Bridges Collaborative Member Profile
Miami-Dade County Public Schools Office of Innovation and School Choice

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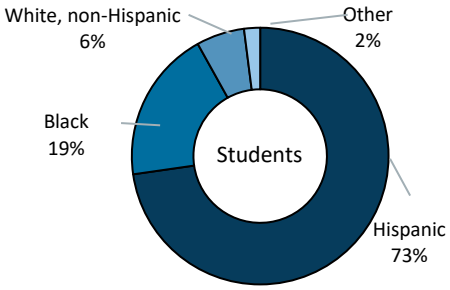
Organization type: Public School District

Location: Miami, Florida

Population

73.8% are economically disadvantaged

17% are English language learners



Size

A heavily urbanized district that services over **331,500 students** in **476 schools** across the county.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) is the **third largest school district** in the United States.

Year Founded

The first magnet school in the district was established in **1973**.

Desegregation/Integration Focus

M-DCPS promotes magnet schools to foster interaction among students from different backgrounds and experiences.

M-DCPS uses targeted recruitment and marketing to reduce minority group isolation (MGI).

The M-DCPS Office of Innovation, School Choice and Parental Options (SCPO) implemented an equity improvement cycle at **three magnet schools**, then scaled up to include **20 magnet schools** working to reduce minority group isolation (MGI) and improve school integration.

How did the district implement magnet programs?

Miami-Dade County (M-DC) is a majority-minority community with a population of 2.7 million people. The population is 68.7% Hispanic, 13.4% White non-Hispanic, 14% Black, 1.5% Asian, and 2.4% "other." Additionally, 54% of the residents were born outside of the United States, and 15% of the county residents live at or below the poverty level.[1] Many neighborhoods in M-DC are racially and economically isolated, and the schools have high rates of minority group isolation (MGI). According to criterion used by the Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS), a group experiences MGI in a particular school when its percentage in the school differs by more than 10% from its percentage in

[1]Census.gov https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/miamidadecountyflorida/POP060210

the district. When analyzing populations to assess MGI, schools consider race/ethnicity, English language learner status, disability status, gender, and socioeconomic status.

To address MGI, M-DCPS's Office of Innovation, School Choice and Parental Options (SCPO) establishes and supports magnet programs to provide educational choice and create schools that mirror district demographics. Under the leadership of Administrative Director, Magda R. Pereira, each magnet program is required to create an annual desegregation plan with support from M-DCPS. The plan takes into account the program's demographic composition and sets recruitment targets to produce a more balanced student–teacher population.

Because Miami-Dade County is a majority-minority community, proportional representation for schools in M-DCPS looks very different than it might in other communities. Marta de Tuya, a curriculum support specialist and Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) grant project coordinator, offers this explanation: "*Each magnet program is different, and their populations are also different; so each school focuses on relevant demographic groups when targeting recruitment efforts. For example, some art programs may have an overrepresentation of girls and their goal may be to focus on recruitment that balances gender enrollment. Additionally, although 14% of M-DC residents are Black, and 19% of M-DCPS students are Black, there are magnet schools in the county that have greater than 70% black student enrollment. Or some that have 95% Hispanic enrollment. These groups are disproportionate and recruitment is meant to target groups that will help school enrollment mirror the community of M-DC as closely as possible to avoid disproportionate enrollment in any one school*."

M-DCPS also worked with the Reimagining Integration: Diverse and Equitable Schools (RIDES) project to support new magnet programs as they developed an equity improvement cycle. At first, the RIDES program supported new magnet programs funded through the MSAP grant. They later expanded to include additional MSAP grant-funded magnet schools and established magnet schools. SCPO started with one school in Fall 2019, expanded to three schools in Fall 2020, and then extended the work to 20 schools in Spring 2021. As a first step in the equity improvement cycle, each school identified stakeholders (including students, teachers, parents, and administrators) who could form teams to prioritize an equity-related challenge. The teams collected data on the challenge, then designed and implemented an initiative to address the challenge during the year. At the end of the cycle, the teams reflected on the initiative's impact. After just one equity improvement cycle, all three schools reported positive change.

