

NEWS & VIEWS

Wrong Side Of The Tracks

Though the word is taboo, tracking still lurks in our schools.

By Darlene White Natale

Somewhere along the line, you were probably tracked. Maybe it was as blatant as being put in the "C" group rather than the "A" group back in second grade. Or maybe it was more subtle: In my school district, the "Cardinals" dreamed of the Ivy League, while everybody knew the "Robins" were headed for vo-tech. Regardless of the labels, the lessons we learned and the company we kept early in life probably had a lot to do with which side of the proverbial track we ended up on years later.

In recent years, schools have distanced themselves from tracking, defined very carefully by Pittsburgh Public Schools Spokesperson Pat Crawford as "grouping students by ability for most or all of the school day." But what many schools now term "ability grouping" sometimes looks a lot like tracking. "Often times, [ability grouping] is a smoke screen for de facto tracking for people who aren't facile enough to use heterogeneous [mixed ability] groups in instruction," says Dr. James Henderson, the Dean of Education at Duquesne University.

Though the dreaded "T" word is seldom heard, the debate over how and whether to divide up students is still one of the most divisive in the educational community.

Tied To The Tracks

Most school district spokespersons won't even utter the word "tracking," preferring the less negative term "ability grouping." Indeed, classrooms in many schools have become more heterogeneous. But the de facto division of students into "the best" and "the rest" continues within many school walls.

"We don't have any [tracking]," says Dr. Paula Calabrese, assistant superintendent of Hampton Schools. "The term is not used in our district." But Calabrese says that ability grouping is used at the elementary level for math and reading. At the high school level there are prerequisites for classes, but there is no formal tracking.

Other districts, like Gateway, phase high school courses according to difficulty level, but don't forbid students from moving from the lowest to the highest phase. Assistant Superintendent Dr. Terry Foriska, however, says that students are sometimes "tracked by the courses they choose to take, for instance trigonometry versus consumer math."

To gifted education advocates, that's just common sense. Franny McAleer, president of the Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education (PAGE), says that by placing children in an ungrouped setting, "The bright kids are pulled down." A PAGE bulletin goes further: "Every student has a right in a democratic society to learn something in school in each class. However, it is possible that the students who may actually learn the least in a given class are the gifted. So much of what they are asked to learn may have been mastered in the past."

But tracking opponents contend that segregating students according to some supposed measure of ability "worsens the

academic prospects of low-achieving students while doing nothing to improve those of higher-achieving ones," as Peter Schmidt writes in a recent edition of *Education Week*. And ability grouping, some allege, is just tracking by another name.

"There probably isn't a real difference between academic tracking and ability grouping as defined by the NEA [National Education Association]," says Cordell Adfolt of the Pennsylvania Education Association, a teacher's union. Adfolt doesn't think that all grouping is necessarily negative. Students who are placed in ability groups but are regularly reassessed may have a chance to move up. But Adfolt says that regular reassessment is uncommon.

"The longer you are in the lower track, the less likely it is that you'll ever get out," Adfolt adds.

Magnets Or Rails?

Pat Crawford of the Pittsburgh Public Schools says the district has a policy against tracking. Instead, Pittsburgh offers magnet programs and schools of special emphasis.

Some of the district's magnet options are sequential, beginning in kindergarten and continuing through middle and high school. Crawford says this does not mean a student can't enter at the middle or high school level. Admittance depends on the district's racial balancing requirements and good luck in the district's annual magnet lottery. At some of the schools, admissions preference is given to the younger siblings of already enrolled magnet students. To stay in a magnet, a student must "maintain satisfactory attendance, citizenship and academic progress," says the district's *School Choices* handbook.

Some educators feel magnets are just a mutated form of tracking. In 1995, A.M. Pallas wrote in a report to the National Society for the Study of Education that magnets "simply replicate the negative aspects of tracking by creaming the highest achieving students into them and leaving low achievers behind in other schools."

