

TRACKING/ACCESS TO CURRICULUM

Introduction

The quality of the education received by a student is vital to success on mandatory tests for graduation and promotion, college performance, and even future career advancements. Yet, access to a high quality of education is often prevented by tracking, inaccurate student placements in tracks, and inadequate instruction. These barriers are a result of the policies schools use in assigning students to classrooms. Parents must be aware of and understand these policies to permit them to make informed decisions about their children's education. Often, it is only those parents who are vigilant in participating in their children's assignment to classrooms and teachers who can ensure that their children receive quality instruction and a fair opportunity to learn and reach their full academic potential. Moreover, this vigilant participation and monitoring of tracking is particularly important for minorities, who disproportionately find their children disadvantaged by the tracking systems in schools.

Tracking or "ability grouping" is a practice used in schools to group together students with the same skill levels or ability, and educate them in a different track from those with different skill levels or abilities. Tracking takes on many different forms depending on the particular school's or individual teacher's policies. Ability grouping can begin or take the form of students being grouped within a classroom, where they break into small groups with in the class to receive different instruction. Often, this type of differentiated instruction occurs in the earliest grades. However, as students progress into higher grades they may be grouped into entirely separate classrooms, where students of purported different ability groups take classes with different teachers, books, or at a different pace. Eventually, these students may be separated into different courses or "tracks" of instruction, so that by high school a portion of students are taking a track of courses that will lead to a college preparatory diploma and exposure to the materials that will tested on high school graduation exams or college entrance exams, whereas students in other tracks are not afforded these opportunities.

School administrators and teachers place students into tracks based on their performance on standardized intelligence test results, past performance in school, teacher evaluations, or a combination of any of these factors. Once a student is tracked into a specific grouping level, students often remain in those levels for their entire school experience. Particularly, when students receive differentiated instruction or class assignments as early as kindergarten or the first grade based on standardized tests, these tests and placements have a long lasting impact on the student's access to curricular opportunities and self esteem. A student who is placed in higher level classes is more likely to have higher self esteem, receive more interactive and holistic instruction and have higher self expectations than a student who is placed in lower track classes. Whereas, a student who is placed in lower level classes is likely to receive unequal or inferior instruction, develop poor self esteem, and have teachers who set lower expectations for their current and future educational success.

HAS MY CHILD BEEN TRACKED?

- Is your child's class separated into different groups for math and science during the day?
- Does your child's teacher indicate that your child is in a particular group based on performance, progress, or ability?
- Does your child's report card or transcript indicate specific levels for certain subjects?
- Does your child seem to be underchallenged in his or her classes?
- Is there a racial concentration in groups or classes within your child's grade level?

What Works and What Doesn't

There are many questions about whether ability grouping is an effective way to deal with differences in student abilities. Ability grouping is also controversial in light of the various findings about its impact on minority groups and its lasting effects on the educational access of tracked students.

Supporters of tracking argue that it allows teachers to provide more effective instruction because they can directly focus their teaching to each student's ability level. They assert that when all the students in a group are at the same level, the teacher can design the pace of teaching to match the needs of the students and can thereby provide more individualized attention. For example, a group of high skills students may move faster and cover more material in a shorter time than a group of lower skills students with whom the teacher may have to repeat material and go at a slower pace. By separating these two types of students, the proponents argue that each group of student is able to learn at its own pace and high ability students are not "held back" by the students at lower ability levels.

Opponents of ability grouping find that it is inequitable and does not increase the achievement level of most students. First, opponents point out that the criteria used to track students into different groups, such as standardized tests, are themselves flawed, and can have a negative effect on students' access to education, morale and self-esteem. Second, tracking deprives lower skills students of the benefits derived from interaction with high skills students. Third, this separation and lack of interaction can limit a student's ability to learn from others. Fourth, tracking can create low self esteem and self expectations among lower skills students, both from the student themselves and their teachers. Fifth, research has shown that once tracked, most students remain in their original tracks. Thus, a low level class placement in early grades can operate to limit education opportunities throughout a student's education. Finally, civil rights advocates have often found that although lower level courses are called remedial, these classes often focus little on building the skills students need and instead provide limited instruction that simply allows them to fall further behind. As a result of these problems, a growing body of research is confirming that students in the lowest levels all too often receive instruction that is either poor or simply does not engage the students in the appropriate type of learning activities. Thus, many leading scholars are now calling for "detracking"

or adopting policies that move away from most schools' current ability grouping practices.

