Madison Education Partnership

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Understanding Public School Choice

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Introduction

Superintendent Joe Gothard wants Madison to be a "destination district" (Gretzinger 2026a). Doing that requires that the district retain enrollments for families living within its boundaries, attract additional families to move in, and draw enrollments from neighboring districts. In recent years, transfers out of the district have appreciably exceeded transfers into the district (Gretzinger 2026b). What can MMSD do to change the tide and realize the Superintendent's aspirations to become a destination district?

> **"To increase its enrollment MMSD must convince families it has the kinds of schools they want their students to attend.**

To increase its enrollment MMSD must convince families it has the kinds of schools they want their students to attend. This requires understanding what drives parent choice and may entail developing new kinds of school to cater to the range of interests parents and their children bring to the table. At the District's request, we wrote this report to review the scientific research literature on public school choice. This report does not purport to recommend a particular type of school or strategy to MMSD. Doing so would require careful consideration of a range of organizational, political, and fiscal factors of which we have limited information. Instead, we hope that the District finds this review of the scientific evidence informative and considers that evidence as one component of what we recognize to be a complex set of negotiations and decisions.

Our report begins by reviewing the scientific literature outlining the different factors at play for parents and students during the school choice process. Section Two compares potential benefits and costs of expanding school choice in MMSD. Finally, Section Three describes two dominant models of school organization connected to public school choice – charter and magnet schools– and weighs the respective costs and benefits of each school type.

Section 1: Understanding parent and student school choice

For districts to most effectively serve their communities district leaders need to understand how and why parents and students choose schools. The research we reviewed suggests that families prioritize the distance from school to their home, school safety, and academic quality.

Distance, more than any other factor, shapes parents' choice of schools (Barseghyan et al. 2019; Bell 2009). This preference may be partly driven by convenience (parents prefer a shorter drive or walk to school to accommodate other demands on their time) and partly by preference for how their children spend their time (reducing time on the school bus or in the car) (Barseghyan, Clark, and Coate 2019). Unfortunately, residential location often constrains variation in the quality of schools available to families, as schools more proximal to a student's home may be more similar to one another than schools further away (Rich and Sprague 2025).

Likewise, residential segregation by race and ethnicity result in appreciable differences in the average test scores of schools proximally available to Black and White students (Rich and Sprague 2025). School choice creates a logistical burden for parents and in many cases, forces compromise, such as between commute time and perceived quality of education (Corcoran and Jennings 2019; Jabbar and Lenhoff 2019; Jabbar et al. 2025.

Perceived school safety also figures prominently in parents' choice of schools, regardless of the relationship between perceptions and reality (Lacoe 2020). Parents' perceptions of school safety can be influenced by social circles of fellow parents (Altenhofen, Berends, and White 2016) or by visual safety cues like metal detectors and security personnel (Hailey 2025; Pattillo, DeLale-O'Connor, and Butts 2014). Even though visual cues suggest a safer environment, parents can be driven away from a school because of an inferred danger that students need to be protected from (Hailey 2025).

“Distance, more than any other factor, shapes parents' choice of schools.

Quality of academic programming is another consideration during the school process. In the literature we reviewed, "quality" was variably defined by test scores or by range of programming (Goldring and Hausman 1999; Jochim et al. 2014). People's perceptions of school 'quality' appear to be influenced more by students' academic achievement *levels* than they do students' *growth* in academic achievement. The latter is arguably more closely tied to what schools produce, but is empirically less closely tied to family advantage than is generally believed (Downey, von Hippel, and Hughes 2008; Downey, Quinn, and Alcaraz 2019; Houston et al. 2022). Given this disconnect, we seek to reference 'perceived quality' when it is clear research is based on perceptions of others, but use the term 'quality' when the empirical basis for the use of the term in an article is unclear.

Parents place a high value on the perceived quality of academics in the school and on the educational opportunities they believe the school affords their students (Goldring and Hausman 1999; Jochim et al. 2014). Affluent parents and those with higher educational attainment tend to rank academics higher compared to low-income families, who typically look at safety first (Saatcioglu and Snethen 2023). This may reflect more about the constraints families face (where safety may simply not be an issue for many more affluent families) than parental priorities in a world in which all else is equal, as neighborhood SES is associated with bullying at school (as both perpetrator and victim) (Jansen et al. 2012; Saarento, Garandeau, and Salmivalli 2015). Still, the perceived quality of a student's education is a significant element of parent school choice. The National Center for Education Statistics found that 55% of parents of students at either their assigned public school or a public school they chose considered academic quality "very important" (Hanson and Pugliese 2020).

