

FINAL REPORT
MONTCLAIR PUBLIC
SCHOOLS:
FOCUS GROUPS
OCTOBER 23RD-25TH
2009

A Community Dialogue Collaborative Effort of
Montclair Public Schools

And a Coalition of Community Organizations, including
the Montclair PTA Council, the Montclair Fund for Educational Excellence,
the 4th Ward Community Collaborative, the NAACP, and the Montclair
Civil Rights Commission

With the assistance of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and
Ethnicity at the Ohio State University, author of this report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Montclair Public Schools: Community Dialogue and Messaging Plan

This report accounts for the focus groups held on October 23-25, 2009 in Montclair. It documents the focus groups' goals, implementation, demographics, questions, responses, follow up reactions and ensuing recommendations.

In response to the recent Supreme Court decisions, *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, in which a majority of Justices held that in voluntary integration plans the race of individual students couldn't be used in school assignment, the school district is updating its integration plan.

Along with its partners, the district is also implementing a community dialogue and messaging plan that involves focus groups, public messaging, and a possible community survey on magnet design. All parts of the plan are in service of the district's educational objectives.

The overall goals of the dialogue and messaging plan are to:

- Give community members an opportunity to be heard on the issues of diversity and integration in general and the magnet schools in particular.
- Provide the school district with the opportunity to gauge the pulse of the community on these issues so that it can best present its plans on school assignment and other initiatives to parents and the larger community.
- Collect input and evidence as to what extent integration is a value that has popular support – and warrants time, money and effort for its maintenance.
- With input from the above efforts, closely tie public messaging to the district's educational objectives and make clear the educational benefits of the student assignment process that is selected.

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University is assisting the Montclair Public School District with its community dialogue and messaging plan, co-facilitated the focus groups, and is the author of this report.

Focus Group Goals and Implementation

The goals of the focus group were to:

- Gather honest and informed input from residents about their feelings towards diversity and integration.
- Provide accurate information about integration in general and the health of the district's magnet system in particular.
- Collect information that can help shape the larger survey that would be widely distributed to the community about diversity, integration and the magnet schools.

Two hundred and ninety-four community members registered for involvement with the focus groups or living room dialogues, and 124 residents participated in the focus groups by invitation.

Each focus group included 6-10 participants and was constituted according to race, socioeconomic status, years of residency, age, community involvement, and whether the resident currently used the public schools or not. Teachers and students also made up their own groups. The sessions were deliberately homogeneous in order to enable each group to feel validated in their experiences. They lasted 90 minutes and were led by one of three trained and experienced facilitators.

Focus Group Questions and Responses

Focus group questions were divided into the following categories: Diversity and Integration; Magnet Schools and Choice; Magnet Strengths and Challenges; Return to Neighborhood Schools and; New School Assignment Approaches. Responses were both positive and negative, and robust in their expression and content. Participants signaled a desire to talk about all topics. Based on follow-up input, the majority of participants found the process beneficial and stated that they would like to participate in living room dialogues to continue the conversation around integration in Montclair.

Kirwan Institute Recommendations

Based on an analysis of representative participant responses, the lead facilitator and senior researchers from the Kirwan Institute make the following recommendations.

A. Diversity and Integration in the Montclair Community and Schools

1. Both the MPSD and community groups should seize the opportunity to educate and engage the community about the history of Montclair's magnet school program and its relationship to diversity. Montclair's history is an affirming, community building narrative. We encourage the district to continue to find venues to lift up this history. For example, the district could incorporate testimonies from students and alumni about the value of diversity and the unique educational experience they enjoyed as a product of the magnet program, into parent orientation sessions and materials.
2. The district should encourage open dialogues with parents and community members through a widely deployed survey exploring perceptions of diversity, integration, the magnet schools and the assignment plan. The results from the survey can inform a successful messaging strategy, emphasizing the benefits of diversity and integration, and can also inform magnet themes (see Recommendation B2).
3. The district should clearly affirm that diversity and integration not only improve student achievement, investing all parents in the community as a whole, but that they prepares children for life in a globalized society and foster citizenship and democratic values.
4. The district should clearly acknowledge that 'diversity' includes race, socioeconomic status, gender, ability, and other forms of diversity.
5. Both the district and community groups should acknowledge that integration is an ongoing process, and that despite tremendous progress, challenges remain, and that the district is committed to addressing these challenges. Despite being a numerically diverse community, patterns of residential segregation persist. And, despite having numerical school-level diversity, meaningful integration is more than numerical representation. Meaningful integration also has implications for teacher and administrator training, curricula, student support, discipline policies, detracking, and the provision of early childhood education.
6. Continue to work with purposeful and proactive leaders within the school and community to facilitate discussions about diversity and integration.

B. Magnet Schools and Choice

1. Communicate to teachers, students and community members, the magnet school efforts utilized and successes achieved to address issues related to racial diversity.
2. The district should continue to ensure that magnet school themes are solidly present and relevant. The original magnet themes were selected with recognition of parental interests to help foster racial diversity. A community survey directed by the district would help the district calibrate magnet school design to better draw a diverse population of students.
3. When referencing the student choice policy, the district should incorporate language that emphasizes the social compact and encourages parents to select schools that are best for their children *and* their community. Research shows that parents will often make decisions that are in the best interest of their community when prompted to do so. Some parents in the focus groups explicitly stated that they selected schools on that basis. The district's communications should at least mention the need for all parents and community members to attend to the soundness of every magnet school, while acknowledging taxpayer concerns.

