

## Retaining Magnet Students

Strategic student retention is an essential element for managing magnet school enrollments effectively. After recruiting the desired number and distribution of students to your magnet program, retaining them is critical to its implementation, growth, and long-term sustainability and to student diversity.



Interchangeably referred to as student persistence, progression, and completion, some view student retention as an outcome. However, the concept of retention has evolved into a process designed to support and facilitate students' normal progression through the school grades until they successfully advance to the next school level or graduate high

school. The strategic process requires assessment, planning, strong relationships, and student and family support.

Magnet schools must combine good schooling with focused prevention, intervention, and recovery efforts that promote student persistence and prevent transfers and dropouts. Magnet school retention efforts must also consider competitive school choice markets, student and family education goals and commitment, and dropout prevention strategies. While these considerations may seem overwhelming, planning for retention from application to completion will ensure that each magnet school meets its academic achievement and desegregation goals while meeting the needs of students.

This issue of THE MAGNET COMPASS features useful student retention principles and strategies, including lessons and tips for engaging students and preventing student dropout.

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## Cornerstone of Student Retention

Student engagement is the foundation of student retention, persistence, and dropout prevention strategies and programs. If a magnet student seems to be disengaged or to feel unsupported in any of the areas shown here, he or she may choose to transfer to another school or drop out entirely. Monitor student data to ensure genuine student involvement across these areas in your magnet school.

- Academic engagement refers to how students respond to class lessons, homework, testing, and hands-on learning in the school environment. An exciting, well-integrated theme that responds to students' individual needs and interests can facilitate this type of engagement.
- Social engagement refers to participatory activities, such as friendships with other students, clubs and activities, sports, or special events (e.g., dances, science fairs).
- Emotional engagement refers to the personal relationships that students form with school staff. Students will be engaged emotionally when they feel cared about, valued, listened to, and encouraged by their peers, teachers, counselors, coaches, principals, and other staff.

**Promoting diversity,  
academic excellence  
and equity through  
magnet schools**

# A Message From the Magnet Schools Assistance Program



Left to right: Anna Hinton, Director of Parental Options and Information; Brittany Beth, MSAP Program Officer, Management and Program Analyst; and Justis Tuia, MSAP Program Officer, Management and Program Analyst

The U.S. Department of Education's goal of preparing every student to be college and career ready starts with the underlying premise that every student will graduate from high school. Today's workers need more sophisticated skills and knowledge



than ever before, and our children rely on parents, educators, and communities to help them develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed.

Research describes a range of factors that can help us engage every child in experiences that spark their interests while supporting academic and social-emotional development. Magnet schools, with their focus on equity and innovation, already build some of these factors into their programs. This issue of THE MAGNET COMPASS will help you review the factors and think about how to strengthen their presence in your schools.

Although we tend to think of dropout prevention as a middle and high school issue, early and elementary learning environments make important contributions to student engagement. During these years, magnet schools can create safe, nurturing, and stimulating learning environments as they help students build strong literacy skills.

The Department's What Works Clearinghouse suggests a three-pronged approach to preventing older students from dropping out. One prong involves using diagnostic data to get an accurate count of

students who leave the system and to identify students who are at risk of leaving. The other two prongs involve targeted and schoolwide interventions. Targeted interventions for at-risk students may match adult advocates to individual students, and provide academic supports and enrichments that help students reengage in school. Schoolwide interventions help to prevent disengagement by personalizing the learning environment and instruction for all students, and by providing rigorous and relevant instruction.

Parents, too, contribute to developing a supportive learning environment. When magnet schools engage family and community members in their children's in- and out-of-school learning experiences, everyone benefits. Richer learning, higher levels of achievement, and higher graduation rates are all associated with parent involvement in education. Magnet schools are perfectly positioned to help students and their families get excited about learning, recognize connections between academics and the real world, and go on to

“Magnet schools are perfectly positioned to help students get excited about learning, recognize connections between academics and the real world, and go on to postsecondary programs.”

postsecondary programs. Use the strategies presented in this issue to further support your magnet students and ensure they continue in the magnet program and in school.

This publication is produced by the Magnet Schools Assistance Program Technical Assistance Center (MSAP Center), a technical assistance resource for MSAP grantees and the general magnet schools community. The MSAP Center provides grantees and magnet schools with technical support by offering tools, information, and strategies to assist in planning, implementing, and sustaining programs. The ultimate goal of the MSAP Center is to help magnet schools provide communities with educational opportunities that promote diversity, academic excellence, and equity.