What do we know about parents in Madison?

This spring, Professor Jessica Calarco's research team surveyed MMSD parents on their experiences with school choice in the district. Consistently, parents brought up concerns over their perceptions of how chaotic or unsafe classroom environments are. For many, these perceptions were formed from social media, news reports on police activity in and near schools, and social circles of fellow parents. Open-enrollment families with whom Professor Calarco's students spoke were drawn to other districts by proximity to their home and familiarity with other districts like Monona Grove.

Section 2: Potential benefits and costs of expanding public school choice

In this report, the term school choice is limited to mean intradistrict public school choice options. It does not refer to private school choice programs. Private school choice programs offer public funding (most commonly in the form of vouchers or educational savings accounts) to pay for attendance or related costs of education to parents who choose to enroll their children into private schools (Skinner and Sorenson 2025).

BENEFITS

School choice may prompt innovation and healthy competition between schools.

For families feeling dissatisfied with the perceived quality of education at their neighborhood traditional public schools (TPSs), outflow to charter schools and magnet programs poses a risk to traditional public school enrollment. Because public school districts also lose funding per pupil that exits the district in favor of charter programs, there is a financial incentive for public school districts to improve the perceived quality of education they offer (Hoxby 2003; Tobin 2024). Evidence on the extent to which school choice actually leads to improvement of TPSs is mixed (Figlio, Hart, and Karbownik 2024; Hoxby 2000, 2007; Rothstein 2007; Rouse and Barrow 2009; Zimmer et al. 2009; Chin and Chen 2026).

COSTS

Toll of the school choice process (More choice doesn't necessarily mean that all students access/take advantage of school choice equally)

Structural constraints such as residential location, financial and time costs may prevent some families from fully utilizing the spectrum of schools available in MMSD (Rich and Jennings 2015). Middle-class families often have a social network with which to consider school options and hear about schools that may be in "better" or "worse" neighborhoods (Thompson and Trejo 2024). Those families may also be able to move neighborhoods to enroll at the desired school. Financial and time constraints may force compromise for families (Thompson and Trejo 2024; Jabbar et al. 2025; Pattillo et al. 2014; Yoon and Lubienski 2017). Parents who can afford to move to a safer neighborhood, own multiple cars, or supplement education with extra tutoring outside of school face fewer obstacles than more economically constrained parents. For example, if both parents work and neither is able to afford to leave to tour a school, they are at a disadvantage to parents who can afford to leave work to explore school choices. Additional constraints include transportation, safety, quality of programming, and distance from the school.

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The school choice process can be difficult, time-intensive, and complex (Rich and Jennings 2015). Parents are forced to consider what their family can reasonably afford in terms of perceived academic quality, proximity to 'good' schools, and safety, both in and out of the classroom. Often, these considerations result in compromise, and disproportionately affect students from low-income families, Black and Latino students, and who reside in areas with higher violence and lower school quality (Jabbar et al. 2025; Yoon & Lubienski 2017).

Section 3: Fact Sheets on School Options

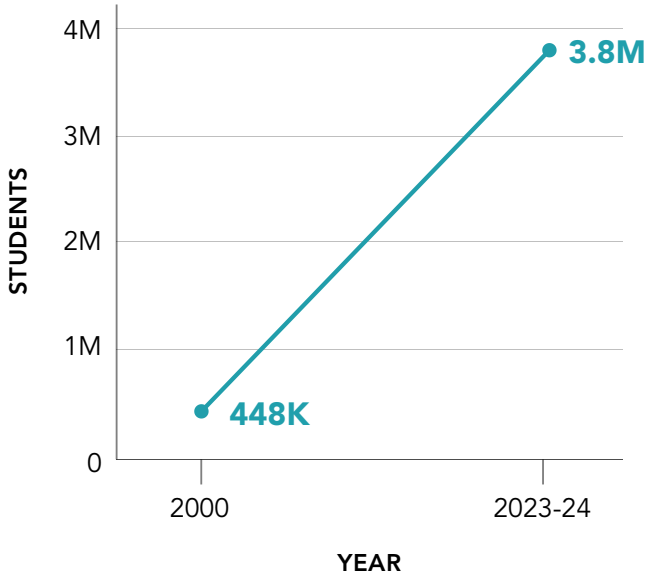
If choice were to be expanded, what would be available for parents? This section identifies two main alternatives, charter and magnet schools, to the traditional public school model. Below, we explore each type of alternative school and what potential benefits and costs exist for families and district leaders. Each subsection touches on defining the school type, then moves to possible benefits and costs.