C. Magnet Strengths and Challenges

1. Seize the opportunity to build upon what some teachers describe as the "revitalized" momentum in certain Montclair schools to recharge the magnet schools' commitment to integration and excellence.
2. Explore the possibility of themes in the high school to abate peer groupings by race and class. Focus group participants and students enjoy the magnet themes, but expressed regret that these themes are not carried into high school. At the same time, high school is where tracking is most pronounced.
3. Address social justice challenges in such areas as English as a Second Language, Remedial Education, and Special Education, racial and socioeconomic diversity, and limited space in some of the more desirable schools.
4. To alleviate fiscal concerns about busing, the district should provide a statement explaining that only 1.5% of its budget is spent on transportation costs.

D. Neighborhood Schools

1. The district and community groups must understand the ways in which the practices of realtors and the trends of new arrivals affect parental preferences, and recognize that some folks will prefer neighborhood schools as a result.
2. The district should use the race and class census maps, and the hypothetical "neighborhood schools" map in the appendix to address the concerns and disbelief that Montclair neighborhoods are segregated. These maps make the point that the Magnet plan has produced evident racial and economic integration despite patterns of residential segregation within the district, and that the return to neighborhood schools would result in stark race and class segregation.
3. Address the concerns and assumptions about the school budget and transportation costs associated with busing.

E. New Assignment Plans

1. The district should clearly explain in broad terms that it has modified its freedom of choice, school selection and assignment policy to ensure compliance with the state order from the Commissioner of Education to maintain integrated schools, as well as applicable federal and state laws, including the Supreme Court's decisions in *Parents Involved*.

2. The district should also clarify that the *Parents Involved* decisions permit the use of a race factor calculated at the neighborhood level, although they restrict the use of race in individual student assignment. Some people mistakenly believe that *Parents Involved* prohibits the use of race entirely in student assignment.
3. The district should address the question of why it does not use SES alone in its assignment plan, and the importance of maintaining racial diversity as a goal and a means, not simply economic diversity.
4. The district should address concerns regarding the misuse of data and confusion over why the district does not use school data instead of census data.

Next Steps

The goal of the messaging strategy will be to clearly communicate to the community the educational benefits of the student assignment process that is selected. The Montclair Public School District may use the insights it has gathered from these focus groups and parent surveys to develop a widely deployed community survey that will provide the district with a more comprehensive understanding of the community's views on diversity, integration, the magnet schools and future assignment plans. Community groups will subsequently coordinate living room dialogues with heterogeneous groups of 10-12 residents that will meet for several hours and over several weeks. They will achieve goals similar to those of the focus groups and will help community members move toward understanding diverse perspectives and expressing their own to a broader audience.

APPENDIX: Montclair Parent Survey

Focus group participants who currently have or previously had children enrolled in Montclair schools had the opportunity at the end of the session to respond to a survey consisting of open-ended questions related to school choice and parental decision making about education. Eighty-seven surveys were completed.

Parents indicated the factors that influenced their decision-making, and their perception of factors that influenced other residents' decisions, around magnet schools. School-based factors included academics/curriculum, class size (student/teacher ratio), culture and climate (diversity), PTA activity, staff, magnet theme, only choice (High School), and resources within the school. Family factors included feedback from peers/family, location, start time/convenience, diversity (students), whether the child would feel comfortable in the school, resources that the school provides and whether there was a values magnet theme.

Parents suggested potential magnet themes including social justice, economics/finance, foreign language, gifted and talented, global thinking/diversity, science/math & technology, and multiple intelligences.

Community Dialogue and Messaging Plan

Movement toward meaningful integration in our schools is more complex following the 2007 U.S. Supreme Court's decisions in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*. For the first time, a majority of Justices held that, along with achieving diversity, reducing racial isolation is a compelling governmental interest that would justify voluntary race-conscious integrative measures. But a separate majority of Justices held that the race of individual students couldn't be used in voluntary school assignment plans. This has led many school districts to reconfigure their integration policies using factors such as the racial composition, poverty rate, and level of parental education within a neighborhood in order to achieve and maintain diversity in their schools.

In response to the Supreme Court decisions, the Montclair Public School District is updating its student assignment policy. Along with its partners, it is also implementing a community dialogue and messaging plan that involves focus groups, public messaging, and a possible community survey on magnet design. All parts of the dialogue and messaging plan are in service of the district's educational objectives.

The overall goals of the community dialogue and messaging plan are to:

- Give community members an opportunity to be heard on the issue of integration in general and the magnet schools in particular.
- Provide the school district with the opportunity to gauge the pulse of the community on these issues so that it can best present its plans on school assignment and other initiatives to parents and the larger community.
- Collect input and evidence as to what extent integration is a value that has popular support – and warrants time, money and effort for its maintenance.

This report accounts for the focus groups held on October 23-25, 2009 in Montclair that constitutes the first part of the district's community dialogue and messaging plan. It documents the focus groups' goals, implementation, demographics, questions, responses, follow up reactions and facilitator recommendations.

This report also presents the results of a preliminary survey conducted after the focus groups among Montclair parents with children currently or in the past enrolled in the public schools. These results are laying the groundwork for a larger, more widely disseminated survey, with living room dialogues and messaging to be implemented later in time.

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University is assisting the Montclair Public Schools in this work, and is the author of this report.

