The concept of Choice can mean a lot of things. When we talk about offering choice to parents, what do we mean in the Cedar Rapids Community School District?

It is true that the word “choice” gets bantered about a lot in public discourse. For some “choice” means giving public funded vouchers to parents to spend at any school they wish without restriction. For others “choice” means having more flexibility in both the where parents send their children and how their children will be taught. In general, most parents assume school choice means getting to choose which physical or virtual school their children attend regardless of school and district boundaries. Iowa already has a choice option for parents called open enrollment. This enables any parent in any district to “open enroll” their child to any district they wish so long as they meet the timeline requirements.

The research around “choice” is compelling and not surprising. When people – parents and children included – are provided options and choices for how, when, where and with whom they learn, their outcomes improve. Where the debate and disagreements typically appear is in the role of public tax dollars in funding private parochial and secular schools.

In the Cedar Rapids school community we want to focus the choice discussion at a more granular level - where the choice is based upon the student and parent’s interests and passions rather than incomplete and often misleading data currently used. Assuming one school is “bad” and another “good” for reasons of choosing one over the other is often based upon faulty assumptions, inaccurate perceptions, and misunderstanding of the data presented. We want parents to have the ability to make informed and nuanced choices within the public school system they and the community support.
So, we want to engage parents and the community in a conversation to help define what this means for our community at this time. I firmly believe that most people in our community value public education as a cornerstone of a strong democratic society and that public education can provide greater choice for kids and parents that strengthens all our schools, all our children, and our community. We want to explore this idea of choice as it manifests itself in the concept of the Magnet school here in Cedar Rapids.

**So, how is the school district defining ‘magnet school’ and what does one generally look like?**

A Magnet school is part of the public school system. In Cedar Rapids, like almost all public schools, students are placed into their schools based on their home address. With Magnet schools, the public school system creates schools extending beyond traditional attendance boundaries.

Magnet schools are focused on innovation and have something different or focused to offer making them an attractive choice to many parents and students looking to feed their child’s interests and abilities. Distinguishing them from other public schools, Magnet schools usually have alternative or otherwise compelling modes of instruction. For example, you might find a Montessori Magnet or a STEM Magnet or a Visual and Performing Arts Magnet. The intent of Magnet schools is not to discredit or diminish the fine academic experiences found in other schools but instead provides expanded choice for parents, kids, and the community.

Student achievement in well-designed Magnets show dramatic student achievement both for those opting in from beyond the school boundaries and those children in the neighborhood who choose to stay. To understand this, simply consider the things you personally find interesting and you have a passion around. How easy is it to engage in learning more and pushing yourself farther? Simply put, people learn more and faster when they are engaged in things inherently interesting to them. This is the basic construct behind Magnets – giving kids and parents the opportunity to learn broadly through a strong interest or passion area.

As for our community, anytime we can provide meaningful choices to our kids and community, the stronger we become. Magnets that have a strong connection to the values and interests of the larger community are well supported by that community. It brings awareness, excitement, energy, and recognition to both the schools and the community that supports it. Finally, it provides the community with another value-add – another reason to bring your family to Cedar Rapids and be a part of our community and to invest in our excellent public schools.

We are currently thinking about Magnet schools as both a neighborhood school and a school choice option for parents. In short, this means any parent living within the traditional school boundaries of a Magnet school would have the choice to continue having their children attend that school or they could choose to move their child to another school. The remaining spaces in the school would be open for any parent living
within the Cedar Rapids CSD attendance area to opt to send their child to the Magnet. If there were more interest than space, we would institute some sort of fair and equitable lottery system.

Research on Magnet schools has shown significant improvement in student learning and school culture both for those coming from beyond the school boundaries AND those neighborhood children opting to remain. Magnets are a more specific and nuanced “choice” because parents and children are attending based upon an interest in the over-arching theme of the school and how learning happens there. Here are a few research findings from a compilation of the six major studies on Magnet schools:

- Studies suggest that Magnets are associated with increased student achievement, higher levels of student motivation and satisfaction with school, higher levels of teacher motivation and morale, and higher levels of parent satisfaction with school.
- More than 2.5 million children attend Magnet schools – more than twice the number of students served by Charter school – making Magnet the largest sector for school choice.
- While studies suggest that Charter schools contribute to “white flight,” Magnet schools provide wide diversity more reflective of the communities they serve.
- In Connecticut, attendance at Magnet high schools had positive math and reading effects and in reading achievement in middle schools.
- Magnet school students generally report more positive academic attitudes and behaviors than non-magnet school students.
- Peer support for academic achievement is stronger in Magnets than non-Magnet schools.
- Magnet students are less likely to be absent or skip classes.
- Students in Magnets feel more connected to students of other races.
- Magnet schools are more effective at improving reading and social studies achievement than regular public schools, Catholic or secular private schools.
- 80% of Magnet schools have higher achievement scores than the district average for regular public schools.
- In math, high school achievement two and three years after entering the program increased, suggesting a causal relationship, meaning Magnet schools likely caused these math improvements.
- Students in Magnets have been shown to graduate at much higher rates than non-magnet students – more than doubling the probability that a student would graduate in one California study.
- Magnet schools are effective tools for attracting and retaining households and students in urban districts.
- Magnet school faculties are more stable than non-Magnet school faculties, in addition to being more racially diverse.
• Magnets are more successful at retaining experienced teachers than non-Magnet programs in the same district.


Of course, there are issues and negatives to Magnet schools. Like anything else, they are never all good or all bad. Moving forward with Magnets means understanding these issues, being as open and transparent with them, and collectively working to find solutions to minimize or eliminate them. Typical issues associated with Magnet schools include:

• Community conflict and dissonance as interest in attending the Magnets exceed their capacity to serve all the interest. The resulting lottery system means some are not going to get in. Magnet experts we've talked to say that there is a two to three year adjustment period for a community and the District.
• Resource allocation is sometimes tilted (either in reality or perception) in the favor of the Magnet schools creating hard feelings and resentment from the traditional and non-Magnet schools. As a community, we will need to keep the topic of financing and support at the forefront of the discussion as we don't wish to create financial and resource inequities nor do we want to halt change and what's best for kids and families because of this fear.
• Poor planning and lack of startup resources can sub-optimize the school and make it struggle early on, causing the "plug to be pulled" before the school can hit its stride and realize its potential.
• Lack of community support and interest in helping the District and its teachers make the transition.

An Example

Magnet schools are still accountable for all the mandates and requirements of the state and district and so the learning targets and expectations remain. However, the school is structured around and focused on a particular theme embedded throughout the school and the various subjects.

For example, a Medical Science STEM Magnet school would focus on medical science. Learning – from learning to read to math to science to art to social studies to physical education – would focus on the theme of medical science. To a Kindergartner, this might look like a small animal clinic where they help to raise, care for, and study a variety of animals. Through this exploration, teachers are able to teach reading, writing, spelling, communication, math, science, art, and social studies as an integrated part of the kids’ excitement about animals and their health. Local veterinarians may be regular participants in the learning as students are introduced to basic science and math
concepts related to animal health. They may conduct experiments by putting animals on different feeding regimens to see which produces the most healthy animals, learning science concepts and research skills along the way. They would learn math by weighing and measuring the animals, their food, and charting their growth and progress.

At upper elementary, grades 4 or 5, the focus might be on more complex medical science issues related to humans and mammals as they progress in their science, math, and literacy skills. Students may spend portions of their day working in labs doing tests and experiments to learn about blood-typing and DNA. They may be applying art and PE to construct models of the human muscular/skeletal system to show to younger children. They would be writing papers and giving presentations on their findings to doctors and nurses who would help coach and teach them. Teachers in schools would remain experts in science, math, and language literacy but would work more as a team collaborating with and in front of the children to model teamwork and create a supportive network of skilled teachers ensuring that every child was engaged in aspects of medical science interesting to them and which was helping them achieve the desired learning outcomes and standards.

At the MS/HS level this may mean regular time spent in clinics and hospitals taking part in research and using high-tech equipment to gain an understanding of biology and chemistry. Teachers would be working as a team rather than in individual disciplines to help students master difficult concepts in context. Science, math, social studies, and language teachers would be working collaboratively and with students and their projects to ensure the work the students were engaged in exposed them to important content and concepts and that they were learning them deeply. For example, a student interested in history may be researching and producing a historical program showing the progression of medicine, medical ideas, and research over the centuries. The science teacher would be engaged with them to help them understand the scientific reasoning and thinking about chemistry, biology, and physics behind this progression, etc.

As for what grade levels we would look at, this would be for the community to decide but in terms of scale and success, it makes some sense to start at the elementary level where the schools are smaller and we have the capability of making the changes necessary in a manageable time and budget. In truth, there are Magnet elementary, middle, and high schools across America. We would need to think carefully and move strategically to help determine what was best for our community and for the success of the Magnet.

Is this entirely new in Iowa or do Magnet schools already exist in the state?