CHARTER SCHOOL: FACT SHEET

What is a Charter School?

A charter school is a type of public school designed to be more innovative in its programming and subject to fewer regulations and less oversight than TPSs, leading to different rules on staff, budget, and programming (Clark et al. 2015). Charter schools may be run by parents, educators, universities, or private companies under a charter and receive public funding to operate (Berends 2015). The organization that authorizes the charter school is able to close the school if student outcomes are unsatisfactory, a feature not present in TPSs. This provides an incentive for organizations that run charter schools to increase student achievement. While typically charter schools are designed to be innovative and experimental in their teaching styles and organizational models, Berends (2015) points out that often, innovation occurs in organizational style (e.g. smaller classroom sizes, more focused teaching design) but rarely in classroom practice (see also Lubienski 2002).

No public charter school is able to charge tuition and the admission is by lottery when the school is oversubscribed (Epple, Romano, and Zimmer 2016; Cohodes and Roy 2025a). Charter schools have seen an exponential growth in enrollment since 2000, from 448,626 students in 2000-01 to more than 3.8 million students enrolled in 2023-24 (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools n.d.). Nationally, the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) documents 8,140 charter schools serving more than 3 million students as of 2023-24. In the same year, charter schools across Wisconsin served 36,837 students and had 235 campuses across the state (NAPCS 2024).



Benefits of the Charter School Model

Research on the effects of charter schools on academic achievement is all over the map, with some studies reporting negative effects (Bifulco and Ladd 2006a), some positive effects (Angrist et al. 2016; Betts and Tang 2018), and others mixed effects (Zimmer et al. 2003, 2009, 2012). Effects vary by school and by state. That charter schools have more variable effects on students growth than TPSs should not be surprising; the whole point of charter schools is to facilitate innovation and experimentation, both of which likely lead to some successes and some failures. As Epple, Romano, and Zimmer (2016) note:

The effectiveness of charter schools is far from uniform. Lottery studies of oversubscribed charter schools generally find favorable effects on achievement, often very large effects. The "No Excuses" model, in particular, has been found to deliver large gains. The invention of this educational model is arguably the most important innovation that can be credited to the charter movement. Whether this model can be implemented and can yield comparable gains in nonselective TPSs remains very much an open issue. (202)

> **"The whole point of charter schools is to facilitate innovation and experimentation, both of which likely lead to some successes and some failures.**

We discuss the "No Excuses" model below in greater detail.

No Excuses Spotlight

The No Excuses charter school model has been relatively consistently effective at boosting student achievement. "No Excuses" models operate on a longer school day and year and encourage a strong student work ethic and strict behavior standards (Angrist et al. 2010; Dobbie and Fryer 2011). Examples of well-known "No Excuses" charters include the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), which is a college preparatory program that operates campuses nationwide. KIPP began as a charter middle school program but has since expanded to elementary and high schools as well. There is a strong base of literature that supports models like KIPP as moderately effective for student achievement while in school. Tuttle et al. (2013) find strong positive effects for student achievement on state standardized tests for KIPP middle school students.

Drawbacks of the Charter School Model

Charter schools tend to have issues in staffing, specifically in substantial outflow and teacher turnover (Dallavis and Berends 2023). Teachers at charter schools tend to have fewer years of teaching experience than their TPS counterparts, and leave the profession sooner (Sorensen and Ladd 2020). Teacher turnover is moderately higher at schools serving greater numbers of low-income students and at schools with high shares of students of color (Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond 2017; Ingersoll 2001; Sorensen and Ladd 2020).

Charter schools are also frequently more costly to operate than their TPS peers. Specialized programming and the high rate of teacher turnover are contributors to the strain on charter school funding. Tan et al. (2026) from the Learning Policy Institute, found that replacing a single teacher in 2024 cost around $25,000 in an average large school district. This strains resources that could otherwise be used for students or existing teaching staff (Tan et al. 2026).