Focus Group Goals

Montclair Public Schools and its partners launched its community dialogue and messaging plan with focus groups around diversity, integration, the magnet school program and future assignment plans. The goals of the focus group were to:

- Gather honest and informed input from residents about their feelings towards diversity and integration.
- Provide accurate information about integration in general and the health of the district's magnet system in particular.

- Collect information that can help shape the larger survey that would be widely distributed to the community about diversity, integration and the magnet schools.

The focus groups provided an opportunity for community members to explore topics that may be difficult to address in an unstructured setting. Engaging community members in dialogue provided them with the opportunity to discuss perceptions, beliefs, alternatives and trade-offs around diversity, integration and the magnet school program. In addition, the focus groups enabled Montclair Public Schools to measure the intensity of feelings related to these issues and assess the language that the community uses to express their achievements, frustration, and/or hope related to the district in the past, present, and future.

Focus Group Implementation

Focus groups were conducted in Montclair on October 23-25, 2009.

Recruitment for the focus groups began in September 2009 by community partners and took place at various locations throughout the city to ensure a diverse pool of potential participants. Transportation, childcare and other special accommodations were offered to participants to ensure access for all. Two hundred and ninety-four community members registered for involvement in the focus groups or living room dialogues, and 124 residents participated in them by invitation.

After evaluating self-designated demographic information, the focus groups were constituted according to race, socioeconomic status, years of residency, age, community involvement, and whether the resident was currently using the public schools or not. Teachers and students also made up their own groupings. Permission was secured for student participants from their parent or guardian. Each focus group was deliberately homogeneous, which provided community members an opportunity to dialogue with those who have experienced the school district in a particular way and allowed for common fears to be addressed in an environment that is less threatening than heterogeneous groups. Homogeneous groupings also provided an opportunity for each group to feel validated in their experiences. Although participants of several groups expressed concern about their homogeneity, they expressed understanding when the facilitators explained their purpose.

Each focus group was composed of 6-10 community members, who participated in a 90-minute discussion. During this time, participants were informed about the structure of the magnet school system in Montclair and were provided with a brief history of integration within the Montclair public schools. In all, eighteen focus groups were conducted at various locations (schools, a church, and a public library) to ensure that the forum was accessible for all community members. All participants were provided with a light snack and beverage, and presented with a small token of appreciation. Participants were encouraged to share their honest opinion and informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to leave at any point during the discussion.

One of three trained and experienced facilitators led each focus group. The facilitators employed their skills to embrace members of each group and to create a welcoming space in which participants felt safe, valued and respected. With the assistance of the facilitators, participants moved from finding a space for validation to finding ways to communicate with the others about their fears and concerns around diversity, integration, the magnet schools and future assignment plans. The facilitator bore the responsibility of identifying themes that emerged from the discussion, which will be used by the district to inform their work to create improved educational opportunities for all current and future residents.

Demographics of Community Focus Group Participation

Potential Participants (n=294)

Actual Participants (n=124)

RACE

28% African American
4.5% Asian
45% Caucasian
8% Latino
4% Other
10% Did not disclose

25% African American
4% Asian
43% Caucasian
4% Latino
4% Other
17% Did not disclose

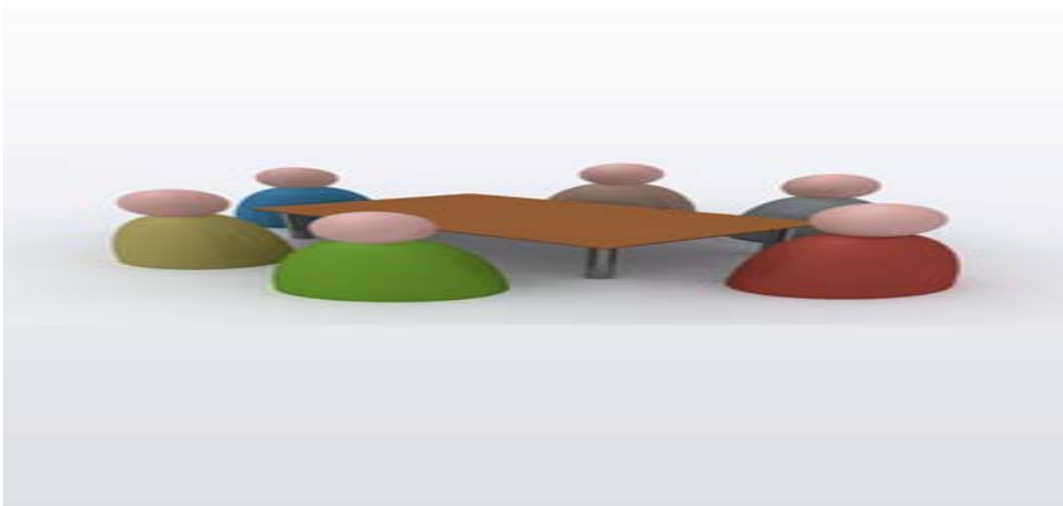
Potential Participants (n=294)

Actual Participants (n=124)

INCOME

4.5% 0-25K
2.8% 25K-50K
13% 50K-75K
10.5% 75K-100K
10.5% 100K-150K
11.3% 100K+
22% 150K+
25.4% Did not disclose

2.3%
3.2%
15%
12%
10%
6.5%
25%
26%



Focus Group Questions and Summary of Responses

A. Diversity and Integration

How do you define Diversity?

