



## **Middle School Transformation Off to a Good Start, With More to Do**

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In the early 1970s, the Stamford Board of Education led the community in a comprehensive process to distribute students throughout the schools so that each school would reflect the demographics of the district student population. This was a remarkable endeavor; few communities can muster the political and public support to intentionally integrate schools.

While students from different neighborhoods, backgrounds and demographics attend the same schools, in four of our middle schools students have been separated into one of three to five “ability” tracks based on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT). Students stayed in these tracks with their peers for every class, usually through all middle school grades. While schools may have reflected the overall makeup of students, classrooms in the tracked system did not.

Our student demographics have been relatively constant over the last several years: among 15,000 students, 21% are African-American, 7% are Asian, 32% are Hispanic and 40% are White. In 2007-08, the last year of rigid tracking in the four traditional middle schools, the “highest” group was 10% Asian, 5% Black, 6% Hispanic and 79% White, while the “lowest” group was 3% Asian, 35% Black, 46% Hispanic and 16% White. Starting this year, we began using new identification and placement criteria as part of our Middle School Transformation efforts. As a result, Honors Math courses are now 10% Asian, 10% Black, 20% Hispanic and 60% White and Honors English Language Arts courses are 9% Asian, 6% Black, 19% Hispanic and 66% White. We have gone from 11% of Black and Hispanic children having access to Honors middle school courses, to 25-30% of Black and Hispanic children having access to Honors middle school courses. We have certainly made progress, but we have a long way to go.

Our Middle School Transformation work embeds the safeguards all students need to be successful. The mechanics of how students are placed in classes represents a fraction of the significant academic improvements made so far. We have revised our curriculum so that it is standards-based and consistent among schools and classes; provided extensive professional development in content and instructional methodology; standardized our criteria for placing students in either Honors or College Prep courses; created daily remediation and enrichment opportunities and established a weekly advisory period for students to develop social-emotional competencies. Through our Efficacy training we have also confronted our belief systems to advance the idea that smart is not something you simply are, it is something you become through hard work. In fact, all of the work we have been doing since 2005 builds the foundation of college readiness for all students, kindergarten through high school. We have seen a steady increase in the percentage of students performing at/above Goal on the CMTs. Additionally, more high school students are taking four years of Math and Science, AP courses and graduating with some college credit. A disparity in outcomes between groups of students still exists, but there is no doubt we are making headway in our efforts to improve the achievement of all students.

Our Middle School Advisory Committee, comprised of parents, teachers and administrators has provided insight and advice for two years and resoundingly supports the Middle School Transformation work. Our middle school teachers have reported that the Transformation strategies are promising and beginning to show positive results. I appreciate how hard our teachers are working to make all of our students successful and I know that they do so because they believe in our mission. The GE Foundation, which has awarded us almost \$17 million over five years, has made their continued support conditional upon the elimination of tracking because they will ultimately seek to hire skilled and diverse graduates. The Stamford Board of Education and the State Department of Education have

both approved our Strategic District Improvement Plan, which delineates our de-tracking strategies K-12. Phi Delta Kappa, Cambridge Education, the Panasonic Foundation, the Connecticut Center for School Change and the National Staff Development Council have each named tracking as one of the major factors contributing to the stark disparity in achievement between groups of students and a barrier to the improvement of our district.

Along with significant support throughout the community and within our schools, Middle School Transformation has not been without criticism. Some have questioned the research we have used to inform our work, or the districts we benchmark ourselves against. The research regarding the negative effects of tracking is solid and spans many years. We look to other districts, such as Rockville Center, NY, South Orange-Maplewood, NJ, Montgomery County, MD or Norfolk, VA because they have promising practices that can be replicated, just as we look at Scofield right here in our backyard. No district is an exact comparison but we can certainly learn from others who face the same challenges.

As Superintendent of Schools, I welcome both criticism and the support. While our preliminary results are promising, there is more we need to explore. **On January 21<sup>st</sup>, at 7:00 p.m. at Rogers International School we will hold a Community Forum to discuss the emerging results. We will also hold separate sessions for current sixth grade parents to give us additional feedback and current fifth grade parents who have questions about next year.**

Our Middle School Transformation efforts are research-based, balanced and manageable. Most importantly, our approach is the right thing to do. Stamford is a sophisticated city, with a rich history of a progressive and bold approach to confronting social issues - whether desegregation of schools in the 1970's or affordable housing in the 1990's. Some may think we have a choice about eliminating tracking. I do not. If we want to live up to the ideals of social justice and equity long espoused by our community, we must ensure that each and every one of our children has access to a curriculum based on high standards that prepares them to graduate ready for higher education and success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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