Magnet schools are not unique and there are many shining examples of Magnets across the country. A good resource to learn more is at the Magnet Schools of America (www.magnet.edu). In Iowa there are almost no Magnet schools so we would be a pioneer in creating a strong Magnet system in Iowa. Magnet schools tend to be most popular and effective in urban centers, of which Cedar Rapids certainly qualifies.
So, what kinds of themes for our Magnets are we discussing with our community?

We are excited to engage in an open, honest, and respectful conversation with our community about Magnet schools. First and foremost, we need to discover if our community sees Magnet schools as an idea worth pursuing and that could provide great value to our children, families and community?

If so, we need to discover the sorts of Magnet schools the community wants, would support, and that would advance our community as a whole. Right now, we have floated out a few examples based upon what we see happening in Cedar Rapids. This list is not THE list but only a way to generate conversation - they may or may not end up being a Magnet theme for our community.

An Entrepreneurial/Micro-Society Magnet. We have a strong and growing entrepreneurial community developing downtown and around the NewBo district. Recent articles in the “We Create Here” section of the Cedar Rapids Gazette highlight this as well as “Creative Week” in October, 2013. As such, it makes sense to explore the idea of an Entrepreneurial/Micro-Society Magnet school in Cedar Rapids. Entrepreneurialism and creativity are big drivers for our economy and having a school with such a theme might accelerate this movement and position our children to be successful here and in this space.

A School of the Arts Magnet. We already have the “Johnson School of the Arts” here in Cedar Rapids. It’s focus has waxed and waned over time but the faculty and the community are still strongly committed to it being an arts school. Additionally, our community has a vibrant visual and performing arts community that would lend support and credence to such a school.

A Museum Magnet. Our community is rich in tradition and history as evidenced by the multitude of museums in our midst. A “Museum” magnet focusing on Cedar Rapids history and future would fit well with our community identity and give our students the opportunity to engage their learning through both history and helping to craft a vision for the future of Cedar Rapids.

A Medical Sciences STEM Magnet. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) remains a huge emphasis in Iowa and the nation. Additionally, we want to find ways to keep more female students engaged in STEM and STEM fields focused on helping the human condition tend to retain females. Finally, we have a vibrant and highly-regarded medical community here in Cedar Rapids. Kirkwood Community College and Mt. Mercy University have renowned nursing and other medical programs; Coe College is known for the strength of its science department, and; we have 2 high-quality, highly-recognized regional hospitals. All this together seems to suggest that a Medical Sciences STEM school would support and advance both student learning and our community’s reputation for its medical sciences.
Other Magnet Ideas. But these are not exclusive and we are excited to learn about how other sorts of Magnet themes might bolster and advance our kids and community. We are strong in the trades and in technology. We have many international businesses and a diverse workforce. Perhaps a Trades & Technology and/or a Language Immersion Magnet would do well for our community as well. The possibilities are limitless.

**How and why might families/students choose a magnet?**

Families would choose a magnet primarily to match their child’s interests and passions to the focus of the Magnet school. A family with a child immersed in the visual and performance arts might choose such a Magnet school to ensure their child was able to fully express and explore this interest while simultaneously ensuring they were progressing through the learning expectations they would receive at any school. Other reasons may revolve around exposing their children to new ideas and potential interest areas.

How a family chooses a Magnet would have to be determined moving forward. Typically, in other places, this comes in the form of an application process stating their interest in sending their child(ren) to the Magnet. If the number of requests are less than the allotted spaces, their children would be enrolled in the Magnet. If there were more requests than spaces then some sort of lottery system would be implemented to ensure a fair and equitable selection process. Parents would always have the option of returning to their "home" or neighborhood schools at any time.

**How would current students at a school identified as a Magnet be impacted?**

Resident students - those assigned to that particular attendance center - ALWAYS have the full right to return to or stay at the school they are assigned to based upon their address. Resident parents and students have the first choice to either stay at the school if it is identified as a Magnet or opt to transfer to one of the area’s traditional schools. They also have the full right to apply to any other District Magnets that might fit well for their child(ren). While many details would have to be worked out, this would likely include transportation and some level of choice as to which traditional elementary those neighborhood parents could opt for.

**When is the earliest we might see a Magnet school in the Cedar Rapids CSD?**

It is far too early to predict this as it is dependent upon the community’s interest and engagement as well as district financial considerations. The absolute earliest would be the 14-15 school year.

**If there is support for such programming, how would the District fund Magnet schools?**

Starting a Magnet school comes with startup and on-going costs. These costs are difficult to determine and would be explored and defined as the conversation moves
forward and well before the school board would make a decision on moving forward with Magnets.