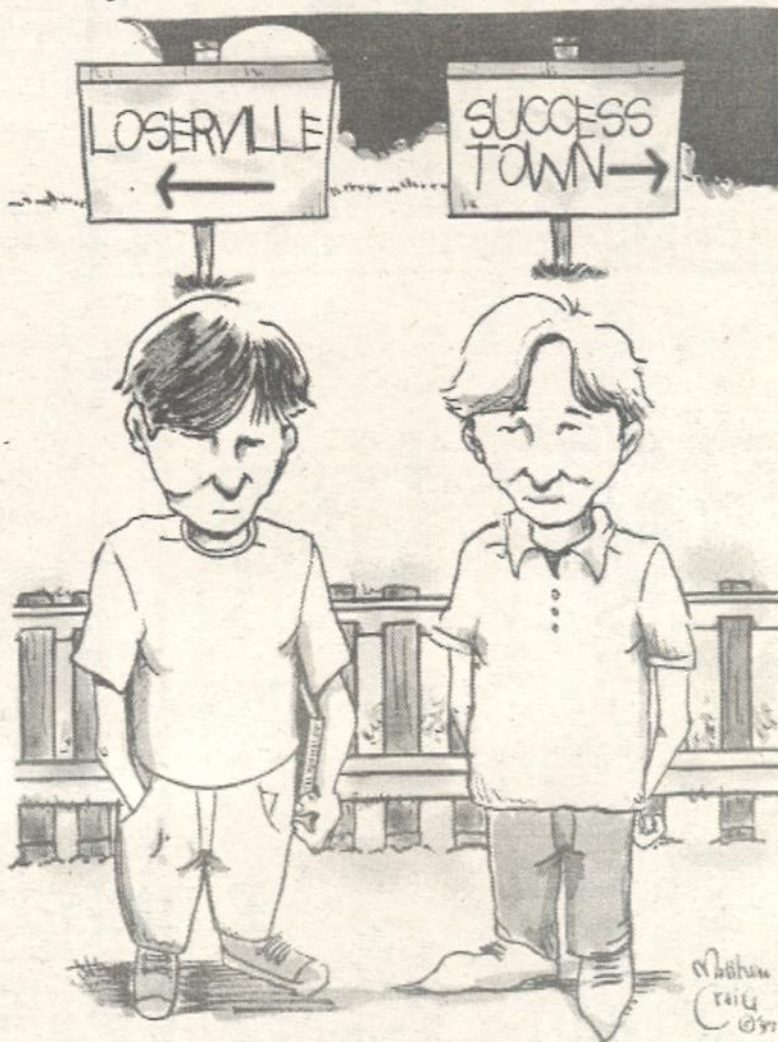
Although Pittsburgh's magnet program is racially balanced, the students left behind in many tracking systems are those most in need of a helping hand — the poor and minorities.

On The Race Track

"The situation is pretty bleak almost everywhere," says Kati Haycock, a principal author of *Education Watch: The 1996 Education Trust State and National Handbook*

released in December of 1996. The report ranks the states on measures of education equity and quality and points out the differences in what is taught to different groups of students — differences which, particularly in Pennsylvania, are startling.

"Students from poor families, for example, are much less likely to be placed in rigorous college preparatory classes and much more likely to be placed in watered down 'general' or 'vocational' courses," the report states. "Similarly, African-American and Latino students are less likely to be placed in courses that build high-level thinking skills, including geometry, advanced algebra and chemistry." *Education Watch* says that even when the



courses have the same titles, standards are sometimes lower for the disadvantaged. For example, students in high poverty areas routinely receive "A" grades for work that would receive a "C" in the suburbs.

Education Watch demonstrates that neighboring states do a better job than Pennsylvania at leveling the playing field for all students. In Pennsylvania, African Americans constitute about 14 percent of the student population, yet only 5 percent of the students in gifted courses are black. More disturbingly, blacks represent 19 percent of the Pennsylvania special education population and an overwhelming 41 percent of the students suspended. By contrast, in Ohio African-American students participate in gifted education at a rate slightly higher than whites.

Still, Haycock sees hope. "Around the country, there are schools and colleges that

are proving every day that poor and minority students absolutely can achieve at the same high levels as other students when they are taught to high levels," she says. To find the more sterling examples, though, one has to look outside of the Keystone State.

Tearing Up The Tracks

One such school, cited by Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers, is John F. Kennedy High School in Bellmore, NY. New York students have the option of enrolling in rigorous courses designed to prepare them for the state's Regent's Exam, which can qualify them for the prestigious Regent's Diploma. Shanker says most of the Regent's students are college bound — effectively on a success track which other students can't ride. But six years ago the principal of Bellmore's Kennedy High decided to eliminate all non-Regent's classes and place those students into the Regent's track. "The results have been impressive and two other high schools have followed suit," says Shanker.

Now at Bellmore, writes Shanker, "120 more students per grade are taking more rigorous courses and more challenging tests — and meeting higher expectations." Eighty percent of the student population passes the Regent's exam in English, up from 61 percent four years ago. In Sequential Math 1, 87 percent of the students now pass the Regent's test, up from 71 percent.

"The net effect has been to raise both the floor and the ceiling of achievement at Kennedy High," says Shanker. "If we continue to ask little of our students, we will continue to get what we ask for."

The Kennedy experience matches one method of detracking developed at Stanford University, called the "accelerated school." In this model, all pupils receive the curriculum that had previously been reserved for the gifted and talented. "An accelerated school curriculum is not only fast paced and engaging, but it includes concepts, analyses, problem-solving and interesting applications," writes educator Carol Ascher.

Accelerated schools are an idea which makes sense to some local educators. "I think we need to establish high standards for all students," says Duquesne University's Henderson. "I think [the gifted] do need to be challenged. I think there are ways to establish mentor arrangements with gifted students to specially challenge them. ... I guess I would say to the folks at PAGE, 'If [gifted education] is good for your kid, why isn't good for all kids?'"

All of our students are taught that this country was founded on the principle that all men are created equal. It will undoubtedly be a long time before school districts are through grappling with the problem of giving all children equal educational opportunities, regardless of which side of the tracks they're from. ■

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