When responding to this question, many participants broadly defined diversity as the ability to recognize and accept the differences of others and to tolerate the values of others. However, some referred to diversity as merely co-existing. Still others noted that Montclair has diversity, but the question is what to do about it. Many pointed out that economic diversity, not just racial diversity, is critical and impacts the cultural climate of the community. In addition, many participants expressed a desire to live, work, and learn in environments that are “comfortable” were they felt “accepted” by their neighbors, colleagues, or fellow students. Students describe issues of diversity as “a thing of the past,” despite expressing a view that “things really haven’t changed that much; we are still segregated”.

*«The community is yearning to talk about diversity, but we must understand the impact of power in the community.»
-business leader*

How do you define Integration?

When responding to this question, many participants referred to integration as the active engagement with diverse individuals, with the intention of learning something from the perspective of others who may hold different values. This definition alluded to the necessity of engaging in conversations and collaborating with diverse individuals to

«Integration is a forced environment, People don't want to go there.»

-White parent

achieve common goals.

Others described integration as “social engineering” and a mechanism for government to desegregate schools and community. One participant believes that integration is living and going to school together, but that it is a “forced environment.” Another commented that people like to come to Montclair for diversity, but that they “don’t want integration.” Many participants attribute this phenomenon to the plethora of new arrivals moving to Montclair to escape the harsh realities, “drugs & crime” of the inner city.

Students expressed pressure by their peers to “act” in a way that is socially acceptable by their peers, which may be impacted by the level of integration in the school and the community, and may differ depending on their previous experiences and cultural background.

Do you include other factors besides race in your definition of diversity and/or integration?

All groups were able to identify many factors other than race (i.e., class, income, gender, & ability) when defining diversity and/or integration. Many participants expressed concern that sectors of the community opt out of integration and choose simply to co-exist. In addition, many respondents were adamant that the class-race interaction (i.e., black and poor, white and rich) impacted one’s ability to integrate more than race alone or class alone. This theme persisted in all focus groups and created a lot of affective responses when discussed. For example, some

participants expressed frustration with “covert discrimination” within the community. Individuals at both extremes of socioeconomic status and in all age groups expressed an understanding of this dynamic and the impact it has on the community and the climate within the schools.

What are some characteristics of an integrated school or community?

«How do we become comfortable with those we are unfamiliar with?»

When expanding on characteristics of an integrated school or community, participants were equally impressed or disappointed by Montclair's level of integration. Some described Montclair as a utopia that has many opportunities for interacting with diverse community members (i.e., fine dining, cultural exhibitions, and integrated schools). Some expressed satisfaction with integration in the schools, but noted that communities were not integrated. Others stated that housing is segregated and the high school is self-segregated; kids are divided; and there is a wedge between honors courses and substandard ones. Still others are concerned that Montclair is resegregating. Several participants explained that prior to participating in the focus group they were under the impression

that Montclair was full of diversity and highly integrated, but expressed an appreciation for exposure to the reality of others.

Students offered the most unique perspective on the topic, describing their vision of true integration and changes that they would like to see in their school and community (e.g., planned activities to challenge personal values of stereotypes and classism, and community centers/courses designed to encourage youth to cooperate in civic activities). The students also expressed the benefits of being exposed to those who are different despite not being fully integrated. When comparing the experiences of their peers, who do not attend Montclair schools, they find tremendous value in having the opportunity for direct exposure to “others.”

*«There is a lack of Latin American representation in the schools, which may limit parental involvement.»
-Latina Parent*

Do you think integration is still an important value in educating children in the 21st century? Why? Why not?

Many respondents were hopeful when comparing the situation in Montclair to other segments of the U.S. and were proud of the progress Montclair has made since the Supreme Court mandated integration. Some attributed this to parents who play a significant role in achievement (e.g., PTA).

A common theme emerged around how student achievement interacts with integration. This was manifest in an array of comments. Some insisted that diversity and excellence were in conflict with one another. Others insisted that the community wants both and hopes that all kids can succeed in a diverse environment. However, several participants noted that integration and excellence are often undermined by prejudice. For example, the language the community uses sets kids up for success or failure, and stereotypes Black kids. Many respondents expressed concern about teacher preparation and their ability to address their personal beliefs when teaching diverse students. Suggestions included facilitating professional development and diversity retreats to enhance school climate. Tension emerged in some groups between participants who believe low achievement is due to “culture” and those who believe it is also due to socioeconomics.

*«It's not that poor parents don't care, they can't. How do we get involved when we don't feel welcome?»
-Black parent*

«Diversity is overhyped; the focus should be on the quality of education for all students.»

B. Magnet Schools and Choice

Why did you choose the school that you did for your children? Name three factors you used to make this decision.

Facilitators posed these questions to those participants with children currently enrolled in the Montclair Public Schools. They expressed views that were very broad and ranged from achievement rates to peer referral. The most common responses were convenience for family (i.e., school start time), bus ride, test scores, and reputation of the school. Other parents expressed the desire to allow their child to have a voice in the decision making process, and stressed that each child may have unique talents or strengths that make one magnet school more appealing than another. Others believed that parents choose a school based on its resources, citing the disparities in fundraising allowed by the district.

More than one participant expressed concern that parents were just watching out for their own kids.

«Now it's all about what 'my' kid gets. Tracking has helped my student, but I know it is unfair.» -White parent

«I am typical, and parents care about similar factors...it doesn't matter where I live, I just want the same opportunity» -biracial parent

Do you believe that other members of the district choose schools based on magnet themes? Which themes are the most attractive?