There would be much work to do in terms of determining what sort of Magnets to develop, what schools they might be at, etc. This means sending teams of teachers, parents, and community members to visit stellar magnet schools across America; bringing in experts who have designed and implemented Magnets to help us; getting teachers in-depth and high-quality professional development to ensure their success as teachers in the Magnet; finding and securing community resources of time, money, and people to support the school to ensure it maximizes its potential, and; determining the physical changes and equipment necessary in the Magnet school to ensure it meets its goals. All told, our district can’t do it alone. We will need the community’s help in getting Magnets up-and-running and integrated into our community for long-term sustainability.

**I heard there would be an application process and that only the best applicants would get in. True?**

False. While some Magnets, and even more Charters, do employ an application process for specific selections, most Magnets employ a lottery system ensuring all interested parties have an equal chance of getting into the Magnet (assuming there is more interest than spots in the Magnet). You may have read in the Cedar Rapids Gazette about the Des Moines Magnet and their entrance criteria. We do not support such an approach and believe our community wishes to keep any Magnet school it might endorse open to all equitably.

So, it is important we employ a fair and equitable system of entry into Magnets. Perhaps even better, we may want to entertain ensuring our Magnet schools match our district demographic in terms of socio-economic status, ethnicity, etc.

**How does staffing the Magnet work?**

Choice and passion are cornerstones to a great Magnet school. This not only means the students and parents but the teachers and staff as well. Like any school, it is important to staff a school with teachers passionate about learning and who choose to be there. Since Magnets are thematic, it is critical teachers get to choose to be a faculty member – or choose not to. Ultimately, such a decision will be made in partnership between the District and the teacher’s union (CREA) to ensure our great teachers are treated with professional respect and in an equitable manner so they are all in a position where they can do their best work for all the children in our community.

**What schools are being considered for a Magnet?**

At this time it is too premature to identify any particular school for a Magnet because it will depend on several factors. We are excited about helping craft the criteria with our community but a few criteria at this point include: 1) the school site has the physical space to accommodate more students coming in from outside the school’s boundary; 2)
the school theme is reflective of our community’s identity and work and is in relative proximity to that work; 3) the Magnet sharpens the focus and alignment towards transformational educational models demanded by our public, and; 4) it ensures a well-balanced district demographic.

It's a big topic and a conversation we want to involve everyone in. The community can share thoughts through our www.engagecrschools.com website. How else does the District plan to engage the community for more learning and conversation?

We are initiating this conversation community-wide primarily through our EngageCR Schools website and a series of community conversations throughout the community. We anticipate engaging parents, teachers, businesses and community members in a myriad of ways including but not limited to: meet-ups in area locations and schools, Tweet-ups (real-time Twitter conversations), editorials, news stories, a segment on KCRG’s Beth Malicki’s "To the Point" show, presentations to community groups upon request, and other conversation opportunities as necessary.

How will the “Community Conversations” be structured and how will it be used to inform future decision-making?

The community conversations are designed with a minimum amount of presenting and speaking by school officials and maximum amounts of community conversation and creativity. Each meeting is slated for 90 minutes (schedule below) and the format will be something like: 1) welcome, intros, and a brief presentation to ground participants in common language and understanding; 2) small groups (<=6) will engage ala World Cafe in conversation about the possibilities of Magnets to help create new ideas and craft a picture of what would be a desired design for a Magnet; 3) groups then pose and attempt to address potential questions, barriers, and community concerns, and 4) attendees participate in voting for their favorite choices.

Meeting Schedule:

**Tuesday, October 29th, 6:30 – 8:00 p.m.**
Kirkwood Regional Center-Linn County
1770 Boyson Road, Hiawatha
Room 100

**Monday, November 4th, 6:30 – 8:00 p.m.**
Educational Leadership & Support Center, CR Schools
2500 Edgewood Road NW, Cedar Rapids
Conference Center: Cedar B & C

**Thursday, November 14th, 6:30 – 8:00 p.m.**
IBEW 405 Hall
1211 Wiley Boulevard SW, Cedar Rapids
Wednesday, November 20th, 6:30 – 8:00 p.m.
Johnson Elementary School for the Arts
355 18th St. SE, Cedar Rapids
School Gallery

Monday, December 2nd, 6:30 – 8:00 p.m.
Cedar Rapids Public Library – Downtown Library
450 Fifth Avenue SE, Cedar Rapids
Beams Auditorium Conference Room

Wednesday, December 11th, 6:30 – 8:00 p.m.
Washington High School
2205 Forest Drive SE, Cedar Rapids
Cafeteria

How does a Magnet school simultaneously focus on a theme and meet all the learning expectations around literacy, math and science?