To further illustrate the equity improvement cycle process, one participating school in which minority[2] students made up 96% of the population focused on low minority student enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) courses as their equity-related challenge. Marta de Tuya notes that "*that was a big concern of theirs, and that was something that they started focusing on right away. It was one of their first efforts, and you started seeing changes. That positive expectation … their AP classes started booming.*" To address low minority student enrollment in AP courses, the school began an internal campaign in which teachers encouraged more students to sign up for AP courses and had students in AP courses promote classes by setting up information tables during lunch and by visiting different

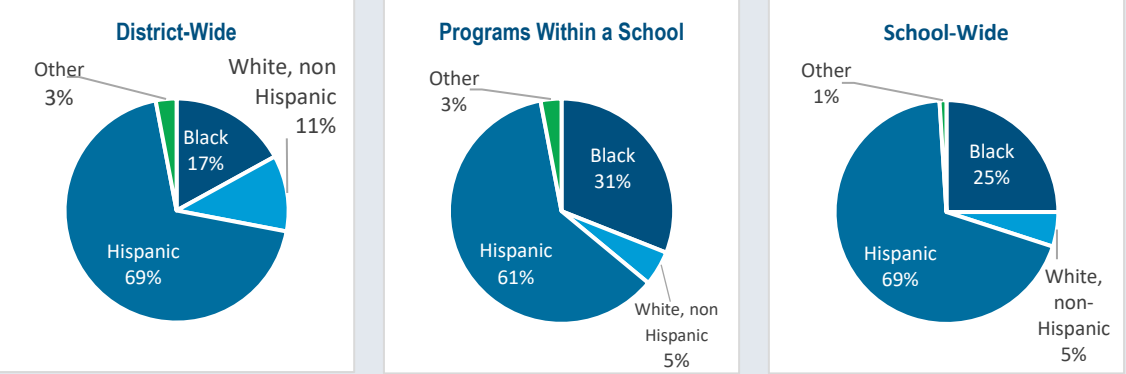
[2] Racial categorization is complex since Black students may be from different ethnic backgrounds such as Haitian or African American. Also, the Hispanic category may include people who speak Indigenous languages and not Spanish. However, students considered "minority" are primarily Black or Hispanic in Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

classes to describe the courses and encourage students to sign up. In addition, during parent nights, teachers shared information on the benefits of AP classes (e.g., lower college costs). Once AP classes expanded, the school provided extra instructional support for students through tutoring and student mentoring programs. Before this initiative, in the 2019–20 school year, 491 students were enrolled in at least one AP class. One year later, in the 2020–21 school year, 817 students were enrolled in at least one AP course.

MAGNET PROGRAMS AT M-DCPS

M-DCPS has a variety of magnet programs, including districtwide programs, programs within a school, and school-wide programs.*

- A **district-wide program** has zero boundaries, which means that students who attend the program can come from different neighborhoods.
- Most M-DCPS magnet programs are **programs within a school.** These offer in-depth experiences and study in specific areas of interest for students in the magnet program but not necessarily for attendance boundary students.
- **School-wide magnet programs** serve students within a specific attendance boundary and allow families living outside the attendance boundary to apply to attend the school. Every student in the school receives magnet programming regardless of whether they are magnet applicants or attendance boundary students. Although students in a schoolwide magnet program may have different levels of proficiency and experience, such programs provide the most integrative experience in curricular programming for the entire student body. M-DCPS is currently using the schoolwide model for magnet school expansion throughout the district.



*Demographic data for each program type accessed at NCES.ed.gov. https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/files.asp

M-DCPS has the largest magnet program offerings of any school district in the country, with 378 magnet programs in 118 schools. Magnet programs focus on topics such as international education, visual and performing arts, engineering and technology, pre-law, and modern languages. To enroll, families submit an application online or by mail. When the number of eligible applications exceeds the number of seats available in a school magnet program, a computerized random selection (lottery) process is used for student admission.[3] Visual performing arts magnet schools are the execption, as

[3] M-DCPS Magnet Application Process https://yourchoicemiami.org/resources/magnet-application-process/

they require auditions, and students are selected based on their auditions. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics's Common Core of Data, in the 2020–21 school year about 36% of students in M-DCPS attended magnet schools. When examining specific demographic groups for magnet schools, 24% of magnet students are Black, 67% are Hispanic, 6% are White, and 75% receive free or reduced price lunch. In nonmagnet schools, 16% of magnet students are Black, 75% are Hispanic, 6% are White, and 72% receive free or reduced price lunch.[4] Further, as measured by the Herfindahl–Hirschman Index,[5] the average magnet school in M-DCPS is more diverse than the average nonmagnet school.

