

# Michael E. Debakey High School for Health Professions: Houston Magnet Schools and the Mandate of Integration

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*In the 1970s, the Houston Independent School District embarked on an ambitious program of voluntary desegregation driven by magnet schools. The DeBakey High School for Health Professions, which offered high quality career education to students across the district, quickly became the program's flagship institution. Forty years later, DeBakey serves a disproportionately white and Asian student body and integration is no longer a goal of the school. The language of choice, once used by segregationists, has been refashioned to suit the purposes of the magnet school. Waning commitment to DeBakey's integrative potential is emblematic of Houston's failed attempt at racial equality.*

IN JULY OF 1971, Ted Freedman, a leader of Houston's Anti-Defamation League, declaimed to Houston Independent School District (HISD) officials that "we are going down the same catastrophic path as other large cities such as Chicago." Freedman made this hysterical announcement at an emergency meeting between community leaders and HISD, at a time when the district was losing more than 1000 students a month. On the agenda: "Check the white flight, correct baseless rumors, and work at making the desegregation process effective."<sup>1</sup> Integration, which the School Board's conservative wing had delayed and prolonged for years, was finally proceeding under the force of a 1970 court order. Many white Houstonians, faced with the prospect of sending their children to integrated HISD schools, picked up and moved to the suburbs. Between 1970 and 1980, HISD's total enrollment plummeted by almost 50,000 students, and the percentage of whites in the district, which started the decade at 50%, was halved.<sup>2</sup>

It was in this climate, in the fall of 1972, that the High School for Health Professions (HSHP), later named after renowned Houston heart surgeon Michael Debakey, was opened. The school was initially founded "in response to the educational needs of the Houston community and to relieve the critical shortage of medical and allied health personnel throughout the state and nation."<sup>3</sup> HSHP, along with the High School for Performing and Visual Arts (HSPVA), opened a year earlier in 1971, was the first HISD school to offer a high-quality, career-oriented education to student applicants from across Houston. However, the school quickly became caught up in the politics of integration. In 1975, Superintendent Billy Reagan sought and received approval from the Federal District Court to replace existing integration plans with a program of voluntary choice driven by magnet schools. Magnet schools like HSHP, it was claimed, would achieve integration by extending the carrot of high

quality premedical education to parents who were otherwise averse to mixed-race classrooms. In 1981, the district court declared that the district had met its desegregation mandate, thereby ending official federal oversight. Thirty years later, in the 2014–2015 school year, whites made up only about 10% of students both in HISD and at DeBakey, while blacks and Latinos remained underrepresented at the school. In their place, Asians and Pacific Islanders accounted for almost half of the student body.<sup>4</sup> In that same year, a Houston Chronicle article praised the school’s “rigorous curriculum” and “near-perfect passing rates on standardized tests.”<sup>5</sup> Yet nowhere in the article, titled “School Report Card,” were the school’s racial or class disparities critically assessed. As the political, demographic, and social landscape of Houston’s educational institutions have changed, so too have understandings of the role which this magnet school ought to play in the lives of its students. Waning commitment to DeBakey’s integrative potential is emblematic of the city’s failed attempt at racial equality.

Magnet schools emerged out of almost two decades of political struggle in HISD. The Supreme Court mandated school desegregation in 1954’s *Brown v Board*; yet many local school boards, including Houston’s, openly opposed integrated schools, and set out to stall such plans by any means necessary. The school board feuded with Federal Judge Ben Connally over the nature and extent of school desegregation in Houston throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Six years elapsed before HISD admitted any African Americans to all-white schools: in 1960, a token twelve black children were permitted to enroll in three white elementary schools.<sup>6</sup> Progress remained glacially slow as the courts pushed the district to implement meaningful reforms. Conservatives positioned themselves as opponents of federally-mandated “forced integration,” instead advocating for “optional and equal” policies “conducive to the preservation of racial integrity.”<sup>7</sup> Segregationists relied on the rhetoric of states’ rights and local autonomy to demonize integration programs (like school pairings) as authoritarian, expensive, “educationally unsound,”<sup>8</sup> and an unwelcome “necessity.”<sup>9</sup> Busing in particular became loaded with fears of racial mixing. In a 1969 report on HISD’s desegregation titled “NO MASS BUSING,” Superintendent George Carver reassured parents that while “many other cities have had to close schools and implement massive busing plans [...] Houston has maintained its neighborhood schools and avoided massive busing.”<sup>10</sup> The busing suggested by the district court was characterized as not just disruptive, but “massive” and threatening to the white-controlled racial status quo. Houstonians were told to fear federal intervention because it would culminate in the destruction of the city’s most valued schools.