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The views expressed in the newsletter do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and no official endorsement by ED should be inferred.



This newsletter was produced in whole or in part with funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number: ED-OII-13-C-0073.

## Fundamental Principles for Student Persistence

Rigor, relevance, and relationships are fundamental to student persistence and dropout prevention because the elements support good teaching and student engagement practices. These elements are integrally connected and their intensities are indicators of a magnet school's success in preparing students for college and career.

### 1 Academic rigor.

Rigorous magnet curriculum and instruction require students to explore, research, and solve complex problems to develop a deep understanding of academic concepts that reflect college and career readiness standards. The theme-based curriculum includes focused, coherent, and appropriately challenging content, pedagogy, and assessment. Rigor promotes learning across disciplines, moving magnet students from basic concepts to more intellectual thinking. It is based on the premise that a magnet school holds high expectations for all its students and provides them with opportunities and interventions to ensure student success. Academic rigor challenges magnet students to be active thinkers and doers, motivating them to persist in school.

### 2 Academic relevance.

Relevant theme-based curriculum and instruction connect with each student's interests. Academic relevance provides magnet students with opportunities to understand how lessons link to real-world experiences. Relevant curriculum enables students to gain personal meaning by drawing on prior knowledge and by understanding how the information fits into their personal frame of reference. This element also encourages students to apply learning across disciplines to real-world situations. Making learning relevant and personal promotes students' persistence and interests in school.



### 3 Supportive relationships.

Studies show that students stay in school when they have meaningful relationships with adults and peers. Magnet students who have personal connections with an adult (e.g., instructor, counselor, or administrator) feel that they have an advocate who understands their interests, struggles, and ambitions. Meaningful student-staff relationships also help shape students' attitudes and behaviors about themselves as learners and their academic success. Likewise, meaningful relationships with peers influence students' motivation to persist in a magnet school and pursue their academic and social goals.

# Strategies for Supporting Students

“Mapping the Way” spotlights exceptional, innovative researchers. This article features Olatokunbo (Toks) Fashola, Ph.D., Research Scientist at Johns Hopkins University. Her research interests include dropout prevention for minority students, schoolwide reform, and student engagement in STEM. In this article, she shares strategies magnet leaders can use to engage students and families to ensure they persist in the magnet program and in school.



Olatokunbo (Toks) Fashola, Ph.D.,  
Research Scientist

Effective student and family engagement, inquiry-based learning, and goal setting, according to Fashola, can help prevent dropouts and engage students in STEM or other theme-based learning so they persist in the magnet program.

To engage younger students in STEM learning, instructional staff working with content experts should “foster the concept of scientific inquiry,” Fashola stated. “Be ready to have the children ask questions; give them time to explore what they have learned.”

Fashola suggested schools can work to improve parents’ experiential capital through targeted activities. For example, parent nights might actively involve family members in science experiments so they understand what their children are learning and are required to do. When there are upcoming field trips or projects, the school can provide parents with questions to ask their children to help foster critical thinking.

Fashola suggested supporting at-risk students by helping them to set proximal (immediate) and distal (long-term) goals. “Proximal goals are, ‘I’m going to pass my midterm, pass the quiz, and pass my final.’ Distal goals are ‘I’m going to get promoted to the next grade; I’m going to graduate from high school.’” After working with the students to set goals, “The counselor can help students stay focused on their goals and study habits” throughout the year.

## MAPPING THE WAY



Staff-student relationships can be key to student retention. Students on the verge of dropping out often say they stayed because “there was one person in the school the student could go to when he or she was having problems.” These role models help students “to take accountability for their success and to believe they are smart.” Relationships with school staff and magnet partners also help to keep students engaged in and pursuing STEM beyond high school. These mentors should “look like the students and be excited about what they do,” Fashola said. Peer mentoring, such as high school seniors mentoring high school freshmen or university students mentoring high school students, can increase social engagement in school.

Parent engagement also matters. “In a number of cases students drop out because their parents do not have what is called experiential capital,” Fashola explained. “Parents who have graduated know what to expect each year of high school,” while parents who did not graduate cannot pass that experience on to their children. Targeted programs can break the cycle and keep those students in school. For example, tutoring programs that include college visits, summer bridge programs that ease the transition from middle to high school, and study skills programs can all help students build experiential capital.



