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RESEARCH-BASED OPTIONS FOR EDUCATION POLICYMAKING

Moving Beyond Tracking

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May 2013*

The Research

For several decades, researchers have documented the effects of tracking students into segregated classrooms according to perceived ability or achievement. Whether known as tracking, sorting, streaming, or ability grouping, an expansive body of literature conclusively shows tracking has been harmful, inequitable, and an unsupportable practice.¹ Initially touted as a way of tailoring instruction to the diverse needs of students, tracking has instead become a way to stratify opportunities to learn, limiting the more beneficial opportunities to high-track students and thereby denying these benefits to lower-tracked students. This generally plays out in a discriminatory way, segregating students by race and socio-economic status.² In his 2012 meta-analysis of the vast body of tracking research, John Hattie incorporated 500 studies. Also incorporating the findings of 14 earlier meta-analyses, he found that tracking has “minimal effects on learning outcomes and profound negative equity effects.”³

These harms likely arise from a combination of predictable elements. Low-track classes tend to have watered-down curriculum, less-experienced teachers, lowered expectations, more discipline problems, and less-engaging lessons.⁴ When high-quality, enriched

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curriculum is provided to all students, the effect is to benefit both high-achieving and low-achieving students.⁵

Successful heterogeneous (“untracked” or “detacked”) grouping is found in US schools and abroad. Most notably, top-scoring Finland has long used heterogeneous grouping as a way to promote high achievement among all its students. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) report explained, “In countries where 15-year-olds are divided into more tracks based on their abilities, overall performance is not enhanced, and the younger the age at which selection for such tracks first occurs, the greater the differences in student performance, by socio-economic background, by age 15, without improved overall performance.”⁶ Finland, in addition to having overall high scores, had the smallest achievement gap of participating nations in 2003.⁷

Tracking Remains Pervasive

Despite incontrovertible evidence demonstrating the harms of tracking, the resistance to eliminating tracking is substantial. Rarely couched in the express language of race or class differences, arguments for tracking are generally made on the grounds that it assures high-track courses will not have a diluted curriculum and that meritocracy will be preserved. Yet the preservation of privilege is almost always the subtext.

At the community level, the resistance is generally from “high-track” teachers and parents who believe that they have benefited from a tracked system. The teachers assigned to high-track classes tend to be more experienced and therefore can exercise more power. The parents who are able to secure high-track placement for their children are disproportionately likely to be white, well-educated and politically vocal and therefore similarly able to pressure schools to keep higher-track classes for their children – apart from students of lower wealth, students of color, or both. Alliances between high-track teachers and parents are often formed to protect tracking or fend off de-tracking.⁸

At the policy level, some policy advocates campaign to rehabilitate the idea that tracking can be beneficial. These efforts have not gone unchallenged by researchers.⁹

Recommendations

The following policy recommendations are drawn from Burris, Welner and Bezoza.¹⁰ Greater elaboration on these recommendations, plus companion statutory language can be found in that earlier brief ([here](#)).

Given the clearly documented negative effects of tracking, curricular tracks that separate students by race, socio-economic status or assumptions about their learning ability should be eliminated. In moving toward this goal, specific policy steps are recommended:

- State policies should require schools and districts to identify and describe tracks and to communicate placement policies to state departments of education and to the communities they serve.

- States and non-profit organizations should connect educators with researchers to advance best practices in serving heterogeneous populations.
- States, districts and schools should communicate to the public the rationale for eliminating curricular stratification.
- Districts and schools should phase out curricular stratification, starting with the lowest track.
- Districts and schools should allow open enrollment in advanced placement and international baccalaureate courses.
- Districts and schools should provide sustained professional development so teachers are prepared to successfully instruct all learners in heterogeneous classrooms.
- Districts and schools should listen to all parents, including those who don't readily speak out.

Notes and References

¹ The seminal research study, which also includes a discussion of other research, is *Keeping Track* by Jeannie Oakes:

Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (2nd edition). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

See also:

Burris, C. C., Welner, K. G. & Bezoza, J. W. (2009). *Universal access to a quality education: Research and recommendations for the elimination of curricular stratification*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved May 28, 2013, from http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/Epic-Epru_LB-UnivAcc-FINAL.pdf/.

Welner, K. G. (2001). *Legal rights, local wrongs: When community control collides with educational equity*. Albany, New York: SUNY Press.

² Burris, Welner, & Bezoza, 2009; Oakes, 2005 (see note 1).

³ Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. New York, NY: Routledge, 90. See also:

Is Ability Grouping or Streaming Effective? (2012) *ASCD Edge*. Retrieved May 16, 2013 from http://edge.ascd.org/_Is-Ability-Grouping-or-Streaming-Effective/blog/6394531/127586.html/;

Slavin, R. E. (1990). Achievement effects of ability grouping in secondary schools: A best-evidence synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*, 60, 471-499;

Kulik, C. L., & Kulik, J. A. (1982). Effects of ability grouping on secondary school students: A meta-analysis of evaluation findings. *American Educational Research Journal*, 19, 415-448;

Kulik, J. A. (1992). *An analysis of the research on ability grouping: Historical and contemporary perspectives*. Storrs, CT: National Center of the Gifted and Talented;

Slavin, R. E. (1990). Ability grouping in secondary schools: A response to Hallinan. *Review of Educational Research*, 60, 505-507;

Slavin, R. E. (1995). Detracking and its detractors: Flawed evidence, flawed values. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 77, 220-223.

4 Burris, Welner, & Bezosa, 2009 (see note 1).

Oakes, J. (1982). The reproduction of inequity: The content of secondary school tracking. *Urban Review*, 14(2), 107-120.

Oakes, J. (1986). Keeping track, Part 1: The policy and practice of curriculum inequality. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 68, 12-18.

5 Burris, Welner, & Bezosa, 2009 (see note 1).

6 OECD (2010), *PISA 2009 Results: Executive Summary*. (p. 9). Retrieved May 17, 2013 from <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/46619703.pdf/>.

7 Burris, Welner, & Bezosa, 2009 (see note 1);

Aho, E., Pitkanen, K., & Sahlberg, P. (2006). *Policy development and reform principles of basic and secondary education in Finland since 1968*. Washington, DC: The World Bank;

Finnish National Board of Education. (2004). *Background for Finnish PISA success*. Retrieved July 9, 2007, from: <http://www.edu.fi/english/page.asp?path=500,571,36263/>.

8 Burris, Welner, & Bezosa, 2009 (see note 1);

Oakes, J. Wells, A. S., & associates (1996). *Beyond the technicalities of school reform: Policy lessons from detracking schools*. Los Angeles: UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, 40.

See also:

Welner, K. G. (2001). *Legal rights, local wrongs: When community control collides with educational equity*. Albany, New York: SUNY Press.

9 For the arguments set for by tracking proponents and the critiques of these works, see:

Loveless, T. (1999). *The tracking wars: State reform meets school policy*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Loveless, T. (2009). Tracking and Detracking: High achievers in Massachusetts middle schools. *Thomas B. Fordham Foundation*. Retrieved May 29, 2013, from http://www.sbsdk12.org/programs/gate/documents/200912_Detracking.pdf/.

This work has been subject to critique, pointing out weaknesses in research methods and tenuous links between data, conclusions, and policy recommendations. See:

Welner, K. G. & Mickelson, R. (2000). School reform, politics, and tracking: Should we pursue virtue? *Educational Researcher*, 29(4), 22-26.

Welner, K. (2009). Non-evidence about tracking: Critiquing the new report from the Fordham Institute. *Teachers College Record*, Retrieved May 29, 2013, from <http://www.colorado.edu/education/faculty/kevinwelner/WelnerTCRLovelessForham.pdf/>.

Similarly, a recent, non-peer-reviewed working paper that found tracking to be advantageous was promoted by advocates favoring tracking, but the research was found to be of low quality and not useful in guiding policy. See :

Collins, C. C. & Gan, L. (2013). *Does sorting students improve scores? An analysis of class composition*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved May 29, 2013, from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18848/>;

Burris, C. C. & Allison, K. E. (2013, April). *Review of "Does sorting students improve test scores?"* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Available online at http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/ttr-tracking-nber-burris_2.pdf/;

Slavin, 1995, Detracking and its detractors (see note 3).

10 Burris, Welner, & Bezosa, 2009 (see note 1).

See also Burris, C. C., & Garrity, D. (2008). *Detracking for excellence and equity*. Washington, DC: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.

*This is a section of **Research-Based Options for Education Policymaking**, a multipart brief that takes up a number of important policy issues and identifies policies supported by research. Each section focuses on a different issue, and its recommendations to policymakers are based on the latest scholarship. **Research-Based Options for Education Policymaking** is published by The National Education Policy Center, housed at the University Of Colorado Boulder, and is made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice.*

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