In place of affirmative integration programs like busing, which threatened to bring African American and Hispanic students into white schools, conservatives advocated for “freedom of choice.” In theory, freedom of choice would allow parents to enroll their children in any HISD school they chose. Proponents of “freedom of choice” repeatedly stressed that its “voluntary” nature would produce the necessary levels of integration and encourage whites to stay in the district.<sup>11</sup> Connally approved a freedom of choice plan in 1967, after the district proved unwilling to implement a stair-step integration program. However, bureaucratic barriers and practical considerations meant that the majority of HISD students continued to attend their racially segregated neighborhood schools. Even the staunchly pro-choice

Citizens Committee to Study Desegregation was forced to admit in 1969 that a minimum 90%–10% racial mixture was not being attained in Houston’s schools; nonetheless, they maintained that “under freedom of choice increases are resulting every year and if continued on a voluntary basis the desired ratio will certainly be obtained.”<sup>12</sup> However, Connally remained unconvinced by the arguments of the segregationists; thus, he ended the freedom of choice experiment in 1970, and ordered the district to implement a more proactive plan. Notwithstanding this court order, HISD continued to advocate for voluntary integration, and even presented freedom of choice as an option to voters on a 1970 ballot.



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The High School for Health Professions was founded not on the racially charged politics of school integration, but on the initiative of Houston’s medical community to address the growing needs of the city’s burgeoning health industry. In a 1970 letter to HISD board member Eleanor Tinsley, Charles Stranger, director of St. Joseph’s hospital, expressed the need for greater health vocational training: “we need qualified persons at all levels of the hospital family. Most of the youngsters are not introduced to our industry early enough to determine whether or not they have an applicable interest.”<sup>13</sup> In the same year, HISD adopted a commitment to vocational training in a number of fields, including health and medicine.<sup>14</sup> Joseph Merrill and Michael DeBakey, executive vice president and president of the Baylor College of Medicine respectively, provided the final “impetus from the top” needed to get the school off ground.<sup>15</sup> When HSHP was established in 1972, it was marketed as the district’s “newest occupational training school [...] designed especially for students interested in health oriented careers.”<sup>16</sup> Many sources from the early years of the school acknowledge the integration opportunities which HSHP created, but usually in passing, as this pamphlet footnote demonstrates: “Students selected represent a broad cross section of the HISD students in ability and ethnic background.”<sup>17</sup> Early on, the work of health education was prioritized over integration at HSHP. As late as 1974, HSHP’s academics were being praised in the Houston Post by the National Education Task Force director, Frank Brown, as “among the best he has seen in the nation.”<sup>18</sup> Conservatives claimed that magnet schools would act as an element of freedom of choice, and the Citizens Committee suggested that four magnet schools be established in Houston’s “predominantly negro population belt” in order to draw white students.<sup>19</sup> However, this rhetoric was never connected to the smaller HSHP which, when first founded, housed less than fifty students. HSHP’s absence from city-wide debates would soon change when the educational mission of the school collided with the ongoing political battle over integration.