*Tell students two things: The only way you want them to leave is by graduation, and they can approach staff with any challenges and complaints.*

Toks Fashola



To create targeted retention strategies, Fashola suggested collecting data on “attendance, academic performance, and the extent to which parents are involved in the children’s lives.” Then use the data to identify patterns—for example, student absences above a certain threshold, or classes with lower pass rates than average. Then, survey students and parents to determine the effectiveness of the strategies.

In conclusion, Fashola stated, “Foster a culture of support. Tell students two things: The only way you want them to leave is by graduating, and they can approach staff with any challenges and complaints.”

# Strategies for Magnet Student Retention

Student persistence is a primary indicator of a school's success. Commonly used to measure school performance, student retention and graduation rates tend to reflect a school's level of student engagement, quality of student learning, and ability to meet student needs. Magnet leaders can use these strategies to facilitate students' continued enrollment, grade-level advancement, and high school graduation.



## 1 Create a safe learning environment.

Create a culture of fairness and trust that fosters a safe and inclusive magnet school climate. Conduct school climate audits and use findings to ensure your magnet school supports student-centered learning and meets all students' needs. Expand nonbullying practices to include user-friendly language for mistreatment to help staff and students identify experienced or observed inappropriate behaviors. Adopt student bystander programs that empower students to defuse poor behavior before it escalates. Ensuring students' physical and emotional safety puts students at ease, promotes regular school attendance, and reduces learning distractions.

## 2 Establish mentoring programs.

Create partnerships between students and caring adults from the community and local businesses that can champion students' interests, talents, and aspirations. Sponsor activities where students and mentors can participate together and build relationships. Train mentors to improve their coaching, communication, and leadership skills, and draw on mentoring organizations' expertise to tailor mentoring to the needs of your students. Connecting students with caring, reliable adults encourages them to become more involved in learning and stay in school.

## 3 Prepare students for transition.

Establish orientation activities to help transition students to the next education level. Have staff regularly communicate academic and behavioral expectations for next grade levels to put students at ease. Establish vertically aligned theme-based pathways and articulation supports to facilitate students' continued theme-based studies. Promote staff collaboration within and between schools to provide students with opportunities to connect with their next school. Easing transition between grades and schools helps students to reduce anxiety and better integrate into the new environment.

## 4 Implement early warning systems.

Establish indicators (e.g., absenteeism, disciplinary infractions, course failures, and grade point average) and thresholds to identify students at risk of leaving the school. Train staff how to monitor students' performance based on the indicators. Use a database application to quickly process information and assist in identifying students at risk. Implementing an early warning system enables magnet schools to provide students with appropriate interventions that support and help keep students on track to completion.

# Assessing Student Retention

Analyzing student persistence and attrition data will help you understand who stays in and who leaves your magnet schools. This knowledge will enable you to identify how well your program supports and engages students and help you create a plan for effective student retention. This matrix includes guiding questions, methodologies, and applications your magnet schools can use to learn more about student retention.

Questions	Methodologies	Applications
How many students leave the school, when do they leave, where do they go, and why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examine historical student data such as enrollment entry and exit, student attendance, disciplinary incidents, suspensions, dropouts, and data on competing magnets and other choice schools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Track students to identify patterns and trends around why students leave and determine where they go. For example, organize attrition data by students' race, gender, grade level, and academic courses and programs.</li> </ul>
To what extent are students engaged academically, socially, and emotionally in the school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examine school and classroom observation data that document students' classroom participation and reactions to schoolwork.</li> <li>Examine students' participation in extracurricular activities such as sports and clubs.</li> <li>Observe student-staff interactions and relationships (e.g., disciplinary reports, guidance counselor logs).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify students who are not genuinely involved in school academically, socially, and/or emotionally.</li> <li>Determine whether these uninvolved students are at risk of leaving the magnet program or dropping out of school.</li> </ul>
To what extent do students' home and work environments affect their ability to engage in school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examine free and reduced-priced meal data to identify students' family income levels.</li> <li>Look at quality of life data for students' residential areas, such as labor, health, and crime statistics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify potential or real stressors that prevent genuine student engagement in school and develop strategies to support students dealing with those stressors.</li> </ul>
Do the school structure and culture support student persistence?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examine student and parent satisfaction surveys; school and classroom observations; student, parent, and teacher focus group summaries; exit interviews; and academic achievement data.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify aspects of the school structure, climate, and culture that support and do not support student persistence.</li> <li>Identify strategies, programs, and community partners that foster student engagement and student retention.</li> </ul>

# Recruitment, Relationships, and Relevance

“Magnet Moments” spotlights personnel from districts and programs that have effectively implemented innovative ideas or research-based practices. This article features Doreen Marvin, Director of Development for LEARN in Old Lyme, Connecticut. Marvin has over 30 years’ experience in education, and has led the development of multiple magnet programs at LEARN. In this article, she details a framework to guide magnet student retention strategies.