How Tracking Affects Student Achievement

Tracking methods in which students are grouped into separate classes based on ability and receive instruction for all subjects in those separate classes have been found largely ineffective in increasing the level of achievement of lower track students. It has been found that students grouped into separate classes according to ability learn the same amount as students in mixed ability classes in cases where the same curriculum is used by all students. In cases where curriculum has been adjusted to meet certain ability levels, high track students have been shown to benefit while lower track students have shown no change in achievement. In fact, this type of grouping has been shown to widen the gap between high and low track students. The gap that develops between these students has been shown to be wider than it would be between students who stay in school and students who drop out.

Tracking methods in which students are taught together for most of the school day, but regrouped according to ability and achievement level for one or two subjects has been found to produce greater achievement gains than mixed-ability groups within elementary schools, if the instruction is adapted to the needs of the students and the grouping is limited to just two subjects. Results have not been as clear however with high school students.

Furthermore, there is very little movement from lower to higher tracks and students often remain in lower tracks for their entire school experience. Once tracked, most first or second graders remained tracked for the duration of their schooling.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

- Parents should ensure that they are aware of the school's policies about grouping.
- Parents should know what grade or age the school begins grouping, how the track placements are determined and how students are moved into different tracks.
- Parents should try to be active in monitoring the student's progress and ensuring that they are doing well and making progress in their track.
- Parents should also be aware that just because a student is doing well does not mean the student is in the right track. A student may perform well in a track that is too low for them.
- Parents should realize that schools do not necessarily focus on moving students into higher tracks if they are performing better and in some schools tracking for one subject determines tracking for other subjects as well.

How Tracking Affects Teaching

Teaching in low track classes has also been shown to be less coherent than teaching in high track classes. Teachers for high track classes often reinforces learning by interweaving reading, writing and discussions to connect related topics, and encouraging students to conduct out-of-classroom research on topics taught in class. On the other hand, students in low track classes are taught more through repetition and drills and tend to spend more time working on rote instruction, completing worksheets, and reading textbooks. Teachers have been shown to treat students in higher tracks more favorably than they treat students in lower tracks and teachers' treatment and expectations of students in lower tracks may also create a self-fulfilling prophecy for these students. Furthermore, teachers assigned to higher tracks tend to be better qualified and more experienced. Thus, students being instructed by these teachers are more likely to be receiving a better quality of education even if the subject matter being covered were the same, which it is generally not.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

- Parents should discuss any differences between the materials covered in different tracks with their child's teacher.
- Parents should ensure that their children are learning everything expected to be learnt for their grade level and that they are equipped to take and pass tests that may be required for their grade level.
- Parents should discuss their beliefs and expectations about their child with the teacher and come up with a plan to meet such expectations.

How Tracking Affects Minority and Low Income Students

Many opponents of ability grouping also find that teacher bias towards minorities and low income students often results in such students being more likely to be assigned to lower tracks. Research has shown that minority students are overly represented in lower level tracks and underrepresented in higher level tracks and that the distribution of a student to high or low tracks is also related to the socioeconomic status of the student's family. Research has shown that students from low income households are more likely to be tracked lower than students from high income households, who are more likely to be tracked higher even when they have low test scores or grades.

In studying the performance of low-income African-American children, research has also found that kindergarten tracking was based on social factors such as how pre-registration forms were completed, interviews with the student's parent and whether or not the student's family was on public assistance. Tracking may thus result in the denial of access to quality education for those students who are already disadvantaged.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

- Parents may request information about the objective criteria used for placement in tracks and discuss such criteria with the teacher and the school.
- Parents may request information from the school on the makeup of different tracks within the school to determine if there is a pattern.
- Parents should ask about ways in which the school is addressing any patterns that show overrepresentation of minority and low-income students in lower tracks.
- Parents can advocate and organize other parents for change in the way students are grouped in their schools. Parents should feel free to read research on tracking, its effects and alternatives to tracking and ability grouping. Parents can use this information to make school board presentations or other forms of advocacy.