Regarding integration, magnet schools have made some progress, yet opportunities for continued improvement remain. For example, while White students are overrepresented in AP courses in both magnet (12%) and nonmagnet (11%) schools (overall 6% of students in the district are White), Black students in magnet schools were more than three times likelier to be enrolled in AP classes than Black students in nonmagnet schools (13% vs. 4%). Students of all races are more likely to be referred for gifted education in magnet schools than in nonmagnet schools.

Spotlight on scaling up the equity improvement cycle to 20 schools

In response to feedback from the three pilot participating schools, Mrs. Perieira scaled up the adoption of the equity improvement cycle to 20 magnet schools. In selecting the additional schools, Mrs. Pereira looked for schools trending toward disproportionate representation. She noticed that in many of these schools, school culture was a primary concern. For example, some students from diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds did not feel they "fit in" or were accepted by the school community. In addition, some schools had school cultures perceived as elitist.

As part of the equity improvement cycle, lead teachers meet with SCPO administrators and staff each year to discuss progress toward school desegregation goals and take steps to address lagging trends. To document their progress, participating schools complete a school climate questionnaire, a school staff equity and inclusion survey, a School Targeted Assistive Recruitment System (STARS) survey to assess changes in school demographics and help design targeted recruitment plans, and a progress assessment tool to monitor progress toward equity goals.

School leadership teams also attend monthly meetings with coaches who provide support for school administrators and equity teams working to implement integration efforts. For example, in one school with a magnet program, school leaders are focusing on integrating more students of color into the programming. In another school, where students of color make up a disproportionately small percentage of the AP enrollment, the administrators have prioritized increasing the number of students of color taking AP courses. The equity improvement cycle allows each participating school to determine the goal they will prioritize.

[4] NCES.ed.gov. https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/files.asp

[5] The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index can be used to measure the racial and ethnic composition of a single school using the percentages of students in each group of interest to create a single metric of the school's diversity.

What factors support scaling the equity improvement cycle in Miami-Dade County Magnet Schools?

Having a clear metric and benchmarks as schools make progress toward desegregation goals

Magda Pereira and SCPO support staff assessed schools' data and demographics to scale up use of the equity improvement cycle. This involved identifying schools that failed to be within 10% of district demographics for specific populations. Schools outside of the 10% range were among those selected for participation in the equity improvement cycle. The long-term goal was for schools to reduce MGI by shifting the percentage of at least one underrepresented demographic group 2% each year.

To allow schools to self-evaluate recruitment efforts, SCPO implemented the STARS program. STARS is also designed to assist schools in creating or adapting action plans to meet diversity goals. M-DCPS magnet schools complete a STARS assessment yearly, and as part of the process, schools identify problem areas, actions steps, and strategies for working with the district. By reviewing the STARS assessments, the SCPO staff can identify which schools experienced a 2% shift in at least one underrepresented group and thereby reduced MGI. SCPO also offers support for schools that do not demonstrate progress toward district goals.

Continuous improvement model

Working toward proportional representation requires a continuous improvement approach. The equity improvement cycle is one way for schools to incorporate continuous improvement. External partners support participating schools as they establish their own equity teams. The teams work together to build the capacities of teachers, school site staff, and stakeholders, including parents, school leadership, district administrators, and community partners. The goal is to foster culturally competent school environments and inclusive programming while ensuring that the teams are using evidence-based strategies.

The continuous improvement model includes collecting information from schools and monitoring progress. Participating schools complete team equity assessment surveys, school climate questionnaires, school student and staff equity and inclusion surveys, and progress assessments. At the end of each cycle, teams share their equity plans, improvements, and evaluations with M-DCPS district leaders and with cohort equity teams from other schools.

