



Boards Making a Difference

Johnson STEAM Academy Attracts Families with Choice and Innovation

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School districts across the state are looking for ways to provide students and families with innovation and choice within their own public schools. Perhaps even more importantly, districts are looking for ways to address equity.

Enter magnet schools. Offering magnet schools gives parents options regardless of the neighborhood they live in and provides students with an alternative learning style in a non-traditional setting. The Cedar Rapids school district is a pioneer in Iowa when it comes to magnet schools.

WHAT IS A MAGNET SCHOOL?

According to the Magnet Schools of America nonprofit professional education association, “Magnet schools are built on the foundation of five pillars and are free public elementary and secondary schools of choice that are operated by school districts or a consortium of districts.”

In language a non-educator and everyday citizen could understand, [Johnson STEAM Academy](#) Principal Candace Lynch describes magnet schools in a different way. “A magnet school is a school designed around a theme. The idea of a magnet school is that people are attracted by that theme. It offers families choice.”

Magnet schools across the nation are organized by themes—STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), Arts, Career and Technology Education, World Languages and many more. Magnet schools are not to be confused with charter schools. The main



difference—magnet schools are designed to follow the same guidelines of the school board and the district, while charter schools create their own charter and their own set of rules.

In 2015, Johnson Elementary School transitioned to the Johnson STEAM Academy, the first magnet school in the Cedar Rapids school district. Johnson’s STEAM theme—Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics—was a no-brainer.

“Johnson has a long history of being a very art-centric school—music, digital arts, and engaged community members passionate about the arts. Five years ago, we began discussions about exploring the state’s initiative around STEM and opening a magnet school. We looked into adding the ‘A’ component to STEM. That was the connector for us,” said Superintendent Noreen Bush.

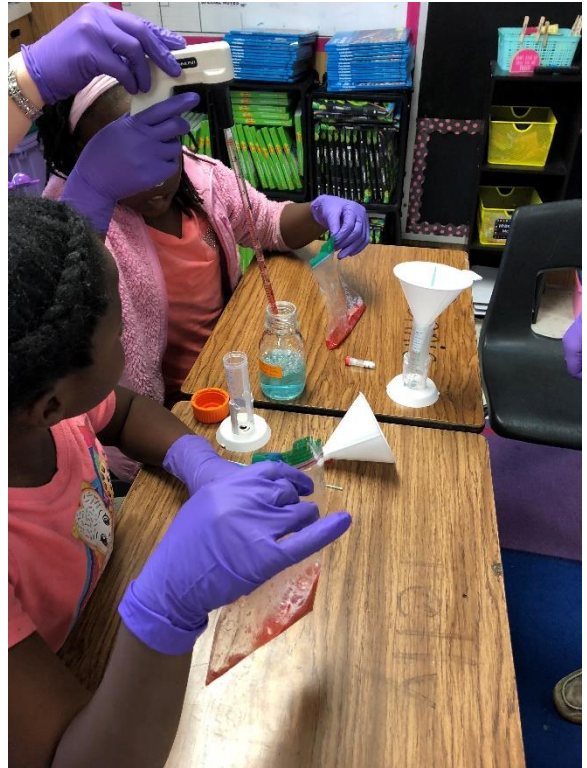
When the district began discussions about its first magnet school, the school board and district offered opportunities for community conversations to discover what the community was interested in seeing in a magnet school. STEM was identified right away as a high-interest area.

MAGNET SCHOOLS ADDRESS EQUITY THROUGH LOTTERIES

Magnet schools in Cedar Rapids allow students living outside attendance boundaries to enroll through a lottery program. So no matter where you live, students have an opportunity to lottery in.

“It was an exploration for us as a district—what could a magnet school do for Cedar Rapids? We have 31 schools in the district, so we looked at which were the best entry points for students,” said Bush.

Bush says community members consider Johnson the heart of the city due to its residential neighborhood feel and quick access to main avenues downtown. That combined with its arts history made it the obvious choice for the district’s first magnet school.



How does the lottery process work? Students and families that live within the neighborhood are given the opportunity to enroll first, then the school opens up the lottery to those outside the neighborhood.

“I was concerned at first—this neighborhood isn’t one that families try to get in to, people usually try to get out. But we’ve had success, and even had a wait list ever since we opened,” said Lynch.