Magnet School: Fact Sheet

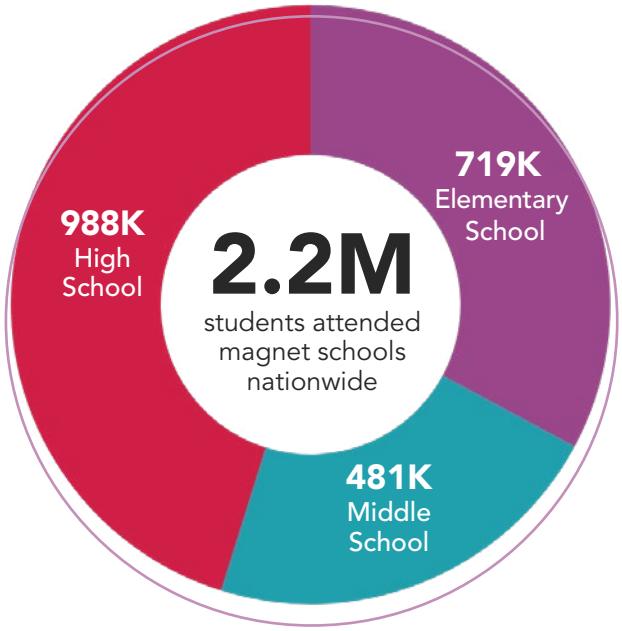
What is a Magnet School?

A magnet school is a public school that has a specialized curriculum. Some example foci are science and technology, languages and music (George and Darling-Hammond 2021; Magnet Schools of America; What are Magnet Schools n.d.). Like charter schools, families choose to apply to magnet schools and, in the event of oversubscription, admission runs on a lottery basis (Bifulco, Cobb, and Bell 2009). The design of magnet schools provides families and students with programs and educational formats that are often not available at their neighborhood schools. For example, magnet schools with a theme on science and technology may have a wider variety of classes and more depth on extracurricular activities in those areas than a neighborhood school.

Magnet schools may also serve higher shares of students of color and low-income families compared to neighborhood schools, although diversity is often dependent on neighborhood (Dur et al. 2025; George and Darling-Hammond 2021; Magnet Schools of America). Nationally, research is clustered in large urban areas with magnet schools, so effects may not generalize to all size districts (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Orfield 2008).

Dur et al. (2025) report that magnet schools tend to be better resourced than their other public schools, in part due to federal funding from the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP). In 2025, Congress appropriated around $139 million in funding for magnet school programming (FY2025 Department of Education Budget Summary n.d.).

In 2022-23, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 2.2 million students attended magnet schools. Roughly 719,000 students attended elementary magnet schools, 481,000 attended magnet middle schools, and 988,400 attended magnet high schools (Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools n.d.).



Benefits of the Magnet School Model

Research on magnet student engagement consistently suggests a student population that demonstrates higher rates of achievement compared to students attending neighborhood schools (Bifulco et al. 2009; Gamoran 1996). Gamoran (1996) highlights significantly higher reading and social studies scores for magnet students and finds students at magnets do not lack achievement in other subjects. However, it is unclear whether high engagement is because of the diversity of magnet schools or because of the nature of enrollment for magnet schools. Because magnet students apply, it is possible that students at magnet schools tend to be more engaged on average than other students attending public schools (Dur et al. 2025; Bifulco et al. 2009).

> **Magnet schools with diverse teaching staff have been identified as supportive of student education and engagement.**

Literature identifies school diversity at magnet schools to be beneficial to student success and achievement (Frankenberg et al. 2008; George and Darling-Hammond 2021). High shares of students enrolled at magnet schools are Black or Latina/o; George and Darling-Hammond (2021) document the makeup of the magnet school population: "About one third of students in magnet schools are African American, compared with 16% in public schools overall, and 29% are Latino, compared with 20% in public schools overall. More than half of magnet school students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunches, which is now true of the public education system generally".

Researchers highlight the benefits of diversity for student success, socially and academically (Juvonen, Kogachi, and Graham 2018). George and Darling-Hammond (2021) note more positive multicultural connections among students at magnet schools in Hartford, Connecticut, and smaller achievement gaps between those students relative to state averages. Further, magnet schools with diverse teaching staff have been identified as supportive of student education and engagement (George and Darling-Hammond 2021). Magnet school diversity can also help to reduce racial isolation at the district level, a concern for many school models as students and families explore school options (Sohoni and Saporito 2009; Dur et al. 2025).

