm: Breakout Session (4 of 7)
- 6:00 pm: Evening on your own

Friday, April 17

- 8:00 am - 4:00 pm: Onsite Support
- 8:30 - 10:00 am: Regional Meetings
Regions II, V & VI (Breakfast served for
Region meeting attendees only)
 - Regional POY/TOY Awards
 - Student Poster
 - Schools of Distinction

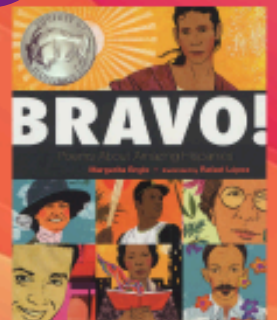
- 10:10 - 11:40 am | 10:30 - 11:20 am:
Breakout Session (5 of 7)
- 12:00 - 12:50 pm: Breakout Session (6 of 7)
- 12:50 - 1:50 pm: Awards Luncheon
- 2:10 - 3:00 pm: Breakout Session (7 of 7)
- 3:30 - 5:00 pm: Business Meeting &
Schools of Excellence Celebration
- 3:30 pm: Exhibitor Move-Out
- 5:00 - 6:30 pm: Closing Reception:
Celebrate like it's 1986! (Hors d'oeuvres
will be served)

Let's Connect:

The Magnet Lab powered by Braintree
hosted daily at the top of the hour

Keynote Speaker Rafael López

New York Times Bestseller, Award-winning Illustrator



Sheraton San Diego Resort Harbor Island

Host Hotel

1380 Harbor Island Dr • San Diego, CA 92101
619.291.2900

Check-In: 4:00 PM | Check-Out: 11:00 AM

The Sheraton San Diego Resort dazzles guests with spectacular views of the marina or downtown skyline. Experience San Diego with a central location in the heart of the harbor, yet just minutes from San Diego Airport with a free shuttle. Enjoy being near downtown, Gaslamp Quarter, SeaWorld San Diego, San Diego Zoo, and Petco Park, for a fun time in the city. Our newly renovated marina tower shines with coastal hues and modern amenities and our light-filled accommodations have a private balcony with seating. Picturesque views of the bay or marina shine in the classic bay tower guest rooms, which also boast private balconies with seating. Stop by BreweryX for a refreshing brew or discover authentic Baja dishes at Rumorosa. Explore the sprawling outdoor pool complex, with ample opportunities to soak in the San Diego sun or lounge in poolside cabanas, cocktail in hand.

Scan the QR
codes below for
info on what to
do in San Diego.



SCAN HERE



SCAN HERE





THE PUBLIC SCHOOL OPTION AMERICANS PREFER OVER VOUCHERS



JONATHAN VOSS
Founder of Voss Research and Strategy

Most of us could be forgiven for thinking Americans are eternally divided about public schools. The arguments are familiar: public schools versus private vouchers, more funding versus less, and of course the heated debates over curriculum.

But when you ask people what they want for children, you hear meaningful agreement, regardless of partisanship or other divisions. People want children to grow up to be independent and able to provide for themselves and their families. And there's something else that has bipartisan support, and which has existed within public education for decades: magnet schools.

A national survey my firm, Voss Research and Strategy, conducted on behalf of Magnet Schools of America in September 2025, finds that traditional public schools remain broadly popular, with nearly three in four adults viewing them favorably. Despite years of endless rhetorical attacks and weakening policies, public education still commands a deep reservoir of goodwill. Magnet schools build on that goodwill.

Methods: Voss Research and Strategy designed and administered an online survey using an opt-in panel that fielded September 3-10, 2025 with a sample of N=1000 adults with oversamples of N=100 Black adults, N=100 Latino/a adults, N=100 Asian American Pacific Islander adults and N=100 Indigenous adults. Data was weighted to the 2024 ACS demographic proportions for gender, age, race/ethnicity, 9-way census region, and educational attainment. Survey error +/- 3.1%.

At first, magnets suffer from a lack of familiarity. Just 38 percent of adults initially say they view magnet schools favorably, while many report no opinion or having never heard of them. But when people are given a straightforward description: that magnet schools are public schools offering specialized academic programs such as STEM or the arts, open to all students and designed to promote innovation and diversity, favorability jumps to 76 percent (even higher than favorability toward “traditional public schools”), including 30 percent who say they are very favorable.