Many in Houston continued to oppose federal intervention and, with the failure of freedom of choice in 1970, began to cast about for alternatives. They found their answer in

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schools like HSHP. Billy Reagan, upon entering the superintendency in 1974, pursued magnet schools as the solution to Houston's racial segregation and demographic flux. In 1975, under a program called Quality Integrated Education (QIE), the district sought and received federal approval for the creation of more than thirty magnet schools. The goals of these schools, as stated in a QIE report, were to:

1. stall or stop the flight of residents from urban schools by offering quality education
2. promote integration
3. offer more educational opportunities for students of the district
4. bring about an alternative to busing and other plans such as the pairing of schools that are no longer needs of the district<sup>20</sup>

These magnet schools were opened to children from outside the district, and free transportation was provided to all students, in hopes that suburban whites would return to HISD campuses.<sup>21</sup> Speaking years later, Reagan described the magnet school program as an innovative strategy: "We shifted our terminology, we shifted our actions from desegregation to integration. And everything we did, we did with the intent of integrating the schools, not forcefully desegregating them. Those are two very different strategies and very different outcomes."<sup>22</sup> The language of freedom of choice was replicated and recast in a form that was acceptable to federal courts. Proponents of the magnet schools repeatedly stressed their "positive" and "voluntary" nature<sup>23</sup>—a not so subtle allusion to the old freedom of choice programs. The plan HISD submitted to the courts insisted that "certain coercive requirements"—namely a required 40-40-20 ratio for black, white, and brown students for the first 15 days of the semester, followed by a mandatory minimum 10% minority enrollment for the rest of the school year, "prevented it from being a freedom of choice plan."<sup>24</sup> Yet it was marketed to the Houston public in exactly those terms. Reagan wrote in a letter to the editor of the Houston Post "one of the most fundamental reasons the magnet school plan is an attractive means of integration our schools is that it is a voluntary program."<sup>25</sup>

HSHP's educational mission coincided nicely with the political aims of QIE's architects. Although HSHP's nominal goal was to provide quality health education on a meritocratic basis, racial integration became key to the school's representation in public and political discourse. HSHP was repeatedly referenced because it had "already proven the concept [of integrated magnet schools] successful."<sup>26</sup> The report submitted to the federal district court claimed that HISD's existing magnet schools "have proven to be successful as an integration technique and as an approach to providing quality education [...] each of these schools draws interested and talented students in its particular field from throughout the district. Each is integrated."<sup>27</sup> This retroactive rewriting of HSHP's purpose served the political purposes of those who wished for the end of federally mandated school pairings. In the words of one Houston Chronicle correspondent writing in 1989, "magnets first existed in HISD as enrichment programs, but evolved into tools for integration."<sup>28</sup> DeBakey continues to be cited as a model of integrated education in the 21st century. A 2006 Department of Education report praised HISD's magnet schools for both the quality of their education and their racial diversity, and cited DeBakey in particular as "an example of a magnet with a unique theme

strong enough to attract excellent students from all over this huge district.”<sup>29</sup> This enduring theme of official discourse heaps praise on the magnet program while ignoring the actual racial dynamics at work in the school.

Hidden from the public discourse which praises DeBakey and Houston’s other early magnet programs for their successful integration is a subtle bureaucratic exemption which excluded these schools from the district’s voluntary integration program. Although HSHP was repeatedly cited to justify the adoption of the magnet school program in 1975, it and the other existing magnets were designated as “alternative schools” under the terms of the plan. Alternative schools, as opposed to magnets, were exempted from both the imposed racial quotas and the federal funds which paid for the busing of far flung students.<sup>30</sup> This distinction allowed HSHP to continue its selective admissions process, and likely contributed to the school’s imbalanced demographics. It was not until 1980, with the adoption of the Voluntary Interdistrict Educational Plan (VIEP), that HSHP became subject to integration mandates. VIEP signaled a slight shift in HISD’s integration goals. The magnet programs established in 1975 had failed to keep whites in the district. By 1980 the district was only 25% white,<sup>31</sup> and there were simply not enough white students to go around in HISD schools. VIEP opened all of HISD’s vocational programs to students from outside districts, in the hopes of attracting whites who had fled to the suburbs. Racial and ethnic goals for VIEP schools were set at 35% white, 45% black, and 20% Hispanic.<sup>32</sup> HSHP’s demographics approached this ratio at its founding, but has since failed to achieve parity with Houston’s overall racial composition. VIEP represents the high point of the attempt to achieve meaningful integration at HSHP. In the years since, both the school and the district have abandoned this mission.