Drawbacks of the Magnet School Model

As with charter schools, magnet schools are more costly than neighborhood schools to run on a per-pupil basis, although magnet schools have a separate funding program through the US federal government. Magnet schools can receive federal funding through grants from the Magnet School Assistance Program, as mentioned in the Magnet School Overview. In 2026, however, the program is in jeopardy of cancellation by the Trump administration. This further complicates the funding situation many magnet schools face. Because of their specific theme and programming for students, they often cost more than traditional public schools (Dur et al. 2025). However, the higher cost of programming may be justified by the strong "pull" factor of more experienced faculty, lower staff turnover, and investment into quality programming. George and Darling-Hammond (2021) note this pull factor may be especially prevalent for parents of color who want access to higher-quality education.

Magnet Schools: Variations and Evidence on Family Choice and Student Outcomes

Variation by Theme

In terms of themes nationwide, STEM accounts for 30 percent of themes, followed by visual/performing arts (16 percent), International Baccalaureate (IB, 12 percent), gifted and talented (GT, 8 percent), and world languages (7 percent) (Nelson & Magnet Schools of America, 2018 mentioned in (Dur et al. 2025).

School theme matters for family choice along with other school characteristics

For example, a study that explores applications in a large school district in Florida found that IB, performing arts, and math/science themes were associated with substantially greater applicant preference than other specialty themes (Prieto et al. 2019). This study also shows that, consistent with work reviewed above, distance from home, perceived academic quality, and a high percentage of applicant's own race are among other strong factors related to the decision to apply. Demand for a specialty theme is heterogeneous: different themes are not equally attractive to all demographic groups (Prieto et al. 2019). For example, IB is even more strongly (by 64.6%) preferred by applicants of other races, but the preference is weaker for Hispanic (by 21%) and White (24.4%) applicants. Selection of art school versus other themes is weaker for applicants of other races (by 31.8%), Hispanics (28.4%), and White applicants (37.6%).

There is little evidence that specific magnet-school themes systematically improve standardized math or reading achievement

A study in a large urban district reports either indistinguishable from zero or negative effect on math and reading by all types of themes, including the programs that might be expected to lead to higher scores in math (as STEM magnet schools) or reading (as humanities and literature programs) (Harris 2019). This study also shows that college-prep programs seem to be particularly problematic with respect to math and reading achievement (consistent negative gains across all models). As the authors note, this may be due in part to unobserved processes that lead students and their families to opt into different schools. Another study by (Judson 2014) among transferring elementary-aged students confirms no effect of transferring to STEM-focus magnet school in math, reading, or language arts. Furthermore, some positive effects of transferring to STEM charter school are explained by student selection with already higher achievement before transfer (Judson 2014).

Within a theme of language-immersion programs, effects vary across outcomes and settings

In Wake County, language-immersion and non-immersion magnets generated similar gains in second-grade mathematics and similar reductions in absenteeism, but non-immersion magnets produced significantly larger gains in second-grade English reading (Dur et al. 2025). In contrast, other studies have found positive effects of being in a language immersion program on reading in Portland (Steele et al. 2017) and mathematics in Charlotte-Mecklenburg (Bibler 2022). Thus, language immersion does not consistently outperform other school options across academic outcomes, and we need to account how different programs are in program model, language, instructional intensity, and school structure even within a single theme.

Inclusive STEM-focused high schools do not have consistent evidence about gains in standardized math tests (Gnagey and Lavertu 2016; Means et al. 2016), but have been associated with greater advanced STEM course-taking, STEM extracurricular participation, science career interest, and higher GPA (but not ACT) compared to traditional public schools with similar socioeconomic background characteristics (Means et al. 2016).

Organizational variation

School-within-school magnets

School-whithin-a-school magnets seem to be more beneficial for math and reading than school-wide or separate-and-unique (without zoned students) magnets, although no achievement spillovers are detected for students in the same schools who do not participate in the magnet program (Harris 2019).

Traditional vs. destination magnets

Traditional magnets are initially lower-performing schools serving more socioeconomically disadvantaged students, with magnet programming intended to attract more advantaged students and promote socioeconomic balance. In contrast, destination magnets are initially higher-performing schools serving more advantaged students, with magnet programming intended to attract students from other areas of the district, particularly disadvantaged students from lower-performing schools. A study by Dur et al. (2025) shows that the effects of magnet attendance generally do not differ substantially between traditional and destination magnets. Both types improve second-grade mathematics performance, reduce absenteeism, and increase on-time grade progression. The estimated effect on second-grade mathematics is larger for traditional than destination magnets, but the difference between the two estimates is not statistically significant.