Support rises across party lines. Once informed, large majorities of Democrats, independents, and Republicans view magnet schools favorably. At a time when Americans are sharply divided by partisanship, magnet schools stand out as an area where people agree once they learn more about them.

Why do magnets resonate so broadly?

First, Americans value academic specialization and believe that it can help children when they are adults. Fifty-eight percent say it is extremely or very important that magnet schools allow students to focus on a specific subject area, such as science, math, or performing arts. Parents recognize that children have different interests and talents, and specialization leads to a more individualized experience.

Second, Americans strongly value the “public” aspect of public schools and care deeply that the opportunities magnets provide remain available to everyone. Fifty-seven percent say it is extremely or very important that magnet schools are publicly funded and open to the public. That reflects the enduring belief that education is a shared civic commitment.

Even Americans who prefer vouchers express strong support for magnets’ defining characteristics. Among those who say they favor vouchers, a majority still say it is extremely or very important that magnet schools offer students an academic focus and provide another public-school option beyond their neighborhood school.



When presented with a direct choice between expanding public magnet schools and giving parents vouchers to use at private or religious schools, more Americans choose expanding magnet schools (52 percent) than vouchers (31 percent). Support for magnets is particularly strong among younger adults and communities of color, but the preference extends well beyond any single demographic group.



“Perhaps most importantly, magnets align with what parents ultimately want: children who graduate confident, prepared, and capable of building stable, independent, and fulfilling adult lives.”

The lesson here is not that debates over school choice will disappear. They won't. But it is a reminder that strengthening public education and expanding opportunity are not necessarily mutually exclusive goals.

Magnets show how public schools can provide parents and students with choices. They allow students to pursue passions in engineering, the arts, health sciences, or international studies. They draw students across neighborhoods, broaden students' exposure and familiarity with people from different backgrounds, and benefit each student by preparing them for the diverse workplaces and communities they will inhabit as adults. And they remain firmly accountable to the public.

For those of us who believe in public education (like me, a child of two public-school music teachers, and a parent to two children who are and will be in public schools), magnet schools demonstrate that we do not need to move outside the public system to offer families and their children meaningful options.

Perhaps most importantly, magnets align with what parents ultimately want: children who graduate confident, prepared, and capable of building stable, independent, and fulfilling adult lives.

In an issue too often framed by our differences, magnets remind us that public education itself contains powerful, popular solutions. And if we are looking for durable bipartisan ground in education policy, we would do well to start there.

Scan the QR code for more information on the polling results and sample messaging.

SCAN



REMOVING BARRIERS, EXPANDING OPPORTUNITY: A MAGNET SCHOOL ALUMNA ON DESIGNING EDUCATION FOR EQUITY



An interview with Dr. Terris Ross, Managing Director of the AIR Opportunity Fund, American Institutes for Research

When Terris Ross stepped into the brand-new math, science, and engineering magnet program at Suncoast High School in 1989, she had no way of knowing how profoundly it would shape her future. She also had no way of knowing she would be the only Black ninth grader in the program that year.

“I wouldn’t be where I am today without my magnet school experience,” Ross says—an experience that ultimately launched her into a career devoted to ensuring every student has the opportunity to discover their potential, just as she did.

Today, as Managing Director of the [AIR Opportunity Fund](#) at the American Institutes for Research, Ross leads a \$225 million investment effort focused on expanding access to high-quality education, strengthening communities, and turning research into measurable improvement. But long before she shaped policy and systems, Ross was a teenager navigating a school that both challenged and transformed her.

Her story (and her work) capture an essential truth about magnet schools: they are proof points of what public education can be when access, equity, and excellence are intentional, not accidental. It belongs into daily practice, ensuring students feel seen, supported, and set up to succeed.

Finding Belonging While Being “the Only One”

Ross remembers the academic rigor of her program vividly, as well as the feeling of isolation that sometimes came with being one of the few Black students in advanced coursework.

“There was one of us in each grade level,” she recalls with a smile. “We leaned on each other.”

