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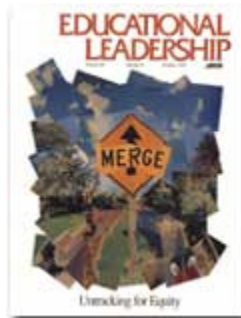
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Untracking for Equity Pages 6-10

## The Case for Untracking

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**What does it take to replace tracking with heterogeneous grouping? Successful schools identify nine characteristics.**



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For years, American schools in pursuit of reform have been caught between two competing demands: mandates for excellence and mandates for equity. Yet, quietly, an increasing number of schools are moving to offer both high-quality education and equal access to knowledge. How? By dismantling unproductive grouping practices that have undermined education for all but a few students. We call these schools “untracking schools.”

Since 1990, the Massachusetts Advocacy Center, with the support of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, has identified untracking middle schools across the country in an effort to document their success in promoting both excellence and equity for all students. Approximately 900 letters to educators around the country produced some 250 nominations of such schools. We asked each of them to complete a detailed questionnaire. Their responses along with site visits and telephone interviews revealed clues to the *process* of untracking and lessons for others considering alternatives to tracking. What we learned is testimony to the resourcefulness, persistence, passion for excellence, and capacity for risk-taking that characterize the best of our educational leaders.

What does it take to replace a comfortable practice like tracking with alternatives? Educators identify nine ingredients.

## A Belief That All Students Can Learn

The direction that untracking takes in a given school evolves from a commitment to the learning of all students at high levels. Untracking schools view reform of grouping practices as a means to an end, not an end in itself. While the *means* of untracking include eliminating separate groups of students categorized by ability and providing equal access to valued knowledge to all students through reshaped curriculum and instruction, the *goal* of untracking is improved learning for all students within democratic school communities.

“Academically, we’re working to raise the floor *and* raise the ceiling,” notes Karla Deletis, superintendent of schools in Wellesley, Massachusetts. John D’Auria, principal of the Wellesley Middle School, adds:

If tracking would help us accomplish our goals at this school, then we would use it.  
 But we believe in producing active learners, critical thinkers, and risk-takers, and tracking our students by ability quite simply doesn't allow us to achieve our goals.

This belief in untracking sustains educators throughout the demanding process of organizational change. As Donald LeMay, principal of Valley Junior High in Carlsbad, California, stresses, “Untracking is a challenging proposition. No one is going to do this if they do not believe it is possible and necessary.”

## A Belief in Change as a Process

A second characteristic of untracking schools is their orientation to institutional change, not as an event but as a comprehensive process that touches every aspect of school life. While at first blush untracking focuses primarily on the regrouping of students, success is unlikely without reforms in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and counseling that complement the new grouping arrangements.

Classroom reforms that support heterogeneous grouping typically reflect a commitment to “leveling up” rather than “watering down” practice. As John Delaney, principal of the Parker Middle School in Reading, Massachusetts, reports, “When we are selecting a new curriculum or introducing a new teaching approach for heterogeneous classrooms, we select the approach we would traditionally choose for our most facile learners.” What Delaney and other educators emphasize is that curriculum and instruction suitable for multi-level groups must draw from the conceptual, inquiry-based curriculums and methodologies often reserved only for those students labeled gifted and talented.

Thus, curriculum and instruction in untracking schools often focus on developing thinking skills in content areas through a variety of interesting learning projects. Sometimes these schools use a curriculum like *Philosophy for Children*, which might have been reserved for top-track students but that works equally well, perhaps even better, with heterogeneous classes. Sometimes they initiate a curriculum that acknowledges new thinking about multiple intelligences such as *Immigration 1850*, developed at Howard Gardner's Project Zero. Or they might use a curriculum specifically designed for heterogeneous groups, like *Foundational Approaches in Science Teaching (FAST)*, developed at the University of Hawaii. In other cases, teachers design their own curriculum, which is frequently thematically organized, experiential, and oriented to a variety of cultural perspectives.

## High Expectations for All

Third, untracking schools purposefully weave norms of high expectations and inclusion into the entire fabric of school life. These schools avoid retaining students in grade or segregating them through pull-out approaches. Instead, recognizing that some students need second, maybe even third, chances for success, they offer mastery learning, extra periods for review of particular subjects, and extended days or school years for vulnerable students. Rather than assume that only some students need preparation for post-secondary education, these schools counsel all students for the probability that they will seek higher education at some point in their lives.

In addition, since untracking schools define extracurricular activities as sources of learning in their own right, participation is based on students' interests (sometimes reinforced by a contract stipulating attendance and commitment) rather than on selection or eligibility criteria. At Jericho Middle School in New York, for example, students with physical disabilities may be full members of the cheerleading squad. Further, if the number of students trying out for the class play exceeds the number of speaking parts available, the school puts separate productions into rehearsal and assigns those students enrolled in onstage parts in one production to backstage roles in the second. Schools like Jericho distribute scarce resources—donated tickets to community sports and cultural events, adult mentors, opportunities for field trips, access to the computer lab, and the like—fairly so that *all* students can expand their horizons.

In untracking schools, all students, not just a few, are acknowledged for their contributions, progress, and achievement through “Good Citizen Honor Rolls” and postcards sent to *every* parent. Similarly, they try to ensure that high-status roles—student government representatives, office helpers, dispute mediators, school tour guides, hall safety guards, and cross-age tutors—are open to all, including special education students. Finally, in schools with culturally diverse populations, opportunities for learning honor nondominant cultures and languages by incorporating aspects of students' home cultures into all domains of school life—including morning announcements, hallway bulletin boards, thematic curriculum, and two-way language learning.