Many participants sighed when discussing the magnet themes. Although historically the magnet themes had meaning, many expressed concern that the themes are no longer relevant to the education that is occurring within the school. One participant used strong language calling the themes "a smokescreen."

Are there other themes that the district should consider adding to create more integrated schools?

Participants were hesitant to offer themes and wanted to continue to address the issue of integration. Many struggled to articulate the connection between the magnet school themes and integration.

However, some expressed a desire to focus on social justice, multiple intelligences, and philanthropy as ways to bring more integration into the schools. Others expressed a need to develop themes for the high school to minimize or eliminate peer groupings by race and class alone.

«There are narrow academic perceptions at the high school level, that's where we need to have choices -teacher»

Since it is impossible to honor all parents' wishes, at what point does your concern about school choice outweigh your concern about integration? For example, would you accept your 6th – ranked school? Why or why not?

Overwhelmingly, those with students currently in the school system were more concerned about their child and the impact their decision would have on their child's current view of him/herself (social acceptance) and his/her future (challenging curriculum). Those who do not have children currently in the school system appeared more willing to show concern for the larger community and were open to integrating schools. However, some expressed concern over how much school choice will cost them in taxes.

«Parents who are very involved are able to create opportunities for their children» -senior community member

C. Magnet Strengths and Challenges

The District spends 1.8 million on transportation to support the magnet system, which represents 1.57% of the total budget. Are you surprised by that number?

Most participants expressed surprise when they learned that only 1.5% of the total school budget was spent on busing costs related to the magnet school system. However, many discussed PTA spending to supplement school budgets and the lack of socioeconomic diversity in schools, limiting access to additional programs and services, e.g., tutoring.

«I came from a poor family, but my parents were there for me...these kids show up for kindergarten and know absolutely nothing.» ~White parent

Some participants expressed concern that the Pre-K is not a part of the Montclair system and stated that funds should be allocated for early childhood development and themes at the high school level. The quote to the left articulates the importance of supporting Pre-K education.

Do you believe there is an educational value to using magnet schools?

All participants were able to provide examples of where the magnet system is adding educational value, but were also able to provide examples where it is creating an injustice for certain populations (i.e., English as a Second Language, Remedial Education, and Special Education). The primary area of concern was lack of teacher training and motivation to help all students succeed.

The magnet system was recognized for increasing diversity but many stated, “magnets don’t fix the main problem of students being ignored.”

Has your child educationally benefited from the magnet schools? Other benefits?

Many stated that their students have benefited from magnet schools, but are hesitant to agree that the benefits can withstand the experience at the high school (e.g., tracking based on academic achievement and lack of resources for those who are struggling to achieve).

«We need to find a way to create motivation for all students within each school building, some teachers can’t and don’t.» ~Teacher

*«We don’t tell the story of why magnets work so well.»
--White teacher*

Some said that when their kids went to the magnets, they came out with more understanding around [race]. Some said that they wanted magnets to be recharged to give more students the chance to understand race. The teachers emphasized magnet school successes. Notably, they cited Nishuane as a school that is “revitalized.” They feel that it has a more positive note, led by passionate teachers, and that it offers a lot of choices.

*«The first time I had a Black friend was in middle school in Montclair.»
--White student*

What have been some of the challenges that your child has faced in the magnet school system that might not have arisen in a traditional neighborhood school system?

*«You have to fight like hell to get your students to have the experiences you want them to have...my smart kid wants to connect with peers that look like her.»
~Black parent high SES*

When participants discussed challenges, themes emerged around race and class. Many participants focused on the lack of racial diversity among teachers and student body (i.e., visual representation) and the lack of attention to special needs that may arise based on socioeconomic status (i.e., parental access to tutoring or transportation).

Another theme that emerged was concern over the limited space in the magnet schools that are effective, based on peer reports, as well as information provided by school officials and local realtors. Participants reported that those families of students who attend schools that are academically subpar schools experience a feeling of loss.

Some participants also expressed concern with busing and

child safety.

*«My mother is afraid when she picks me up from school because of the Black students standing around...and I don't understand why.»
--White student*

Have magnet schools benefited your community? Why or why not?

Participants focused on the allocation of resources more than the impact of themes. Issues that arose focused on PTA funding, equality, and socioeconomic factors such as income or social prestige undermining the magnet system. Specifically, some reported that political concern for individuals or sub-communities within the system (PTA) overrides concern for the whole community, creating a hostile environment for anyone who challenges the system.

*«I don't think we (the community) know what the goal is of the magnet school system today; is it integration or academic achievement?»
-community leader*

D. Return to Neighborhood Schools

After looking at the map of neighborhoods by race [explained by facilitator] are you surprised to learn that we still have segregated housing patterns in our town?

Many participants were excited to see clearly presented data, but were not surprised by the housing patterns. Some new arrivals to Montclair expressed disbelief in the level of segregation in the communities and articulated frustration with real estate agents for misrepresenting the community and “selling a dream.” Some participants acknowledged that, although their section of town was diverse, people were segregated within it (e.g., two city blocks being all white or all black; residents opting not to interact with those who look different). Others attributed this phenomenon to new arrivals choosing not to move to certain sectors because they did not want

to feel like they could not afford the lifestyle that was expected within certain sectors of the community (e.g., ability to join a country club vs. attending the community pool).

The map shows that a return to neighborhood schools will result in segregation. What do you think about that?

