

Little Rock School District Magnet Schools Assistance Program (FY 24-29)
Project Catalyst Abstract

As this country celebrates the 70th anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision, “intense levels of segregation—which had decreased markedly after 1954 for Black students—are on the rise once again” (Orfield, et al., 2019). The Little Rock School District in Arkansas is no exception to this disturbing nationwide trend. According to the 2020 Census, Little Rock, the State’s capital and largest city, had a population of just under 203,000 residents, of whom roughly equal percentages were White (47.8%) and Black (41.5%), with the remainder representing all other demographic groups. The demographic breakdown of the district veers substantially from the community—the majority (59%) of LRSD students are African American, while just 19% are white. The remaining students include 16% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and another 3% from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. In Little Rock, families are opting out of the district’s elementary, middle, and high schools in significant numbers in favor of other educational choice options, including charter schools, non-public schools, and homeschools, leaving empty seats and the specter of school closures. What’s more, when comparing the demographics of the students participating in these other choice options, it is clear that LRSD is experiencing yet another wave of “white flight.”

In an attempt to redress decades-long patterns of underutilization and minority group isolation (MGI), the LRSD is seeking funds from the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) under **Absolute Priority 1** to serve as a catalyst to re-invigorate its magnet choice options and re-attract families from across the district that have been opting out of the LRSD for many years as well as reaching beyond the district’s borders to the more diverse communities of the neighboring districts. By LRSD’s definition, minority group isolation (MGI) occurs at a school when the proportion of students belonging to a specific minority group is greater than 10 percentage points above the districtwide average for that group at that educational level. The four schools included in this MSAP application are experiencing MGI among Black students. The rates of MGI range from 11.7 percentage points above the district middle school average for Mann MS to 33.2 percentage points above the districtwide average at the elementary school level for MLK, Jr. ES. Collectively, the four schools currently serve 1,668 students in grades K-8.

With funding from MSAP, the LRSD plans to significantly revise three existing magnet schools and establish one new magnet program. Carver will revise its existing theme to incorporate the full range of STEAM educational programming. Dunbar will adopt a new theme of Business, Leadership, and Entrepreneurship, and Mann will be the Media Arts and Digital Innovation Magnet School. MLK, Jr. will be the newly established Leadership and Language Magnet Academy.

The LRSD MSAP initiative will accomplish the following objectives: (1) To reduce MGI among African American students in the four proposed magnet schools; (2) To ensure that all magnet school students meet challenging academic standards and are on track to be college- and career-ready; (3) To ensure that all magnet school students benefit from the magnet’s educational offerings and have equal opportunities to gain magnet theme-specific value-added skills and knowledge; and (4) To build the capacity within the magnet schools to provide rigorous, theme-based instructional programs that will help promote choice and diversity in the magnet schools.