In June 1981, Federal Judge Robert O’Connor declared HISD a unitary district, citing HSHP’s as one of the district’s successful integration programs. The magnet schools, he explained, had “proved to be a workable method of desegregating the HISD’s schools.”<sup>33</sup> In the thirty years following the formal end of federal oversight in 1989, the school board and the city gave up on integration and racial equality, even as the magnet program expanded from the original 34 schools to more than 100 sites in 2003.<sup>34</sup> In 1987, a mere six years after the federal government approved Houston’s magnet schools, the Houston Chronicle announced that magnets had failed in pursuing their “seemingly hopeless desegregation goal.”<sup>35</sup> VIEP schools had proven inadequate at stemming the tide of white flight, as Houston became increasingly black and brown over the course of the 1980s. HISD Trustee Wiley Henry, in speaking on the demographic dilemma faced by the city, said “You can’t integrate the school district when only 17 percent of the students are white. Integration is no longer the issue. Education is the issue.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in reevaluating the magnet schools, many came to see their multiracial character as threats to the educational opportunities available for non-white Houstonians. In 1992, HISD ended VIEP and the 126 out-of-district students then attending HSHP were forced to return to their home schools. The district argued that “inner-city students are getting shortchanged in HISD’s top magnet programs -- displaced by out-of-district students who outperform them,”<sup>37</sup> and thus that HSHP’s integrative function was in fact harming Houston students. Yet spots were ultimately limited at HISD magnet schools

because the district did not want to provide more money to these schools. “There are costs of those [out-of-district] youngsters being there that our taxpayers have to pick up,” reasoned one district official, revealing the fiscal concerns underlying the policy reversal.<sup>38</sup> Integration, considering HISD’s changing priorities, had become too expensive.

In the 1990s, both the federal government and HISD retreated from their commitment to bring about racially integrated schools in Houston. The integrative potential of magnet schools like DeBakey was quickly replaced in public discourse by the language of meritocracy and academic success which had accompanied the school’s original founding. “I’m not sure how much magnets have done for integration,” said University of Houston education professor Robert Houston in 1995, “but they have done a lot for education.”<sup>39</sup> A 1993 Houston Chronicle article heaped praise on the school’s college-level academics and “high standard of excellence,” while devoting a single sentence to the school’s racial demographics.<sup>40</sup> As the district’s commitment to integration visibly waned, HSHP increasingly began to emphasize the role of Houston’s medical community in founding and growing the school. In 1996, HSHP was renamed after Michael DeBakey, president of Baylor College of Medicine, because he was the “driving force behind [the school’s] creation and development.”<sup>41</sup> This name change served not only to capitalize on DeBakey’s well-deserved prestige and emphasize HSHP’s significant educational achievement, but also to symbolically distance the school from the traumatic racial politics of the integration period. Integration now plays only a small role in the way which the school imagines itself and its history.



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The rhetoric of free choice, which had earlier been used to covertly buttress segregation, crept back into the public discourse surrounding magnet schools in the 1990s as racial equality receded from the district’s mission. “I think it is a matter of the parents feeling they have a choice in the education of their child,” said HISD’s magnet program director Dee Bates in 1994 to explain the popularity of magnet schools like HSHP. “I think that’s the big thing. It’s a matter of choice.”<sup>42</sup> Immediately following the Brown decision, school segregationists had advocated freedom of choice in order to ensure the survival of de facto racial apartheid. At the end of the 20th century, even as the magnet schools’ nominal commitment to integration was removed from official policy, freedom of choice was being used to justify their continued existence. Indeed, starting in the 1990s, choice became the watchword of a new breed of school reformers who believed that transforming the education system into a competitive marketplace of charter schools would provide better opportunities for all.<sup>43</sup> In 1994 HISD Superintendent Rod Paige voiced his approval of charter schools and even offered HSHP as a model for their success, saying “a school built around a focus with teachers who choose to be

there and children who choose to attend that school works.”<sup>44</sup> Absent from the language of choice which bolstered charter schools was an affirmative commitment to racial integration, as the district had briefly been forced to adopt in the 1970s. This suggests that choice, as implemented in Houston, did not create integrated education in the 1960s and 70s, and that it continues to perpetuate that inequality into the 21st century.