Adequate time and planning

SCPO staff spent 3 years developing desegregation and integration plans before introducing them to schools. In that time, they worked at the administrative level and focused on understanding biases and challenges and familiarizing themselves with the available resources. They used new MSAP grant funded magnet schools to initiate an equity improvement cycle in three pilot magnet schools. The pilot schools implemented the equity improvement cycle on an ongoing basis according to the continuous improvement model, and their positive experience with the equity improvement process led Magda Pereira to invite more schools to participate. The equity improvement cycle allowed the district to set expectations for themselves and the schools, monitor progress, and identify supports to address challenges related to transportation, school culture, and resegregation. Marta de Tuya offers

this advice: "*I would say start small and recognize that it's a long road, and it's a committed process. It's not going to be quick, and once you're able to grasp that, then it just becomes your life's work*."

Key partnerships

Partnerships with external collaborators contributed to the district's successful inclusion of more schools in the equity improvement cycle. The partnership with Elam Leadership Institute focused on the provision of technical assistance and professional development to school districts and communities with diverse populations as they developed practical action steps. SCPO also partnered with RIDES, a group whose mission was to increase the number and quality of intentionally diverse schools through the development of diagnostic surveys, action-oriented resources, and equity improvement cycle tools. Partners at RIDES met with school leaders monthly and provided ongoing coaching. Although RIDES is no longer active, its focus was on helping school equity teams with team building and connection to resources so that each school could achieve its desegregation goals. Independent contracts allowed professors to continue coaching the participating schools through the equity improvement cycle process.

What are the challenges in scaling up the equity improvement cycle in Miami-Dade County Magnet Schools?

Programs within a school

Although the goal of a program within a school is to diversify the school's student population by attracting students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, integration is a remaining concern. A program within a school typically is filled with higher performing students who take part in the magnet program, and the attendance boundary students who are not in the magnet program tend to be left with fewer resources and a more segregated experience. To avoid the disadvantages of magnet programs within a school, SCPO is shifting toward offering more school-wide magnet programs. Since magnet and attendance boundary students would receive magnet programming, school-wide magnet programs contribute to a more integrated school experience.

Policy changes

Florida House Bill 7: Individual Freedom has created challenges for scaling up the equity improvement cycle. According to the act, "*subjecting individuals to specified concepts under certain circumstances constitutes discrimination based upon race, color, sex, or national origin."* Consequently, staff cannot openly discuss critical topics related to equity and implicit bias, and the limitations placed on instructional materials and professional development training have made it uncomfortable for some of M-DCPS's partners and staff to carry out equity-related plans. Partners are now unsure if the resources they provided to M-DCPS before the policy change are compliant with the legislation. Some staff also express concerns about their roles if they continue to engage in equity-related work. In response, the district is refocusing and restructuring aspects of the work to ensure compliance with the Individual Freedom Act.

Challenges related to staff buy-in

While implementing the equity improvement cycle, M-DCPS SCPO has faced challenges related to staff buy-in and turnover. Initially staff were not sure how the equity improvement cycle would work at their schools and expressed uncertainty about how to engage in the work. Marta de Tuya notes, *"Some of the barriers have been internal with staff and particularly at the schools. People not being sure about how this works, and getting the work right, and knowing how to do it. It's a process. When we first started this four years ago, five years ago, somebody said it's at least a 10 to 12 year turnaround. And we were like, 'Oh my gosh.' But, we see it. Right? It's baby steps. But it's happening. That mentality and that culture is changing in the school. So the biggest barrier, I think, is fear of the unknown or fear of change."*

Lessons learned/key takeaways

- Allow adequate time for school district staff to do the introspective work of learning about ways to incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools before rolling out desegregation or integration plans.
- A data-driven approach to desegregation and integration allows schools to set goals and identify specific areas for improvement. Ongoing efforts to monitor school and district demographics and climate can help identify long-term trends and allow districts to offer additional support for schools that trend toward resegregation.
- Implementing a continuous improvement process allows schools to take a tailored approach to identify and prioritize areas of improvement for desegregation or integration.
- External partnerships can reinforce school leadership's efforts by offering coaching and engaged support for schools implementing desegregation and integration plans.

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