Testing For Track Placement

Though methods of determining track placement differ from state to state and district to district, standardized tests are often a significant part of track placements. All Many students entering the first grade take a school readiness test. Likewise, students at various times in school (often in grades 3, 5 and 8) are administered the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) or another standardized test. The ITBS measures student performance in reading, math, science and social studies in comparison to a national sample of students. The ITBS is not designed to match the school curriculum though it may be similar. The test scores are reported in terms of a national percentile rank (NPR). For example, an NPR of 60 would mean that the student performed equal to or better than 60% of the students in the national sample. Some schools may administer the ITBS in other grades in addition to those listed above or may also administer the Stanford Achievement Test, ninth edition (Stanford 9). The Stanford 9 is similar in nature to the ITBS. Often, the students' percentile rank on these standardized tests will play a significant role in determining what level the school places the student.

In grades 1 through 8, most states also administer their own criterion-referenced competency test, which is intended to measure whether students are learning the state curriculum in English and Language Arts, math and reading. Although not as frequently, states also measure science and social studies.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

- Parents should assess whether their child's ITBS and/or Stanford 9 score fairly reflects their child's education abilities and, if it does not, discuss other measures with the school that they might use to place the child.
- Parents can determine whether their child's level placement reflects their ITBS and/or Stanford 9 score and discuss this with school administrators.
- Parents should request the ITBS and/or Stanford 9 testing schedule from the

school at the beginning of the school year.

- Parents should ask how the ITBS and/or Stanford 9 results are used in determining track placement for students.
- Parents should review their children's progress from the previous year's results to ensure that they are making the expected progress.
- Parents may also compare their child's progress to the school's progress rating to determine how their child's test performance compares to others.

Testing for Gifted Programs

Many schools operate and fund differentiated curriculum programs for gifted students. Local school boards are required to notify parents in writing of the gifted program it operates, the referral procedures for that program and eligibility requirements. In Georgia, for instance, a "gifted student" is defined as "a student who demonstrates a high degree of intellectual and/or creative ability(ies), exhibits an exceptionally high degree of motivation, and/or excels in specific academic fields, and who needs special instruction and/or special ancillary services to achieve at levels commensurate with his or her abilities." (Ga. Comp. R. & Regs. 160-4-2-.38)

In Georgia, essentially anyone can refer a student for initial consideration for the gifted program, even the own student or the student's peers. However, students who score at a level specified by the local school board on standardized tests are automatically referred. Once referred, a student must score within a certain percentile on standardized tests or other evaluations required by the Georgia Department of Education. The local school board is allowed to select the specific tests or evaluations. To be eligible for the gifted program, "a student must either score at the 99th percentile (for grades K-2) or the 96th percentile (for grades 3-12) on the composite or full scale score of a standardized test and" meet the qualify criteria for one of the following: mental ability (intelligence), achievement, creativity and motivation. Otherwise, a student can meet the qualifying criteria for three out of the following four areas: mental ability (intelligence), achievement, creativity and motivation.

Qualifying Criteria:

Mental Ability: a score in the 96th percentile on a standardized test of mental ability.

Achievement: a score in the 90th percentile on a standardized test of achievement; or a product or performance that is judged by qualified evaluators to be a 90 on a scale of 1-100.

Creativity: a score in the 90th percentile on a standardized test of creativity; or a product or evidence of an outstanding performance that is judged by qualified evaluators to be a 90 on a scale of 1-100.

Motivation: a score in the 90th percentile on a standardized test of motivation; or a product or performance that is judged by qualified evaluators to be a 90 on a scale of 1-100; or a grade point average of 3.5 on a 4.0 scale over the previous two years.

☑ **WHAT PARENTS CAN DO**

- Parents should ask for a gifted program testing schedule at the beginning of the year and exercise their right to have a conference to discuss their child's test results, eligibility and placement.
- School districts are required to provide parents in writing with information about the gifted programs in their districts as well as the written criteria used for referral, screening, selection and placement.
- Whenever the opportunity arises, parents should encourage their child to consider participating in plays, academic contests, art displays, talent contests and other similar activities. Parents should also request that qualified evaluators judge these activities so that the score can serve as alternative criterion for placing the child in the gifted program.
- Below is a list of websites that provide resources for parents to prepare their child for ability testing:

<http://www.brainchild.com/gen/usmap.asp>

<http://kidtest.com>

www.ct4me.net/

<http://getsmarter.org>

<http://www.eduplace.com/kids/mhm/>

www.internet4classrooms.com/TCAP.htm

Effects of Tracking on Test Performance

Student performance on required standardized achievement tests is likely to be different depending on the student's track. Students in lower tracks may not be receiving the level of instruction that is required to do well on the standardized and standards-based tests. As discussed above, given the difference in material, approach to teaching, and experience of teachers in lower tracks, students in these lower tracks may be greatly disadvantaged in standardized testing situations. This situation results in a vicious cycle of underachievement caused by poor test performance by lower track students who then remain in these low tracks because of their continuing poor performance.