The failure of integrated education in Houston has left a lasting imprint on DeBakey High School. In 2003, DeBakey articulated five goals focused on improving test scores and increasing campus outreach; none mentioned race or integration.<sup>45</sup> A brief look at the school’s demographics and racial dynamics reveals that, as a result of the district’s retreat from “Quality Integrated Education,” meaningful interracial contact continues to elude DeBakey. Underrepresentation of blacks and Hispanics at the school remains strong in the 21st century, and has increased as Asian students have grown to occupy a greater proportion of the school. However, looking at total racial composition in isolation from other factors can lead to a misleading portrait of the school’s cumulative cross-racial relationships. Research suggests that variations across classrooms and clubs within a school can significantly affect the level of interracial contact.<sup>46</sup> Frequently, through tracking mechanisms like AP courses as well as self-segregation among students, a school’s composite racial makeup obscures the experienced interracial interactions between students. In order to better understand these dynamics, I examined the racial composition of student organization portraits found in available historic HSHP and DeBakey yearbooks from 1980, 2001, and 2013. Although poor photo quality and the school yearbooks’ unfortunate tendency to not name the students in club photos made the assessment of race difficult in the case of many individuals, the broad trends appear to be reliable.

Results from this analysis (see Figure 1) indicate that throughout DeBakey’s history black and Hispanic students have been underrepresented not only at the school level, but also within the school’s clubs. Disparity between school and district represents the difference between a racial/ethnic group’s total percentage across HISD and its representation at DeBakey; disparity between clubs and school measures the difference between a group’s size within DeBakey and its representation in the school’s clubs and organizations. Representation of blacks at DeBakey is inconsistent, and blacks have in reality been sporadically overrepresented according to both measures. Hispanics, in contrast, have experienced consistent and significant underrepresentation. In 2013 Hispanics were underrepresented by more than 40 percentage points in DeBakey’s student body, and by an additional 9 percentage points in the school’s clubs and organizations. In 2002, DeBakey’s -14.8 underrepresentation rate for blacks and Hispanics among student clubs far exceeded the average for Southern public schools, which rested at -6.2.<sup>47</sup> The limited data available suggests that the participation of non-white, non-Asian students at DeBakey has never reflected those populations’ overall composition in HISD, and this underrepresentation has been exacerbated by the end of the district’s commitment to integration. Hispanics especially have experienced underrepresentation at both the school and organization levels, even as they have grown to make up a majority of HISD’s population. In their place, Asians now represent a plurality

of students at DeBakey, the only high school in HISD to hold this distinction. Asians are not only massively overrepresented at DeBakey when compared to Houston as a whole, but they also enjoy favorable participation in school clubs. Whites, as a result of the end of the district's VIEP program, have accounted for a relatively tiny proportion of the school since the 1990s. HISD's failed commitment to integration has resulted in a magnet school which does not accurately reflect the racial diversity of the district.