*«It is already happening in the High School... students are segregated»
--High SES parent*

Participants were unanimous in not wanting to return to neighborhood schools, but many expressed concern about the feasibility of true integration given the current resources available to the school district.

High school students expressed concern that racial tension would escalate in the community if there were a return to neighborhood schools. Students were able to articulate the value of going to a magnet school for elementary and middle school and the benefit of creating a tolerance for those who are different. Students who did not attend Montclair schools for elementary and middle school expressed difficulties adjusting to schools with students who are

different racially.

How do you think it would affect your children? Your neighborhood?

Many Caucasian parents expressed concern that their children would suffer if there were a return to neighborhood schools. They expressed fears that their children would not learn to appreciate what they have and not develop an understanding of what others face in a global economy.

*«We have a natural need to feel comfortable and bussing will not help us feel comfortable with our biases...discussions like these will»
--White High SES parent*

E. New School Assignment Approaches

How would you feel about using other census data to ensure that each school includes children from a diversity of neighborhoods (e.g., high income, low income, middle class, predominantly African American, predominantly white)?

Participants were overwhelmingly supportive of using census data to inform decision making related to the redesign of the magnet school system and school assignment decisions.

Would you be willing to give information about your finances and your level of educational attainment?

Most participants were willing to disclose financial information, and did so when signing up to participate in the focus groups. However they only disclosed a range and did not provide their actual salaries. Others expressed concern over potential misuse by those with ulterior motives. There were many who stated that the school already gathers such data and were perplexed that not everyone has to provide this type of information.

Focus Group Follow-Up Reactions

After participating in the focus groups, participants were provided with an opportunity to react to the process. The majority of participants found the process beneficial and stated that they would like to participate in living room dialogues to continue the conversation around integration in Montclair.

Positive outcomes included:

- Hearing perspectives from members of the community that aren't often accessible.
- Gaining valuable information regarding the history of the magnet schools in Montclair and some of the underlying issues about them.
- Confirming the value of magnet schools to maintain Montclair's school integration.
- Learning that one's experience was similar to many other parents in Montclair.
- Meeting some like-minded folks relatively new to town who agree with them.

Participant recommendations for future community conversations:

- Set aside more time to address the topics.
- Provide problem-solving opportunities to address some of the issues that arise.
- Address the tensions around the fact that "neighborhoods are still so segregated"; and around common talk about the importance of diversity but not really wanting it "in their school or neighborhood."

Facilitator thoughts on reactions:

The reactions described above highlight the benefit of homogenous groups and the importance of community members finding support as they discuss integration in Montclair. These reactions also display the benefit of having diverse individuals find common ground. By creating groups that were homogenous in one aspect (e.g., race, users of the school system) but diverse in other ways (e.g., income, years of residency, age) facilitated the emergence of themes that are relevant for most residents of Montclair. While we acknowledge that those who chose to participate in the process may place a higher value on education or social justice issues than non-participants, it is important to use this information to begin a broader investigation into the obstacles, fears, and benefits of integration in Montclair.

Kirwan Institute Recommendations

Based on an analysis of representative participant responses, the lead facilitator and senior researchers from the Kirwan Institute make the following recommendations:

A. Diversity and Integration in the Montclair Community and Schools

1. Both the MPSD and community groups should seize the opportunity to educate and engage the community about the history of Montclair's magnet school program and its relationship to diversity. Montclair's history is an affirming, community-building narrative. We encourage the district to continue to find venues to lift up this history. For example, the district could incorporate testimonies from students and alumni about the value of diversity and the unique educational experience they enjoyed as a product of the magnet program into parent orientation sessions and materials.
2. The district should encourage open dialogues with parents and community members through a widely deployed survey exploring perceptions of diversity, integration, the magnet schools and the assignment plan. The results from the survey can inform a successful messaging strategy emphasizing the benefits of diversity and integration, and can also inform magnet themes (see Recommendation B2).
3. The district should clearly affirm that diversity and integration not only improve student achievement, investing all parents in the community as a whole, but that they prepare children for life in a globalized society and foster citizenship and democratic values.
4. The district should clearly acknowledge that 'diversity' includes race, socioeconomic status, gender, ability, and other forms of diversity.
5. Both the district and community groups should acknowledge that integration is an ongoing process, and that despite tremendous progress, challenges remain, and that the district is committed to addressing these challenges. Despite being a numerically diverse community, patterns of residential segregation persist. And, despite having numerical school-level diversity, meaningful integration is more than numerical representation. Meaningful integration also has implications for teacher and administrator training, curricula, student support, discipline policies, detracking, and the provision of early childhood education.
6. Continue to work with purposeful and proactive leaders within the school and community to facilitate discussions about diversity and integration.

B. Magnet Schools and Choice

1. Communicate to teachers, students and community members, magnet school efforts utilized and successes achieved to address issues related to racial diversity.
2. The district should continue to ensure that magnet school themes are solidly present and relevant. The original magnet themes were selected with recognition of parental interests to help foster racial diversity. A community survey directed by the district would help the district calibrate magnet school design to better draw a diverse population of students.
3. When referencing the student choice policy, the district should incorporate language that emphasizes the social compact and encourages parents to select schools that are best for their children *and* their community. Research shows that parents will often make decisions that are in the best interest of their community when prompted to do so. Some parents in the focus groups explicitly stated that they selected schools on that basis. The district's communications should at least mention the need for all parents and community members to attend to the soundness of every magnet school, while acknowledging taxpayer concerns.