Implementation is an important source of variation in magnet-school effectiveness

Across 24 magnet schools in multiple states, (Wang, Schweig, and Herman 2017) found, on average, no overall magnet-school effect. The authors found substantial variation in achievement effects across schools, with measures of fidelity of program implementation and magnet-school support explaining about 60% of the between-school variation in math effects and 40% in reading effects. It is not clear from the study how different variation in school effects is for magnet schools compared to other public schools.

Summary of Variation among Magnet Schools

Magnet school theme matters for family choice but in a complex way with other important factors such as distance, perceived school quality, and school demographics. We find little consistent evidence of impact on improvement in math or reading test scores or of variation in that impact by theme. However, magnet schools' effects may go beyond standardized tests and include, for example, advanced course-taking, STEM engagement, and attendance. Unfortunately, work focusing on these other outcomes is much more limited. Program organization and fidelity of implementation are important elements that explain some variation in magnet-school effects. These same features, however, may account for the variable effects of traditional public schools as well, though these were not the subject of the studies reviewed here.

Charter vs. Magnet Schools: Key Features and Outcomes

	Charter Schools	Magnet Schools
Definition	Public schools designed for innovative programming with less regulation and oversight than traditional public schools (TPS). Can be run by parents, educators, universities, or private companies.	Public schools offering a specialized curriculum or theme (e.g., STEM, visual/performing arts, International Baccalaureate, world languages).
Admission	Tuition-free; relies on a lottery system when oversubscribed.	Tuition-free; relies on a lottery system when oversubscribed.
Primary Benefits	Promotes innovation, experimentation, and healthy competition. Specific models (like "No Excuses") show very large, favorable effects on student achievement and college preparation.	Fosters racially and ethnically diverse learning environments, reducing district-level racial isolation. Associated with higher student engagement, advanced course-taking, and better attendance.
Primary Drawbacks	Highly variable effects on academic achievement (ranging from negative to positive). Prone to staffing issues, including high teacher turnover and early exit from the profession.	Higher per-pupil operating costs due to specialized programming. Little consistent evidence that specific themes systematically improve standardized math or reading test scores.

Conclusion

Our review of the literature on school choice suggests substantial variation in outcomes for expanded choice. Charter school research is mixed on student achievement; some research finds positive results (Betts and Tang 2018), while other research finds either no impact (Zimmer et al. 2009) or negative results (Bifulco and Ladd 2006b). This may not be surprising, as the entire point of charter schools was to "serve as 'laboratories of innovation,' generating evidence about effective educational practices via their random admissions lotteries" (Cohodes and Roy 2025b:8). To some extent, charter schools have delivered on this promise; some have provided clear evidence of effective practices that, if broadened to TPSs, can increase student success in school (Fryer 2014). The charter model has also demonstrated problems in teacher turnover, which at high levels is costly (Tan et al. 2026; Dallavis and Berends 2023). However, "No Excuses" charter schools may show benefits to student achievement scores while in school and possible value past graduation.

Magnet schools have also shown some success, with students who are often more engaged in class than their peers attending neighborhood schools, although this apparent effect could come from having a motivated applicant pool. Magnet schools have also provided racially and ethnically diverse learning environments to their students, both of which have contributed to favorable outcomes (George and Darling-Hammond 2021). Costs associated with operating magnet schools may also be a detractor for district leaders, as themed programming and teacher turnover are both expensive. In charter and magnet school research, studies are often focused on large urban districts. Consequently, effects may not translate easily to MMSD in terms of size.

> **"We recognize the complexity of any policy decision facing a school district and accept that research may at best inform these decisions.**

We recognize the complexity of any policy decision facing a school district and accept that research may at best inform those decisions. Based on our review of the research, we think MMSD would do well to carefully consider and explore the following questions:

- How do parents and students perceive the qualities of their assigned school with respect to proximity, safety, and academic quality?
- How do these perceptions align with more objective measures of these qualities?
- Is there reason to believe that perceptions of these qualities would be different in the presence of school choice?
- Is there reason to believe that the actual qualities of these schools would be different in the presence of school choice?
    - How would the perceptions and qualities of schools gaining and losing enrollment change?

The first two of these are readily answered with research in the district, and much of the data are probably already available. The latter two are more speculative, but consulting with peer districts and reviewing the research literature may be informative.

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