Prior to opening as a magnet school, around 300 students were enrolled in Johnson Elementary. Now in its fifth year as a magnet school, more than 400 students are enrolled, with about 25% lotteried in from outside the neighborhood. The academy is at 99% capacity.

“It’s very exciting, families want to come from all over the district. They are looking for something different for their kids,” said Lynch.

WHAT’S DIFFERENT ABOUT JOHNSON STEAM ACADEMY?

The Cedar Rapids school board initially supported the magnet school through a Vision Cast, aligned to the strategic plan. “Through the Vision Cast, the board outlined that it’s not just about curb appeal or attracting people to Cedar Rapids. It’s about being focused on students, learning and results,” said Bush.

Johnson STEAM Academy is the only certified magnet school in the state of Iowa. It’s also certified at the highest level—demonstration—among only 13 other elementary schools in the nation with that designation.

“Our board is extremely visionary. We have flipped the old adage that you have to see it to believe it. Instead, we say, if you believe it first—you will see it. Johnson believes in kids first, and their successes, and that’s why we see it happening,” said Bush.

The board’s Vision Cast outlined what they wanted to see administration accomplish: increased innovation and student ownership through project-based learning. The district found ways of making that happen with the first magnet school and collaboration between administrative practices and teachers.

Johnson embeds STEAM themes across all curriculum, creating an innovative learning experience for students. Throughout the curriculum, there are competencies of the 5 C’s: Collaboration, citizenship, creativity, communication and creative thinking. The school is still aligned to Common Core and district academics, but educators and staff embrace innovative instruction and try new ideas.

“Our teachers have to be creative in the traditional classroom—so in this non-traditional classroom setting we’ve created, there are even more opportunities for them to be creative and figure out how to integrate instruction with a STEAM focus,” said Board Member Jennifer Borcharding.

Jennifer Borcharding was a parent in the district when the magnet school launched in 2015. “I was able to witness through my own kids’ experience—it got me excited about the innovative practices and I saw first-hand that the district was embracing this movement forward. It’s actually one of the factors that inspired me to run for the school board. Seeing kids take pride and ownership was something so exciting that I wanted to be part of it,” said Borcharding.

Students select areas of interest and participate in hands-on learning experiences, using the 5 C's. Johnson also aligns with the district's 'Profile of a Graduate' by embedding future ready skills throughout the curriculum.

"Johnson really opened up opportunities for kids that maybe wouldn't have had that same kind of exposure, because they may not have been academically strong in the traditional classroom. But they blossomed with hands-on learning. To watch those kids and their pride and their love of school grow has been so exciting," said Borcharding.

The district is seeing results in the Functional Assessment Staging (FAST) scores with this approach. "We are seeing really good results—change theory suggests that it takes 5-7 years to be institutionalized. However, our spring scores last year increased, and we even beat our own goal by approximately 5% for kids meeting benchmarks. This fall we maintained those scores," said Lynch.

JOHNSON PAVES THE WAY FOR MORE MAGNET SCHOOLS

Since 2015, four more schools have transitioned to magnet schools in the Cedar Rapids district. Each magnet school has its own theme, each built on the foundation of the magnet school pillars: diversity, innovative curriculum and professional development, academic excellence, high quality instructional systems, and family and community partnerships.

This fall, Cedar Rapids offered five magnet schools of choice (three elementary schools and two middle schools):

- Cedar River Academy at Taylor—sustainability theme
- Johnson STEAM Academy—STEAM theme
- Kenwood Leadership Academy—leadership theme
- McKinley STEAM Academy—STEAM theme
- Roosevelt Creative Corridor Business Academy—business theme

"Johnson was a trail blazer. When we opened, we knew we'd be the first magnet school in the district and didn't really have much to model after. We knew we were designing based on a dream we had. We designed magnet standards based around future ready skills and said—this is what we can accomplish here at Johnson," said Lynch.

Johnson truly did pave the way for other schools in Cedar Rapids—and other districts across the state.

"I'm so proud of our district, the project-based learning and student ownership. It allows teachers to approach content through a different way and ignites passion in students. I see a tremendous amount of collaboration and respect at Johnson, both in students and teachers," said Borcharding.

[Meet the Cedar Rapids School Board](#)

[Learn More About Johnson STEAM Academy](#)