For too long American schools have assumed subjects must be taught in isolation from one another and that the connections were “obvious” and up to the student to figure out once they aged out of the K-12 system. Decades of research has shown that people – children and adults alike – learn best in context and when they are engaged in solving a problem or trying to create something new. When we do this, we are simultaneously utilizing a variety of subjects to solve those problems and create those new things.

Magnet school themes operate like the “real world” in that they are not add-ons to the curriculum. Instead, they serve as integrators for the curriculum. They help pose interesting and meaningful questions, problems, and/or projects for kids to engage in. Through their investigations and attempts to answer the questions they learn that they need things like math, literacy, science, history, and art to solve them. As an illustrative example, consider an early elementary Medical Science STEM. A class or grade level might be engaged in raising, tending, and caring for a variety of animals. Through this engaging work, students would engage in learning science – how different types of animals function, how they stay alive, nutrition, etc. They would learn math through weighing and measuring and counting a variety of things related to their animals. They would engage in literacy development by learning words related to their animals, reading and writing stories about their animals, and interacting in real ways with professionals in the community and around the world learning important communication skills.

Does a Magnet school – for an example an Arts Magnet – mean that the art programs in the other schools go away or get diminished?

Absolutely not. The arts as well as the other subjects we offer are important to all our children regardless of the school they attend. An Arts Magnet, for example, simply
means art is infused into the curriculum as a focal point and gateway into learning and engagement. What it does not mean is that the 30 other schools stop teaching the arts. Magnets are not designed to take away programs from other District schools – it is simply an emphasis area at the Magnet school.

**Does the District have a plan? Does it have the “how” figured out? Is this just a rubber-stamp process or a half-baked idea?**

The days of developing a comprehensive plan predicting every possible nuance and contingency are over. Our world moves too quickly and is too unpredictable to wait for the perfect plan with all the questions answered. It is no longer sufficient for a small group of people to design, plan, and implement large scale improvement efforts. Today it requires multiple perspectives and viewpoints and large-scale involvement to generate ideas and imagine the possible. In short, the answer to the “how” is through the answer “yes.” We realize this is disconcerting for many people who expect linearity, predictability and iron-clad guarantees in order to move forward. To make the adaptations necessary to thrive in the world our kids face today means living at the corner of the known and the unknown. We must accept the fact we can’t predict the future and then make iron-clad plans to meet up with it at some point. We can’t answer all the questions and quell all the fears before moving ahead. To wait for that means never moving forward because there will always be questions and fears. We just won’t know all the answers until we push forward.

But we can do a lot. As a community we hold immense power. We don’t have to predict and then prepare for an unknown and scary future. We have the ability to imagine the possibilities and co-create the future we want for our children and our community. By coming together as a community to have open, honest, and respectful conversations first about the possibilities around us and then dealing with the known barriers and perceived problems we can take purposeful action. It is an on-going cycle of pushing towards the future we wish to create while developing the “how” as we learn and develop together.

So, do we have a plan? Yes. Our plan is to engage our community in the important conversation about how to bring transformational learning to our kids while simultaneously continuing to improve upon the stellar schools we already have. Our plan is to co-create this future with the community. We don’t have the detailed “how” figured out. What we do have are dedicated educators who spend their entire waking hours thinking and learning about how to help children learn and about how to develop a supportive community around them to ensure every one of them is successful. From all of this thinking and reflection comes ideas both from inside and outside the community giving us a place to begin the conversation and play with some ideas.

This isn’t a “rubber-stamp” activity where a pre-conceived plan exists and is already cooking in the oven, nor is it a half-baked idea trying to be “sold” to the community. We aren’t “selling” anything – we are working together to build a recipe for our children’s success. In this case, there can’t be too many cooks in the kitchen!
Research and Information on Magnet Schools:

Reviving Magnet Schools: Strengthening a Successful Choice Option A Research Brief


$2 billion later, do magnet schools help kids learn


Magnet School Outcomes: what the research says.

Magnet Schools and Student Achievement

Do Magnet Schools Boost Achievement?
http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct96/vol54/num02/Do-Magnet-Schools-Boost-Achievement%C2%A2.aspx

Public School Choice: Magnet Schools, Peer Effects, and Student Achievement
http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/research.projects.magnet_school_peereffects.html

Magnet Schools Change in Demographics and Success

http://www.bsdmagnet.com/RD070_VT_-_2008-12-09_-_MagnetSchools_-_Full.pdf

Magnet School Research

http://www.magnetsinamerica.org/magnet-school-research/