

Reforming schools' ability grouping

The Advocate Staff

“To the extent that it is educationally feasible, the school board should take steps to eliminate ability grouping at all educational levels.

That passage was included in a report titled: “School Desegregation in Stamford, Connecticut,” and compiled by the Connecticut Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights.

In July 1977.

Many Stamford parents are concerned about the public schools' plans to change how they group students according to ability. But they should know going in that doing away with rigid tracking isn't some feel-good fad whose bandwagon our educators are chasing. The overwhelming philosophy in education for decades has been to do away with or reduce tracking. Stamford is lagging significantly behind in this regard, and school administrators are right to be doing something about it.

That said, parents' concerns are understandable. School administrators need to keep them informed and be open to suggestions as the process moves forward.

As it currently stands, the reform plan, which would affect middle schools – primarily sixth grade – makes good sense.

The first major part of the plan should not be of concern to anyone,

and would correct a rather obvious problem.

Currently, the city's middle schools (excepting Scofield Magnet) take the results of fifth-grade standardized tests and use them to assign a student to an instruction level for language arts, math, science and social studies – the same level for all. That presents a problem for the kid who is a strong reader/writer but struggles with math.

Under the proposed new system, a broader range of measures would be used to determine a student's instruction level. And students would be assigned appropriate levels for each subject – or at least for math/science and language arts/social studies groupings. That makes perfect sense; high marks all around.

Where some parents might get concerned is with the proposal to reduce the amount of instruction levels to which students are assigned. Under the proposed change, grouping, or tracking, would not be eliminated outright. But whereas middle schools now use three to five ability groups; the new system would employ two or three ability groups.

That would mean students with a wider range of proficiency would share classes than is currently the case. And that has some parents concerned that kids at the top level would be pulled down.

But experience where tracking has been reformed says that isn't the case. What experience does show is that rigid tracking dooms those stuck in low levels to the ghetto of low expectations.

The key – as with all things educational – is the teacher. This reform will require teachers to navigate classes with wider ability ranges, and for that they must be trained.

Teachers will begin receiving professional development this spring to help them prepare. However, the amount that Superintendent of Schools Joshua Starr had budgeted for all professional development for the 2009-10 school year already has been cut by 36 percent. The boards of finance and representatives need to be conscious of that when voting on budgets for next year.

The middle school reform plan is not finalized. The next public meeting on it will take place in May. Before then, parents should examine the plan at <http://stamfordpublicschools.org> and get involved. The committee working on the plan must be open to parent input, and not just at public meetings.

But the reform plan so far looks like a good one. It's important – and needed. The entire community should get behind it.