



Cedar Rapids Future Ready Magnet School Journey: Pitfalls, Progress and Promise

Pitfalls, progress, and promise: The magnet school journey for Cedar Rapids Community Schools was no easy feat. However, through an effective five-year plan, they opened the doors to six magnet schools offering diverse and engaging learning environments for students of all ages. Cedar Rapids Schools shared their progress and lessons learned with board members at the Inaugural Summit on Student Success on April 27.

What Are Magnet Schools and What Are They Not?

Cedar Rapids Schools made a point to thoroughly explain magnet schools and their purpose, while highlighting the many misconceptions. Magnet schools are free K–12 education, operated under local district administration and the publicly elected school board. Acting as a form of school choice, magnet schools were initially developed to encourage diversity. What separates magnet schools is that they offer rigorous theme-based education in areas such as STEM, arts, leadership, entrepreneurship or environmental studies. Used as a tool for equity, magnet schools aim to pull students from outside traditional school boundaries.

There is a misconception that magnet schools are tuition or donation-based private/charter schools. However, magnet schools are not for profit and are not affiliated with any outside district or organization.

Key Lessons Learned Along the Way

1. Initially, Cedar Rapids Schools viewed magnet schools as simply a way to boost enrollment. Although, they quickly learned that the U.S. Department of Education has three clear and compelling magnet school purposes that Cedar



Cedar Rapids Schools share their magnet school vision and journey with board members



Board members discuss how they are promoting student achievement in their own districts

Rapids Schools used to drive their innovation. The Magnet School Assistance Program (MSAP) federal purposes are:

- a. **Create integrated schools that encourage diversity and prevent minority student isolation.** A safe, supportive and collaborative environment where each student feels valued is the goal.
 - b. **Create theme-based schools that work to increase student achievement and reduce gaps.** These innovative programs are rigorous and prepare students for a lifetime of learning both in and out of the classroom.
 - c. **Build capacity and sustain for the long-term.** Developing a system of magnet schools is a challenge in itself. Cedar Rapids Schools was faced with the question of how we ensure that these magnet schools are prepared to serve students for the long run.
2. Cedar Rapids Schools once believed that magnet schools could only exist autonomously. However, they now know that magnet schools must operate within a framework that is aligned with your district's vision, goals and resources. One of the main goals was to increase staff, student and family sense of belonging, allowing magnet schools to be woven into the district as a whole.
 3. At a glance, one might assume that the purpose of a magnet school is the theme, such as arts or STEM. Cedar Rapids Schools learned however that theme must be a primary vehicle to focus on academic achievement. When students have the opportunity to tap into their personal interests or passions through a unique theme-based curriculum, they are set to reach their full potential.

Cedar Rapids School's Five-Year Plan and Results

- **Year 0–2:** The onboarding years, which included the hiring of a full-time Project Director and a Building Based Magnet Coordinator. The goal was to launch associated work projects from the toolkit.
- **Year 3–4:** Earn MSAP funding with the goal of scoring acceptable or above on the state report card. Again, a heavy focus on student achievement. Within this time frame, Cedar Rapids Schools earned several awards or certifications including HRS Levels one & two, MSA (Middle States Association) Merit, a Community School award and other related recognition.
- **Year 5:** Cedar Rapids Schools set the goal to use \$20,000—\$30,000 of non-MSAP funded discretionary budget and to score commendable or above on the state report card. Awards and certifications for this fifth year included Magnet Standard of Excellence, Leader in Me (LiM) Lighthouse Certification and overall community recognition.

What Could Magnet Schools Look Like in Your District?

Cedar Rapids Schools closed out their presentation by listing the big ideas for boards across the state to consider. The idea of tackling magnet schools as a concept can seem daunting and at times impossible. Cedar Rapids Schools want boards to learn from their journey's ups and downs and the key lessons learned along the way:

- Focus on effectiveness
- Keep equity and student achievement at the center—this means fostering diverse, inclusive environments with exceptional state report card scores.
- Clarity is key
 - Consider the various themed programs
 - Guaranteed and viable curriculum—it's about learning those 21st century skills and believing that all students have the ability to handle a rigorous curriculum
 - Outcomes—consider the results, awards and recognition earned by Cedar Rapids Schools
- Build infrastructure to support key innovations
- Staff input and ownership is critical—recall one of the initial goals to create a sense of belonging, not only for students and their families but for school staff as well.
- Innovation feeds system improvement—consider project-based learning and the unique coursework that magnet schools can provide. This innovation helps to fuel student achievement and deeper learning overall.

To close out the education session, Cedar Rapids Schools offered a relaxed and open conversation about magnet schools and their purpose with attendees. Board members shared the excellent work they're doing back home and brainstormed ways to further improve. Thank you to Cedar Rapids Schools for providing an engaging and eye-opening presentation and discussion surrounding magnet schools. To further discuss magnet schools, their purpose and Cedar Rapids School's vision, contact:

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