Doreen Marvin,  
Director

“Recruitment, relationships, and relevance all lead to retention,” Marvin explained, describing the framework she uses. “It is about the individualized, personalized support that you give students, both academically and socially.”

“We believe that retention actually starts with recruitment. If you do not tell parents exactly what to expect when

At the secondary level, family-school compacts that outline responsibilities can provide clarity. Marvin explained, “If anybody, including the school, falls short on a responsibility, it is a place to start the conversation. If a student chooses

“*If you believe that 50 percent mobility is acceptable, that is what you will get.*”

Doreen Marvin

## MAGNET MOMENTS

a student gets to the school, you are more likely to lose the student,” Marvin said. To keep families in the magnet program, Marvin advises magnet schools to “be honest in their recruitment. Make sure families know what their child will learn and what the theme truly means.” Once the family enrolls, Doreen advises schools to “make sure parents know all their options for going to the next level” in the magnet pipeline.

The relationships step in the framework involves engaging students and their families. All stakeholders should “understand the magnet program’s core values and beliefs about engaging kids and families in learning,” Marvin said. One key component is that “every student should have a significant relationship with someone in that building.”

Clarity is also important in family engagement, and goal setting can provide clarity. “Every year our schools meet with families and students to establish goals they want to accomplish. For example, one student may want to make five new friends this year, or another may want to understand algebra so they can move to the next level of math,” Marvin explained. “Then, we help them achieve that goal and we let parents know their progress.”

to leave, the school talks to them to identify which responsibilities the school did not do well.”

Relevance in the framework refers to the rigor and relevance of the theme-based curriculum. Instruction should connect to the real world and show students all the career choices available within the magnet theme. Marvin also noted, “Reflect on and revive the excitement around a magnet school every few years. No matter how successful you are, evaluating the theme has benefits. Is it still relevant in our community and to college and career readiness?”

To measure effectiveness, Marvin suggests setting a goal. “People should believe that 100 percent of students will stay. If you believe that 50 percent mobility is acceptable, that is what you will get.” Data to help measure success include exit interviews with leaving students and graduates; surveys of parents, current students, and recent graduates; and achievement and assessment data.

In conclusion, Marvin summarized her beliefs for her magnet programs’ recruitment and retention. “It is about everybody being welcome at the dinner table and knowing what they are going to eat before they get there.”

## More Information

For more about student retention, visit <http://msapcenter.com/resource.aspx>.

## Creating an Engaging Classroom

Magnet instructors can make these subtle changes in the classroom to elevate student engagement and increase connection with the school.

- ✓ *Customize students' classroom experiences.* Create learning environments that accommodate a range of learning styles (e.g., tactile, visual, or auditory). For example, assign students to work in groups by different learning methods, or create separate classroom spaces for students who prefer to work quietly alone. Personalizing student learning experiences eliminates distractions and enables students to be present to process learning.
- ✓ *Stimulate students' curiosity.* Provide opportunities for magnet students to learn through personal experience and natural exploration. Give students content-relevant artifacts they can interact with to tap into their imaginations. This type of activity can stimulate learning and foster intellectual engagement, generating an eagerness for learning that encourages persistence in school.
- ✓ *Encourage personal discovery.* Integrate personal discovery activities (e.g., creating self-portraits, writing autobiographies, or completing self-assessment surveys) into learning to help students become aware of their talents, learning styles, and personality types and help students better understand how the content links to their personal life. Sharing with the class will help students learn about each other and forge stronger relationships with their peers and teachers, creating a feeling of community.
- ✓ *Praise students' achievements.* Set aside time weekly to honor student accomplishments (e.g., increasing test scores, leading a group project, or placing in a science competition). Use social media such as Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram to share student successes beyond the classroom. Recognizing successes increases students' self-esteem and motivation, fostering greater magnet school connections and continued matriculation.

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