

Making our Middle Schools Work for Everyone

By Wendy Lecker and Cindy Grafstein

Detracking our middle schools has been one of Stamford's pressing academic issues for many years. We now have an opportunity to change from a system that has been consistently shown to be unsuccessful for the majority of middle school children, to one that benefits and challenges all children.

The makeup of the grouping in our middle schools tells a story of educational and social segregation that deprives a significant portion of our African-American and Latino children of access to high level courses and academic opportunities. Based on tests taken in 5th grade, our students are placed into tracks. Once placed in a track, the data shows that there is very little movement out of that track throughout middle school and into high school. In our middle schools (with the exception of Scofield) the honors level and level one are overwhelmingly white and Asian, with a small percentage of African-American and Latino students. The racial and ethnic representations in the lowest two levels are almost the reverse, with African-American and Latino students representing the majority.

How does this placement affect these students' educational opportunities in high school and beyond? A white or Asian student in Stamford is more than four times more likely to be enrolled in an Advanced Placement class than an African-American student, and twice as likely as a Latino student. White and Asian students are twice as likely to take four years of math and science as African-American and Latino students in Stamford's high schools.

It is very clear that the racial divide caused by the placement of children into tracks in middle school cements many of our African-American and Latino children into lower-level classes in high school and diminished educational opportunities beyond high school. Stamford is not unique in experiencing this phenomenon. School districts across the country, over the past 30 years, have discovered that tracking results in segregation and lower achievement by children of color. What is unique about Stamford is the time it has taken us to do something about this problem.

Evidence Shows

Evidence from districts around our nation proves that when districts move from tracking to heterogeneous grouping, the achievement of the top group does not suffer and the achievement of children from the lower levels rises. Heterogeneous grouping practices are the key to this success. Even with "flexible" ability grouping, teachers are unable to maintain high expectations and a challenging curriculum for

children in the lower groups. However, when all children are taught a high-level curriculum in mixed ability groups, all children grow.

An example of the success of detracking can be found fairly close to us, in Rockville Centre, Long Island. In Rockville Centre, the district moved from tracking to heterogeneous grouping in their middle schools. The results were astounding. For example, children from all abilities increased participation in advanced math. The representation of African-American and Latino children in AP math tripled. The number of Regents diplomas awarded African Americans and Latinos in Rockville Centre surpassed the state average of white and Asian students earning the diploma.

Social Development

While tracking disproportionately affects children of color, no child is immune from the rigid structure that prevents academic advancement as well as social development. Being placed in one group and staying with that same group of children for three years certainly cannot be supported as developing social and emotional skills. Middle school should be a time for great social development and giving a child an opportunity to find his or her way amongst a great variety of children. One of the greatest aspects of Scofield's model was the grouping and regrouping of the team of approximately 100 students all throughout the school year.

There are those who fear that heterogeneous classes will not challenge their children. However, research has shown that with a comprehensive curriculum and enough training and support for teachers, teaching in a heterogeneous classroom does not harm the children at the higher levels and in fact can enhance their education.

Northeast

Our children's experience so far proves this point. Our children were taught in heterogeneous groups throughout elementary school at Northeast and they were sufficiently challenged. Their curriculum was high level, their teachers were excellent and the teachers were comfortable teaching to different levels.

The test scores at Northeast are parallel, if not better, in most subjects compared with other elementary schools that group for reading and math. The education in their mixed ability classes enabled our children to achieve academically and has enhanced their emotional development.

In middle school, the challenge our children receive is from a particularly skilled teacher, not from the fact that they are sitting next to children who tested in a similar range to them.

'Flexible' Not Enough

In his presentation to the community on Feb. 25, Superintendent Starr correctly conveyed the urgent need to change our grouping practices. However, what Dr. Starr is proposing appears to simply change our current tracking system into yet another tracking system, based on different tests.

Dr. Starr is proposing "flexible" grouping. Flexible grouping is not heterogeneous grouping and will not lead to the changes that research shows will work and that other districts across the country have embraced with much success.

Teachers/Curriculum

We are convinced that if our middle school teachers are provided with appropriate and ongoing support, they can teach challenging courses to heterogeneous groups.

This goal will be attained if the teachers are supported and if the curriculum has true rigor. By rigor, we do not mean more tests and scripted curricula. We mean depth; the kind of depth achieved with an interdisciplinary curriculum. Making connections across subject matters will allow our children to expand their intellectual horizons.

The commitment to change must also be sustained. Too often, we begin an initiative, only to abandon it a short while later.

We understand that such monumental changes are difficult and will require time and money for full-scale implementation. However, there are ways to begin implementing heterogeneous grouping. Starting with one or two subjects is one possibility.

The changes that are being proposed will not affect our older children. However, we each have a child in elementary school. We want their middle school experience to continue to be representative of the community in which they live. We want them to have the best education as well as to learn to be tolerant, responsible citizens.

We are confident that with heterogeneous grouping, our children and all of their classmates will grow to their fullest potential, intellectually and emotionally.

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