C. Magnet Strengths and Challenges

1. Seize the opportunity to build upon what some teachers describe as the “revitalized” momentum in certain Montclair schools to recharge the magnet schools’ commitment to integration and excellence.
2. Explore the possibility of themes in the high school to abate peer groupings by race and class. Focus group participants and students enjoy the magnet themes, but expressed regret that these themes are not carried into high school. At the same time, high school is where tracking is most pronounced.
3. Address social justice challenges in such areas as English as a Second Language, Remedial Education, and Special Education, racial and socioeconomic diversity, and limited space in some of the more desirable schools.
4. To alleviate fiscal concerns about busing, the district should provide a statement explaining that only 1.5% of its budget is spent on transportation costs.

D. Neighborhood Schools

1. The district and community groups must understand the ways in which the practices of realtors and the trends of new arrivals affect these parental preferences, and recognize that some folks will prefer neighborhood schools as a result.
2. The district should use the race and class census maps, and the hypothetical “neighborhood schools” map in the appendix to address the concerns and disbelief that Montclair neighborhoods are segregated. These maps make the point that the Magnet plan has produced evident racial and economic integration despite patterns of residential segregation within the district, and that the return to neighborhood schools would result in stark race and class segregation.
3. Address the concerns and assumptions about the school budget and transportation costs associated with busing.

E. New Assignment Plans

1. The district should clearly explain in broad terms that it has modified its freedom of choice, school selection and assignment policy to ensure compliance with the state order from the Commissioner of Education to maintain integrated schools, as well as applicable federal and state laws, including the Supreme Court’s decisions in *Parents Involved*.
2. The district should also clarify that the *Parents Involved* decisions permit the use of a race factor calculated at the neighborhood level, although they restrict the use of race in individual student assignment. Some people mistakenly believe that *Parents Involved* prohibits the use of race entirely in student assignment.
3. The district should address the question of why it does not use SES alone in its assignment plan, and the importance of maintaining racial diversity as a goal and a means, not simply economic diversity.
4. The district should address concerns regarding the misuse of data and confusion over why the district does not use school data instead of census data.

Dialogue and Messaging Plan: Next Steps

Public Messaging

On the Revised Assignment Plan:

“For 30 years, Montclair Public Schools have strived for excellence, tailoring educational opportunities to student needs through freedom of choice magnet selection while preparing all students for life and citizenship in a diverse society. The revised assignment policy preserves parent choice and ensures compliance with all applicable federal and state laws. As the first update to the freedom of choice plan in three decades, these adjustments are designed to preserve and promote successful, high quality, integrated education for all students.”

Community Survey

The Montclair Public School District should consider drawing upon the insights it has gathered from these focus groups and parent surveys to develop a widely deployed community survey that explores topics similar to those addressed in the focus groups. The analysis of the results would serve to refine the district’s understanding of how community members are thinking and talking about diversity, integration, the magnet schools and future assignment plans. This process could help the district develop a strategic messaging plan that effectively communicates the benefits of diversity and garners widespread public support for the assignment plan. The survey would also allow the district to recalibrate the magnet school design so as to increase the schools’ draw of a diverse student population. The survey would be developed in conjunction with the district and conducted and analyzed by The Kirwan Institute. Any associated costs would be absorbed by the Institute.

Living Room Dialogues

Community groups will subsequently coordinate living room dialogues with heterogeneous groups of 10-12 residents that will meet for several hours and over several weeks. They will achieve goals similar to those of the focus groups and will help community members move toward understanding diverse perspectives and expressing their own to a broader audience. Living room dialogues may also invigorate the community’s commitment to racial integration and spur increased attention to integration along class lines. To enhance the impact of these dialogues, high school students should be included to ensure that their perspective is heard. In addition, the PTA documentary highlighting experiences with race and diversity within Montclair can be used as a vehicle for discussion about the reality of race relations within the school system. However, it is essential that those hosting the dialogues are open to diversity and are able to create a “comfortable” environment for open discussion.

APPENDIX

Montclair Parent Survey

Focus group participants who currently have or previously have had children enrolled in Montclair public schools had the opportunity at the end of the session to respond to a survey consisting of open-ended questions related to school choice and parental decision making about education. Eighty-seven surveys were completed. Below is a summary of the feedback to the survey.

1. Parents stated that they have children in/or have had children in the following schools:

Nishuane:	25	Montclair HS:	23	Glenfield:	17	Hillside:	15
Northeast:	10	Renaissance:	9	Mt. Hebron:	9	Watchung:	8
Edgemont:	8	Rand:	5	Bradford:	5	Pre-K:	5

Solomon Schechter, Spanish Survey, and MKA were each mentioned once

2. Parents identified the following factors as influencing their decision making:

School based factors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academics/Curriculum • Class size (student/teacher ratio) • Culture & Climate (diversity) • PTA, Staff • Magnet Theme • Only choice (high school) • Resources within the school • Location 	Family Factors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback from peers/family • Location • Start time/convenience • Diversity (students) • Will my child feel comfortable • Resources that the school provides • Values/Magnet Theme
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3. Did the magnet theme impact your choice?

5.7% (n=5)
54% (n=47) stated
3.4% (n=3) stated
23% (n=20) stated

**Definitely/Absolutely
YES
A bit, primarily, somewhat (depends on the school)
NO**

4. When asked about factors that impact the decision making of others, replies were very similar to those expressed when reflecting on their own decision making.