But belonging came from other places, too: fellow Black students in the school’s International Baccalaureate program, extracurriculars like band and cheerleading, and, most profoundly, from one math teacher who believed in her ability even when she doubted herself.

As a ninth grader taking Honors Geometry and Algebra II simultaneously (and still considered “behind” her peers already taking Pre-Calculus), Ross hit a breaking point. “I told my teacher, Mr. David Williams, ‘I don’t think I can do this.’ He looked at me and said, ‘I know that you can.’ If he had agreed with me that day, I would have quit.”

That moment redirected her life. Ross would later return to Suncoast as a math teacher, teaching alongside Mr. Williams, who had since been named Florida Teacher of the Year. “A real full-circle moment,” she says.

Her message to educators today is clear: students don’t only need access; they need adults who see their brilliance before they see it in themselves.

Access and Excellence Are Not Opposing Forces

Part of the work has been debunking the myth that advancing equity requires lowering standards, an assumption Ross calls both harmful and false.

While directing research at the National Center for Education Statistics, she oversaw analyses revealing significant disparities: even among students who scored in the top half of 5th-grade math assessments, Black boys were far less likely to be enrolled in Algebra I by 8th grade. Later, analyses of federal Civil Rights Data Collection showed persistent gaps in access to Advanced Placement courses for students in high-poverty and high-minority schools.

“These aren’t gaps in ability,” Ross says. “They’re gaps in opportunity to learn.”

“

**“These aren’t
gaps in ability,”
Ross says.**

**“They’re gaps
in opportunity
to learn.”**

Magnet schools, when supported through thoughtful policy, offer a direct antidote. They were founded on the idea that diversity and rigor are mutually reinforcing, and that public schools can be engines of innovation and inclusion. But sustaining that mission requires structural support: equitable admissions criteria, transportation, funding models aligned to student need, and state and district policies that protect access with integrity.

“Access to excellence should never depend on a ZIP code, a lottery, or a parent’s ability to navigate bureaucracy,” Ross insists.

Turning Research Into Results

The AIR Opportunity Fund is investing in work that helps communities translate high aspirations into practical tools and tangible outcomes. Recent investments include:

- Design tools for state and district leaders to rethink school district boundaries and funding structures so they better match student needs.
- Models that support more integrated, community-driven boundary planning, reducing commute times and increasing school diversity.
- Efforts to expand access and persistence in AP courses, so students not only enroll but thrive.
- Initiatives that help schools put belonging into daily practice, ensuring students feel seen, supported, and set up to succeed.

The early results are promising. For example, community school efforts supported in the Mississippi Delta, Arkansas, and Louisiana are showing reduced absenteeism and rising school ratings. And new national analyses show that underrepresented minority students who take AP Calculus or AP Physics are significantly more likely to pursue and complete STEM degrees—sometimes at rates exceeding the average.

Ross lights up when she talks about these findings. “That resonated so deeply with my own story,” she says. “AP Calculus and AP Physics changed what was possible for me.”



This, she says, is “the magic of magnet schools”—not just the coursework itself but the systems that allow students to stretch into their potential.

Designing the Future of Educational Opportunity

When asked what leaders can do in the next year to expand access to high-quality education for all students, Ross offers a crisp framework:



For Policymakers:

Examine admissions, transportation, and funding policies to ensure they don't inadvertently exclude students who could thrive.



For Advocates:

Tell the full story of magnet schools, not only their academic outcomes, but their civic, creative, and community impact.



For School and District Leaders:

Lead with fairness, study your enrollment data, partner with researchers, elevate student voice, and position magnet programs as innovation hubs rather than isolated bright spots.

A Vision Rooted in Purpose

Reflecting on her own journey, from a ninth grader questioning her place to a national leader shaping opportunity, Ross returns to a simple, powerful idea: "The promise of magnet schools isn't just preparing individual students like me for success. It's showing what's possible when public education is designed for opportunity, not just access."

Her call to action is equally clear: Let's make sure the next generation isn't "the only one" but one of many, thriving in schools that reflect and celebrate the richness of our communities.

"The promise of magnet schools isn't just preparing individual students like me for success. It's showing what's possible when public education is designed for opportunity, not just access."