Furthermore, for lower tracked students, the psychological impact of repeated failure on standardized tests leads to self-doubt. Research suggests that many students make less of an effort to succeed so that they can blame their poor results on lack of effort. Thus, a self-fulfilling prophecy is created for these students.

Standardized testing may not be the best measure of a student's skills, yet school systems rely heavily upon them and, thus, parents must do everything possible to help adequately prepare their children for them. Encouraging students to study and do well on all their tests and fostering strong study habits regardless of which track can positively

affect a child test scores and class room achievement. Good study habits can also help prepare students for high stakes testing, a topic we discuss at length later in this manual.

☑ ***ELEVEN TIPS TO HELP YOUR CHILD PREPARE FOR TESTS (FROM THE AMERICAN SCHOOL COUNSELOR ASSOCIATION)***

1. The best way to prepare for tests is to study, know the work, and take the right courses.
2. If your child is nervous at test time, ask her teacher for tips on helping her relax.
3. Make sure that your child is in school during the testing sessions. Do not plan any doctor or dental appointments on test dates.
4. Make sure that you are aware of your child's performance and that you can help interpret the results when they become available.
5. Remember to keep well-informed about your child's tests. Know how test results are used, and how they will affect your child's placement in school.
6. If there are major differences between standardized test scores and school grades, find out why.
7. Encourage your child to study over a period of time rather than "cram" the night before.
8. Encourage your child to listen carefully to all test-taking directions given by the teacher and to ask questions about any directions that are unclear.
9. See that your child gets his/her regular amount of sleep before the tests and is well-rested.
10. Make sure that your child eats his/her usual breakfast on the day of the test. Hunger can detract from a good test performance.
11. Encourage your child to do his/her best.

Challenges to Tracking

Tracking is used by teachers and schools as a tool of teaching. As such, a parent's first challenge to tracking should be directed to teachers and schools. Parents should be fully informed about the tracking practices that are affecting their child and then discuss their child's tracking and any of their concerns with the teacher and the school.

☑ ***HOW PARENTS CAN GET INFORMATION***

- Since tracking systems differ from school to school and district to district,

parents should get information on the tracking programs used in their child's schools by asking the teachers directly about how students in the same grade are instructed differently and whether students may move between such groups.

- A student's test results and performance history can be obtained from the student's teacher and school.
- Parents may also be interested in seeing how their child's performance compares to that of other students. Such information may be obtained on the their state department of education website.
- If attempts to receive information from the school or the department of education fail, parents may file requests under the Freedom of Information Act as described on the US Department of Education's website at <http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/leg/foia/foia.html>.
- Parents may be interested in reading about other legal challenges to tracking and segregated class in other school districts. The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, for instance, filed litigation in Thomasville, Georgia that included a challenge of its tracking practices. For more information on this case, see www.lawyerscomm.org/projects/education.html. Similarly, the Department of Justice has initiated legal proceedings regarding the racial segregation in classrooms in districts like Dublin, Georgia.

Due to its disproportionate impact on minority and low income students, tracking and ability grouping may be seen as an attempt to resegregate students by placing white students in higher tracks and minority students in lower tracks. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination in assigning students to schools, classes, or courses of study in programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance. School districts are therefore responsible for making sure that they do not use ability grouping or tracking practices that result in discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin. Thus, criteria used by schools to assign students to tracks should be nondiscriminatory. Students should also be given the opportunity to move from one track or ability group to another, depending on their progress.

Parents who believe that a school's tracking policy is illegal can file complaints with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires schools to provide justification for practices such as tracking that have a disparate, discriminatory impact on particular groups. For further information about filing complaints and for a complaint form, see the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) website at <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OCR/index.html>.

BEFORE YOU FILE A COMPLAINT

- Do you know what evaluation, placement and exiting criteria are used to determine track placement in your child's school?

- Have you discussed these criteria with your child's teacher and school?
- Are the criteria applied uniformly to all students regardless of race, color, or national origin?
- Do you believe any of the criteria are culturally biased or discriminatory?
- Has your child met exiting criteria but not been moved to a different track?
- Have you discussed your concerns with your child's teacher and school without resolution? You may also contact your superintendent's office.