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John S. Irwin Elementary School: History as a Magnet School

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Officially, our society offers all children an equal educational opportunity. As a society, we publicly proclaim the myth of standardization in public education. However, as individual parents, we contradict this myth. The reality is that we tend to strive to ensure that our own children have an education that is a little bit more equal than that of other children. We don’t want the average school for our children; we want the best school. How can we justify our actions if all schools are the same? Our public proclamations cannot be sustained by our private actions. Historically, as parents attempt to find the best education for their children, schools become segregated. Segregation is sometimes a byproduct of life, and sometimes an active choice.

By its very nature, desegregation requires children of different races to share the same schools and classrooms, thereby enjoying the same educational privileges. As part of the desegregation process, magnet schools are made formally different from regular schools. Magnet schools are not standardized schools because they attempt to draw students from all over a district in an effort to integrate the student population. This is the history of one school, in one community, that was selected in an attempt to deal with the problem of segregation. This is the history of Irwin Elementary School, in Fort Wayne, Indiana, that was transformed into a Magnet School as part of an attempt to implement a solution to segregation within the district. Now the ‘experiment’ has matured, and one must ask the question, "Has the FWCS desegregation program been successful?" In terms of strict desegregation goals, the answer is a definite yes. However, a nagging question continues to haunt us, "What is the purpose of a magnet school?" Is the purpose educational excellence, school choice, or integration? The answer is never simple.