

## Should Your School Detrack to Close the Achievement Gap?

Much of the international and national research on ability grouping agrees that schools that track students into academics based on ability unintentionally widen the gap between high and low performers. Therefore, it would seem that if tracking increases the achievement gap, then detracking schools would be an easy sell to parents and educators. Not necessarily so.

The 2006 report *Explaining Student Performance*, commissioned by the European Union and conducted by independent research center The Danish Technological Institute, concludes that heterogeneous grouping in Nordic countries helps all students, and does not hurt high achievers. The majority of recent research on ability grouping concludes that schools using tracking systems worsen disparities between high- and low-performing students, creating more academic segregation, with more poor and minority students being shunted into the lowest tracks.

University of Wisconsin-Madison sociology chair and WCER research director Adam Gamoran explains in his 2009 report *Tracking and Inequality: New Directions for Research and Practice* that where there's tracking, achievement tends to diverge and reinforce initial differences by social class.

Critics worry that detracking will result in one-size-fits-all curriculum that's way over the heads of some students, but not challenging enough for others. Brookings Institute Fellow Tom Loveless raises concerns about detracking in the report *The Misplaced Math Student: Lost in Eighth Grade Algebra*. Loveless takes issue with the Algebra for All movement, which encourages educators to place all 8th grade students in algebra classes.

Another Loveless report, *Tracking and Detracking:*

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*High Achievers in Massachusetts Middle Schools*, published by the Fordham Foundation, compares the percentage of middle school students in Massachusetts achieving at the advanced level on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in tracked and untracked schools, and finds no difference in English language arts scores. In math, however, each additional track level in 8th grade—up to three levels—is associated with a three-percentage-point gain in students scoring at the advanced level. Fordham's research director Amanda Winkler summarizes, "the more tracks you have in math, the more high achieving students you have. The fewer tracks you have, the fewer high achieving and [the] more failing kids you have."

In addition, Winkler says *Tracking and Detracking* questions correlations between U.S. and international definitions of tracking. However, in his survey of major studies using Programme for International Student Assessment, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study data, Gamoran says the data show broadly similar results, despite variation in the forms of tracking. He adds that while "the research is pretty clear that detracking shrinks achievement gaps, the question is, does it do so by raising the achievement of low achievers or by pulling down high achieving students?" Gamoran's assessment of research suggests that detracking typically, though not inevitably, does both.

So, schools or districts interested in detracking can find both success stories to celebrate and cautionary tales to heed. Also, undertaking a detracking initiative requires a commitment to addressing some widely-held beliefs about student ability, teaching, learning, and access.

### Middle School Writes the High School Transcript

Rockville Centre School District in Long Island, N.Y., began detracking in 1995. At the outset, administrators used

high school transcripts to convince teachers that the reform was needed, explains Delia Garrity, Rockville Centre's former assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. In many districts, students' experiences in "middle school write the high school transcript," says Garrity, suggesting academic placement in the middle grades almost certainly determines the level of courses students will take in high school and beyond.

The school district set out to address the huge gap between the curricula that low- and high-achieving students were learning. The district implemented detracking at the 6th grade level and overhauled the entire K–12 curriculum, supplanting tracks with an honors-level curriculum for all, with the option of an International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum in high school (on top of the honors baseline).

"When all you are offering is honors [classes], you can't let anyone drop—there's no place to go," says Garrity.

The detracking efforts required intensive, ongoing professional development for the district's teachers. Also, Rockville Centre focused on the highly collaborative Japanese lesson study model. "Teachers buy into [the model] because they are the professional developers—planning, delivering, critiquing, and approving the lesson that works best for their kids," says Garrity.

Garrity and other Rockville Centre administrators quickly discovered that teachers aren't the only adults to consider when implementing such a momentous reform. At first, administrators heard most from parents of high-achieving students who feared their kids would foot the bill for detracking. Using TIMMS data to muster initial community support, and then the student data gathered after detracking, the district was able to demonstrate, over time, that high achievers were doing as well as or better than before detracking. Now, Garrity says, teachers are more likely to hear from parents whose kids are struggling with the challenging curriculum. To support these students, Rockville Centre provides K–12 curriculum continuity, support classes on alternate days and extra support in the mornings, and differentiated instruction. High achievers as well as struggling students benefit from the more strategic instruction, says Garrity.

