

## Cause for hope and concern in school plan

By Gary S. Klein

I read with interest your coverage of Superintendent of Schools Joshua Starr's community forum on middle school reform (Feb. 27). As a Stamford Public Schools parent and graduate and a local business owner, I am both excited and concerned about these important changes the administration is proposing.

On the positive side, I applaud the plan to increase advisory time, though I hope teachers will be properly trained on these topics so that advisory time is not simply wasted nonacademic time. I also applaud the plan to allow our top students to get high school credit for certain middle school classes.

Most important, all parents should applaud the plan to group students in a more flexible way. For example, currently, students are placed into one academic group for all subjects, based on the results of certain tests administered in elementary school. Currently, students stay in the same academic level for all classes: math, science, social studies and language arts. Under the new plan, students will be able, based on their individual abilities, to be placed in different academic groups for different subjects. For example, a student who is strong in math but weaker in language arts would be placed in a higher math group and a

lower language arts group. This is an important breakthrough.

***In addition, Dr. Starr's proposals for more advisory time and constantly re-evaluating a student's academic group, and flexibility to move a student up or down in groups as his abilities allow, will also go a long way to improve the system.***

But there is one significant flaw and danger in Dr. Starr's plan that parents and teachers should oppose vigorously. In Dr. Starr's presentation, he suggested that the new plan will decrease academic groups from four or five to two or three. While three academic groups based on ability might make sense (though four is probably the right number), organizing the middle schools into merely two academic groups would be counterproductive and would cause many top-performing students to leave Stamford.

Simply put, a system with two academic groups really has no academic groups. This would force teachers to teach students of dramatically different abilities at the same time, taking away important focus from the lower kids, who need help appropriate to their level, and from the higher

kids, who need to be pushed into the high school level classes that Dr. Starr proposes they should be taking in middle school.

While having kids of all abilities sit in the same classroom at the same time has laudable social goals, it runs a serious risk of robbing the kids of the focused teaching that kids of all academic levels need. That is, our children need to be taught up or down to their level. As a parent, I am excited and optimistic about most of the proposed middle school reforms. However, any reform that eliminates academic grouping or cuts grouping to two academic groups is a serious mistake that will rob our children of important educational time and cause our highest performing students to leave Stamford, which would be bad for everyone.

I urge parents and the Board of Education to participate in the reform process and prevent any effort by the administration to eliminate grouping or limit the system to two academic groups. Let's not take away from an otherwise important and positive reform effort by imposing a system that will sacrifice our children's education.

*Gary S. Klein is a Stamford resident.*