

## Keep Cloonan change in perspective

The Advocate Staff

Stamford has finally started the long, long overdue process of reducing student tracking that dooms so many to low expectations for most of their public school careers.

This week, Cloonan Middle School began mixing sixth-grade students of differing academic abilities in science and social studies classes.

In the fall, all of the city's middle schools will scale back on tracking, which is the process by which kids are placed at academic instruction levels as they enter sixth grade, levels at which the vast majority remain through high school.

The change is unpopular with some parents, especially those whose kids are in high-performing tracks. They are concerned that by mixing abilities in the same classroom, their kids' education will suffer. But experience has shown this not to be the case. Tracking actually began falling out of favor as an academic practice more than 30 years ago. Where it still exists, it is a major contributor to the achievement gap between minority/white, privileged/non-privileged students.

But while Cloonan got the jump on other schools this week, it is important to point out that its early start is

not part of the system-wide plan to reduce tracking. Cloonan administrators, not Superintendent of Schools Joshua Starr or the Middle School Advisory Council, who have been the prime movers behind the district-wide tracking policy, generated this move. (Cloonan does have the superintendent's backing, however.)

The distinction is important because of the controversial nature of tracking reform. Should Cloonan run into trouble, it will be easy for opponents of the plan to call for the school system to scrap it. And while we wish Cloonan the best with its efforts, teachers there face some tough challenges. For a change like this, teachers need to prepare and be adequately trained. Curriculum might have to be replaced or amended as well. Teachers at Cloonan have received some training, but many feel the change was put upon them too quickly and that they and students would benefit from more coaching. Make no mistake: Even though experience has shown that mixed-ability classes do not drag down high-performing students, they likely will if teachers are not provided with the skills they need.

It's also important to point out other significant differences between the

Cloonan plan that will last through the end of the year and the district-wide plan (which Cloonan will adopt come September). At Cloonan this year, kids are being mixed together in science and social studies classes. In the fall, Stamford middle school students will be mixed in math/science and language arts/social studies.

And Cloonan this year is mixing kids with much greater intensity. Stamford middle schools next year will reduce tracking, not abolish it. Middle schools now use three to five ability groups; the new system would employ two or three ability groups.

There will be much to learn from Cloonan's eight-week "experiment" this year, however. Any change brings unexpected challenges. This trial run should give those in charge of implementing middle school reform in the fall a better idea of what they're in for.

In short, the Cloonan jump-start should be a useful tool for educators, but not a referendum on tracking changes as a whole. Stamford has finally started the long, long overdue process of reducing student tracking that dooms so many to low expectations for most of their public school careers.