<p>School based factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academics/Curriculum • Test Scores* • Class size (student/teacher ratio) • Culture & Climate (diversity) • PTA, Staff • Magnet Theme • Only choice (high school) • Facilities • Location 	<p>Family Factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback from peers/family • Reputation* • Perception* • Location • Start time/convenience • Diversity (students) • Whether participant's child feels comfortable • Resources that the school provides • Values/Magnet Theme • Finances* • PTA Talk*
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NOTE: Some factors were attributed to the decision making of others, but not disclosed when asked about the respondent's own behavior (*denoted above with an **).

5. Does the magnet theme impact school choice of others?

39% (n=31)

YES*

18% (n=14)

Sometimes, somewhat, partially

18% (n=14)

NO

10% (n=8)

Don't Know

NOTE: Again, individuals were much more expressive when discussing the choice of others (*denoted above with an **).

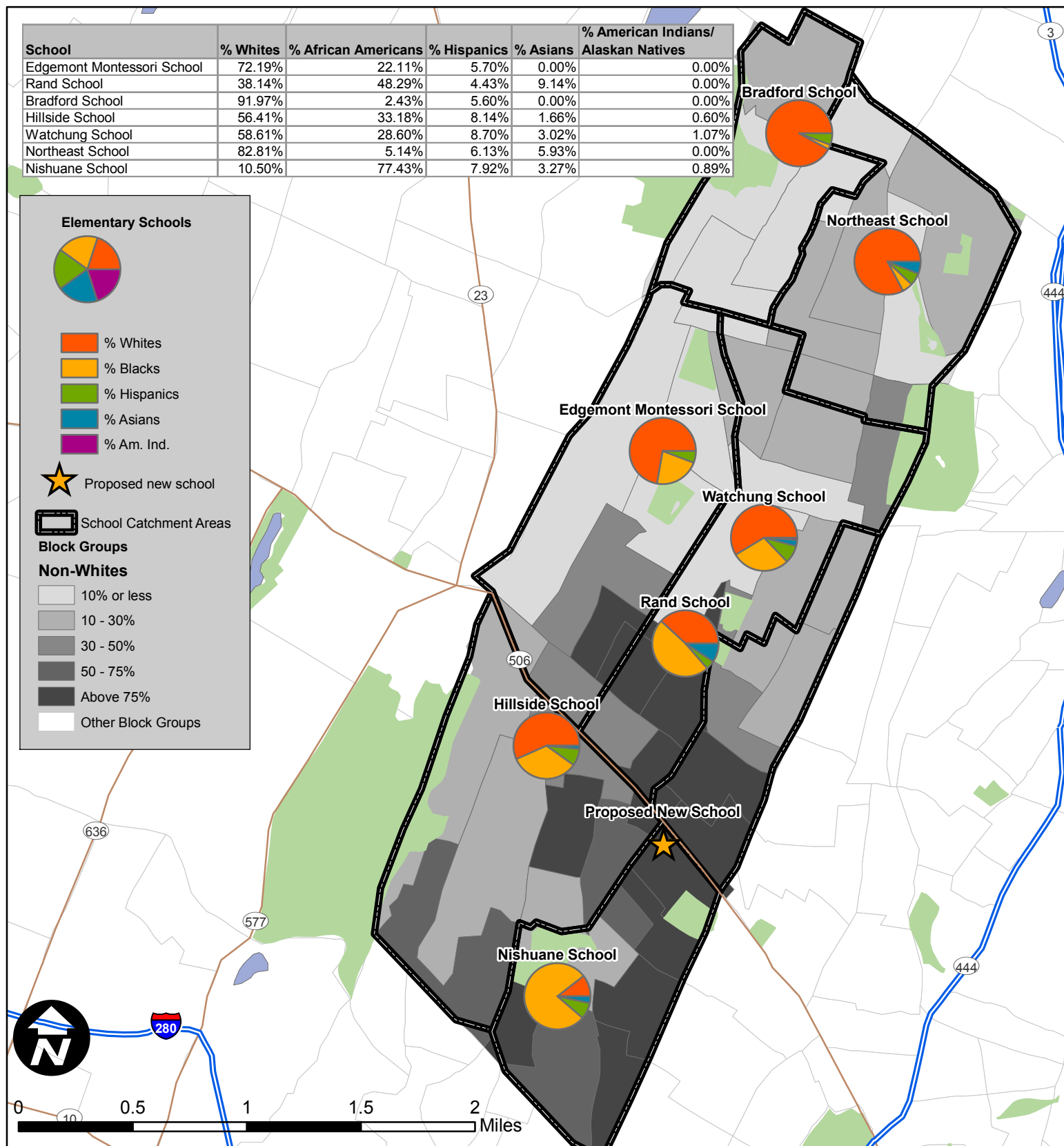
Potential magnet themes

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economics/Finance • Foreign Language • Gifted and Talented • Global Thinking/Diversity • Science/ Math & Technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Justice/Social Responsibility • Develop themes for the high school • Don't Know / Good Question • Different Learners (Multiple Intelligences)
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Montclair, NJ

Neighborhood School Scenario

Elementary Schools Racial Composition



This map displays the racial composition of children in elementary schools in Montclair District, NJ, based on the assumption that school enrollment directly reflects the race breakdown of elementary school age kids in the school's catchment zones. School catchment areas are based on a projection of what would neighborhood schools look like today using today's schools.