CONGRATULATIONS!



Student Poster Competition Winners

Elementary



1ST PLACE

Nafeesathul Ahamed Anas, 4th Grade
 Washington Gifted and Talented
 Magnet Elementary School
 Wake County Public School System
 Raleigh, North Carolina
 Teacher: Sonya Drum | Principal: Catie Burnette



2ND PLACE

Elodie Oliva, 5th Grade
 Gordon McCaw STEAM Academy
 Clark County School District
 Henderson, Nevada
 Teacher: Cere Annette Henson
 Principal: Jennifer Furman-Born



3RD PLACE

Jordyn Monroe, 5th Grade
 Kay R. Pace School of the Arts
 Clayton County Public Schools
 Jonesboro, Georgia
 Teacher: Briana Long | Principal: Dr. Lee Buddy, Jr.

Middle School



1ST PLACE

Naomi Talens, 8th Grade
 Hale Charter Academy
 Los Angeles Unified School District, California
 Teacher: Brian Sonderling
 Principal: Henry Song



2ND PLACE

Rena Wu, 8th Grade
 Austin Academy for Excellence
 Garland Independent School
 District Garland, Texas
 Teacher: Kathryn Crenshaw
 Principal: Keisha Rider



3RD PLACE

Genevieve Sanders-Esteen, 8th Grade
 McKinley Middle Academic Magnet
 School of Visual and Performing Arts
 East Baton Rouge Parish School System
 Baton Rouge, Louisiana
 Teacher: Cetin Ates | Principal: Dr. Tongelia McCray

High School



1ST PLACE

Jocelyn Hertz, 11th Grade
 Seminole High School
 Seminole County Public Schools
 Sanford, Florida
 Teacher: Melissa French
 Principal: Michael Pfeiffer



2ND PLACE

Suri Nguyen, 9th Grade
 Elite Scholars Academy
 Clayton County Public Schools
 Jonesboro, Georgia
 Teacher: Daphne Johnson
 Principal: Samuel West



3RD PLACE

Shienelle Medina, 11th Grade
 Spring Valley High School
 Clark County School District
 Las Vegas, Nevada
 Teacher: Tony Gebbia | Principal: Tara Powell



A 'Bigger World,' By Design



DR. KIMBERLY R. LANE
MSA President 2024-2026

Magnet education has always been, for me, a story about possibility; what can happen when public schools are intentionally designed for access, integration, and opportunity. As I conclude my presidency of Magnet Schools of America during its 40th anniversary, this possibility shapes our past and future.

Annually, I choose a word to anchor my professional and personal journey. My 2026 word is kintsugi, the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with lacquer mixed with powdered gold, honoring cracks as part of its history and beauty. As an educator, I see kintsugi as a student-centered commitment: noticing fractures in our systems and in students' experiences, then mending them with care, resources, and relationships so that youth emerge stronger. In magnet schools, that "gold" looks like integrated classrooms, rigorous thematic teaching and learning, and adults who design learning around students' strengths and stories.

Personal Roots in Integration

My passion began in rural North Carolina, where "choice" was absent and place dictated resources and perceptions. My early school had a potbelly stove in the gym, and our community was often described as "backward." My K-12 experience was insular—most people looked like me, worshipped in the same churches, and shared the same friends—until college opened a far more diverse, integrated, and expansive world.

What my home community could not offer me—diverse peers and perspectives, theme-based pathways, access aligned to my interests—is exactly what magnet schools now provide to students in that same NC school district. That contrast has framed my core question: What if every student, regardless of neighborhood, experiences, background, socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity, could attend a school that reflects the diversity of the world they will encounter as adults?

At their core, magnet schools shape students' daily experiences: who they sit beside, what opportunities they access, and whether they experience school as a place where they are seen, supported, and challenged. When we deny students access to integrated, excellent schools, we are not simply limiting their academic options. We are teaching them that separation is natural, that inequity is inevitable, that some children matter more than others.