According to the data, detracking is closing the achievement gap in Rockville Centre. In New York, students can earn the Regents diploma, the Regents diploma with advanced designation, or a local diploma. In 2000, Rockville's Regents diploma rate for minority students was 32 percent. In June 2008, it was 95 percent, and for white and Asian students, it was 98 percent. More students are also earning the Regents diploma with advanced designation. In the last year, 67 percent of the district's minority students earned the diploma, compared to, statewide, 46 percent of white and Asian students and 10 percent of minorities.

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## Detracking in Stamford

Demographically, Connecticut's Stamford School District is 40 percent white, 30 percent Latino, 22 percent black, and 8 percent Asian, with about 15 percent being English language learners, and close to 40 percent receiving free and reduced lunch. Stamford schools are diverse, but educators noted that students were being segregated at the classroom level. Since the 1970s, four out of the five Stamford middle schools separated students into four different tracks. This year, the school district switched to two levels: college prep and honors, eliminating the curriculum that students at the lowest track were receiving. As with Rockville Centre, detracking at Stamford begins at the 6th grade level, but the curriculum reform effort spans K–12.

Stamford Superintendent Josh Starr says of detracking, "I knew from day one that if I didn't address this issue, anything else I tried to do would fail." Starr says the district revised the curriculum, provided staff development, and worked with parents and members of the community to explain the changes.

While the initiative is still in its infancy, Stamford educators report seeing a decrease in behavior referrals and improved test scores. Also, in the past, black and Latino students made up just 11 percent of the honors program; but now, with the move from four tracks to two, these students comprise 25 to 30 percent of the English or math honors class populations.

During the three-year phase-in, the district has provided teacher and student supports. These supports include adding more instructional time by moving from 45- to 60-minute periods; adding academic enrichment classes twice a week in English and math, focused on extending or remediating student learning; implementing Scientifically Research Based Interventions Efficacy Institutes to help change student (and educator) beliefs about academic achievement; using AVID, a college readiness program; and offering intensive professional development.

For parents, the school district published a guide and a Web site about the Middle School Transformation project and held community forums and focus groups. Parents need

to understand what's going to change, and see evidence of their kids doing solid academic work, Starr says.

Starr has the momentum of support from funders and partners, and recently, after presenting his district's strategic improvement plan to the Connecticut School Board, the board passed a statewide resolution to reduce tracking.

## Moving Forward

Gamoran cautions against using a district such as Rockville Centre as a national model—their 2009–2010 demographics read 21 percent African American and Latino and 13 percent free and reduced price lunch. Access to more resources, relatively modest low-income and low-achieving populations, and a less polarized school community provide an advantage for schools or districts looking to detrack, says Gamoran. Therefore, he says, detracking is a decision best made with the local context in mind.

Garrity warns administrators who are interested in following her district's example to be wary of studies such as *Tracking and Detracking*, which she believes may ignore variables such as urban and suburban contexts, poverty and mobility, and differing curriculum. "The best research on tracking is done as a school starts to detrack, and looks at its own data (with pre- and post-studies) the way we did," says Garrity.

Once the decision to detrack is made, the leadership has to run with it. "You can't wait for a consensus. If you wait for everyone to get on board, it's never going to happen," Carol Burris, principal of South Side High School in Rockville Centre School District, says. "If you have any chance in closing the achievement gap, you can't continue to give kids different curriculum and expect everyone to do okay." **EU**

—LAURA VARLAS

### → MORE ONLINE

Access the reports mentioned here in the online version of this article. Also read the online-only article "Who Should Make the Decision to Detrack?," that looks at the complex policy implications of undertaking a detracking initiative. To read both articles, go to [www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education\\_update/apr10/vol52/num04/toc.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education_update/apr10/vol52/num04/toc.aspx).