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The changes which affected DeBakey in the 1980s and 90s extended beyond racial integration issues and into curriculum. When the high school was first founded, it was meant to be a vocational program that prepared students “to enter health careers after graduation or to continue their studies at the college level.”<sup>48</sup> The school placed equal emphasis on college preparation and training for “allied health professions”<sup>49</sup> which allowed DeBakey students without the money or desire to attend eight years of post-secondary education the chance to enter the medical field immediately after graduation. However, as the school grew in capacity and prestige, its curricular priorities began to change. Under the leadership of Charlesetta Deason, principal from 1989 to 2008, DeBakey added many Advanced Placement (AP) courses and began placing greater emphasis on pre-college standardized tests. In 1993, almost 98 percent of the school's graduating students entered higher education;<sup>50</sup> by 2012, that number had reached 100.<sup>51</sup> While these impressive numbers no doubt reflect DeBakey's academic excellence, the school's focus on success in higher education excludes those students for whom time and monetary constraints make medical school impractical. Indeed, DeBakey's 2014 student body consisted of only 42% economically disadvantaged students at a time when the district as a whole enrolled more than 75%.<sup>52</sup> DeBakey's emphasis on post-secondary education excludes some of Houston's most disadvantaged students, and is symptomatic of the district's failure to adequately address the need for equity in Houston's education system.

HSPVA, DeBakey's original sister magnet school for the fine arts, shares in the problems of racial imbalance. HSPVA been the whitest school in HISD since 1983 and the most socioeconomically privileged since 1988, yet Elaine Gore, in her study of the school optimistically titled *Talent Knows No Color*, concludes that HSPVA has still succeeded in lowering racial barriers because at HSPVA “the norms of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class are superseded by the social category of artist.”<sup>53</sup> Much the same thing continues to be said of DeBakey which, despite its racial imbalances, is praised as “Houston's premier magnet” with “a 100 percent graduation rate and perfect to near-perfect passing rates on standardized tests.”<sup>54</sup> This laudatory rhetoric obscures many problems inside the school. However much the magnet schools may have fostered interracial contact, the continued



demographic imbalances at DeBakey and elsewhere point to fundamental flaws in the magnet school model. The promise of integration remains unfulfilled in Houston's schools. DeBakey, a magnet school initially founded with career education in mind, has proven a poor tool for the purpose it was turned towards: creating a racially-mixed environment representative of Houston's residents. Both in terms of its student population and in terms of the interactions those students have outside the classroom, DeBakey does not accurately reflect the city's diversity. The failure of the magnet schools, despite the best intentions and most fervent hopes of their creators, provides an important lesson about the role of choice in education and segregation. So long as freedom of choice remains the philosophy of our institutions, those with greater social and economic capital will continue to exercise that freedom to avoid those with less. Houston's preference for choice-based policies, at the expense of affirmative integration, has resulted in a well-established and durable inequality at DeBakey and within the city's education system.

School Year	1972-73		1980-81		2001-02		2013-14	
	HSHP	HISD	HSHP	HISD	DeBakey	HISD	DeBakey	HISD
<b>Total Students</b>	45	225397		194043	701	208297	823	210716
Black(%)	33.3	39.4		44.9	40	32	19	25
White(%)	51.1	44		25.1	11	10	10	8
Hispanic(%)	15.6	15.6		27.8	26	55	27	62
Asian or Pacific Islander (%)	0	NA		NA	23	3	43	4
Disparity between school and district: Blacks	-6.1				8		-6	
Disparity between school and district: Hispanics	0				-29		-35	
Underrepresentation of Blacks and Hispanics at DeBakey	-6.1				-21		-41	
<b>Student Clubs</b>								
Average Percent Black			58.2		33.4		22.5	
Average Percent White			16.4		19.2		11.9	
Average Percent Hispanic			24.4		17.8		17.4	
Average Percent Asian			1.0		29.7		48.3	
Disparity between clubs and school: Blacks					-6.6		3.5	
Disparity between clubs and school: Hispanics					-8.2		-9.6	
Underrepresentation of Blacks and Hispanics in Clubs					-14.8		-6.1	

Figure 1. Race in DeBakey Clubs and Organizations

Data for the 2001 and 2013 school years was taken from District and School Profiles available online at <http://www.houstonisd.org/Page/38525>. District wide data from 1972 and 1980 was taken from Kellar 1999. 1973 data for HSHP came from Gunby 1980. Yearbooks references from the years 1981, 2002, and 2014 are available in the Works Cited section; no yearbook was available for 1973.

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