40 Years: The Magnet Model

MSA's 40th anniversary celebrates four decades of sustained, values-driven work. Conceived when districts and advocates were searching for voluntary, innovative ways to dismantle school segregation, MSA's founders believed that high-quality, diverse public schools could be designed with purpose. They connected practitioners, shaped policy, and built a magnet community by championing integration, specialized access, and futures unbound by address.

Five decades of research affirms that magnet schools reduce racial and socioeconomic segregation, boost achievement, graduation, and engagement, especially when paired with inclusive enrollment practices and clear integration goals. Distinct by design means aligning every decision—from enrollment patterns to instructional practices—ensuring students thrive in diverse, challenging, and affirming learning communities.

Systems in Service of Students

Today's educational climate is complex for magnet educators and leaders. Challenges abound: polarization, policy shifts, resource constraints, and broader social tensions. Amid politicized education, I often felt the tension between my strong convictions and the responsibility to speak on behalf of a national organization that strives to elevate all voices. In those moments, MSA chose to center students over debates, framing our messages



**To every
magnet
educator and
leader: your
work matters,
and it is seen.”**

with both clarity and care. That meant grounding every statement in student experience, research, and our mission, while remaining respectful of the diverse perspectives in our community. It allowed MSA to be unwavering in its belief that integrated, innovative public schools are a public good, not a partisan position.

To every magnet educator and leader: your work matters, and it is seen. You are doing more than managing programs; you are sustaining spaces where integration, innovation, and elevated expectations are lived realities for students. The complexity of your work does not diminish its value; it underscores why MSA must continue to advocate for/with you with steadiness, clarity, and respect.

In my day-to-day work, I have seen how a districtwide magnet strategy, combined with thoughtful assignment practices, can reduce concentrations of poverty, sustain diverse schools, and maintain strong academic performance for students who might otherwise attend highly segregated, under-resourced schools. I have also seen the courage it takes to sustain that work when political winds shift, when vocal critics weaponize "parent choice" to resist integration, when funding is threatened, and when the goalposts move.

Strategic Decisions for Sustainable Impact

My presidency focused on strategic visioning and strengthening systems for magnet leaders in support of student possibility. That meant elevating both quantitative evidence and qualitative stories. It meant keeping MSA aligned to its mission as the national leader in promoting and expanding high-quality magnet and theme-based education, and to its vision of widening access to diverse, innovative programs that truly prepare students for success regardless of their zip code.

Moving from aspiration to action, MSA's 2026-2028 Strategic Plan is grounded in three core directions: building a stronger community of support for magnet schools, strengthening internal governance and operational capacity, and investing in student success through educator empowerment. This translated into concrete work aligned with the MSA pillars—Diversity, Innovative Curriculum and Professional Development, Academic Excellence, Leadership, and Family and Community Partnerships—and pushed us to ask how those pillars show up in students' daily school experience, from the front office to the classroom. These decisions bring MSA closer to the same distinct by design expectations we hold for our schools: coherent pathways, strong leadership, intentional integration, and systems equal to the ambition of our mission.

Legacy: Stories, Systems, Evidence

If there is a legacy I hope continues as MSA moves into its fifth decade, it is the fusion of stories (humanizing data), systems (sustaining practice), and evidence (proving impact) to create greater possibilities for our students, families, and communities.

Let us continue to invite magnet leaders, students, and families to share their transformative journeys, because while research tells us which systems work to sustain effectiveness, stories show us the impact. In these narratives, we meet first-generation college students, confident bilingual communicators, aspiring engineers and artists, and young civic leaders whose lives have been reshaped by theme-based, intentionally integrated public schools. Their kintsugi narratives echo what many of us share: a deep belief in the power of magnet programs to mend systemic inequity with access and opportunity—affirming wholeness. These are not stories of broken students. They are stories of broken systems and the educators who choose to reshape outcomes.

As I close this chapter, I am confident that MSA will be the voice that refuses to accept resegregation as inevitable, that centers students over politics, that supports magnet leaders with the resources and resolve their courage deserves.

For the child whose neighborhood has long been allowed to define their options, magnet education remains a promise: a bigger world, by design, and that is the legacy of MSA I am profoundly honored to help carry forward.





Schools Students Want. **Schools Students Need.**

www.magnet.edu

DISTINCT
by **DESIGN**