Such changes in routines reflect a deep commitment to core beliefs about the role of schools in developing intelligence and expanding opportunities for student success. As schools untrack, they play out beliefs that school practices should nurture all dimensions of intelligence rather than define and measure fixed ability. Second, they reveal a commitment to developing students' aspirations rather than circumscribing students'

dreams. They also treat students as citizens of a learning community rather than products of an assembly line. Finally, educators in untracking schools act on the belief that persistent effort rather than inborn ability is a precursor to success in life and the basis for lifelong learning.

## A Partnership of Leaders and Teachers

Fourth, the relationship between the principal and teachers in untracking schools is critical to their success. In these schools, principals involve a variety of constituents in developing the mission of the school, articulate that mission in a variety of arenas, and ensure that the mission is fulfilled. In doing so, they may have to challenge traditional beliefs about child development and intelligence, nurture alternative belief systems, assess the potential leverage for institutional change, negotiate for resources, and open doors to resources so that teachers can strengthen their own learning.

Just as principals in untracking schools are called on to be risk-takers, they must foster conditions for risk-taking among their staff. They do so by encouraging teachers who try innovative ideas to describe their successes and failures to others, while promoting self-assessment among teachers by temporarily suspending teacher evaluations. These principals themselves must have a thorough knowledge about research on tracking, an understanding of instructional alternatives, and some grounding in organizational change. In addition, they must be able to act politically to address the concerns of all constituent groups. In response to skeptics, they must be ready to respond in a compelling way to questions like, "How do you plan to make sure that my advanced child won't be bored in heterogeneous classes?" and "How can you ensure that my child is not going to be overwhelmed when you mix her in with smarter students?"

At the same time, principals in untracking schools must work with teachers to introduce reform where it really counts: in classroom practice. This requires gauging the readiness of staff for change and working with teachers to identify appropriate professional development approaches, including teacher-directed efforts. As teachers from the Graham and Parks School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, emphasize:

It's what happens with kids *after* mixed-ability grouping occurs that matters. This must be put into teachers' hands—by empowering them, having them *critically* examine the current program, investigate other schools through visits or reading, and then develop their own ways.

## The Value of Parent Involvement

Looking back on their untracking experiences, principals observe that parents can make or break school change. They emphasize the importance of involving parents at an early point in planning and implementing heterogeneous groups.

Some schools educate parents about alternatives to tracking by inviting them to attend classes using new teaching approaches or programs introducing new curriculum. By piloting new approaches and publicly reporting the results, other schools persuade parents that untracking strengthens the mainstream of the school so that all students will master complex material. Still other schools take advantage of a phase-in process to allow parents a choice between heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping until all teachers are prepared to teach all children effectively.

Often the most vocal parents in opposition to heterogeneous grouping are those who expect their children to enter gifted and talented programs. These parents may be politically powerful and sophisticated in countering arguments in favor of heterogeneous grouping. However, they may reconsider their position when they understand that inclusive schooling will offer all students an education that is sometimes reserved only for students labeled gifted.

## A Hospitable Policy Context

While some schools are untracking with little encouragement from the formal educational hierarchy, many gain momentum from supportive district- or state-level policies. For example:

- The Massachusetts Department of Education (1990) has not only issued a policy

advisory and sponsored professional development programs to encourage alternatives to ability grouping, but has tied discretionary dropout prevention and remedial grant funding to untracking.

- California's Middle Level Partnership program and the Department of Education's report *Caught in the Middle* (1987) have encouraged inter-district clusters of middle schools to pool resources to initiate and sustain heterogeneous grouping.
- New York's "trainer for trainers model" has created a pool of professionals who offer staff development and technical assistance to schools implementing mixed-level classrooms.
- In Nevada (1990) and in Maryland (1989), policy studies and advisory positions regarding appropriate practices for adolescents suggest that middle-level schools group their students heterogeneously.
- In districts—including Ann Arbor, Michigan, and San Diego, California—central office and school staff have worked with school board members to review and publicize research on tracking. They've also initiated studies of local tracking patterns, resulting in a formal policy and timetable to promote alternatives.

In the absence of a favorable public policy context, many schools forge ahead, drawing support from positions taken by the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics, the National Middle School Association, and the research of Jeannie Oakes (1985) and others. Middle schools especially have found that recommendations for heterogeneous grouping by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) can provoke discussion and generate support for untracking. They also report that these sources give proposed reforms credibility and encourage school decision makers to take risks they might not otherwise take.

## A Multi-Year Plan

The complexity of change required for successful heterogeneous grouping requires planning, and many schools acknowledge this by adopting timetables that span three to seven years.

A school's plan may reflect the numerous steps necessary to prepare for untracking: disseminating research about tracking and its alternatives, visiting other schools with heterogeneous classrooms, researching curriculum appropriate for diverse classrooms, and identifying resources for staff development. The plan may also outline a specific timetable for implementing heterogeneous grouping in whatever form the school has chosen—whether flexible grouping, "controlled heterogeneity," grouping for multidimensional intelligence, inclusive integration of students with all levels of disabilities into the school mainstream, multi-language or multi-age grouping.

Productive planning assures those most uncomfortable with change that they will not be forced to change overnight. It can also provide a framework for shaping classroom practices to mirror research findings. As Sandra Caldwell, principal of the Middle School of the Kennebunks in Kennebunkport, Maine, reports, "We question practically everything. We ask whether our practices align with research, and when we find gaps, we work team by team to figure out action plans to close them." In short, untracking schools may have not one, but many, plans for change implemented at different times by different actors.

## Purposeful Professional Development

Untracking schools agree that reform cannot take place without focused professional development. Some have engaged in activities that seek to strengthen the school as an organization through goal-setting and team-building exercises. Others begin with a review of "high expectations" teaching strategies, sometimes using the Teacher Expectations, Student Achievement (TESA) program to reduce the potential for differentiated instruction within heterogeneous classrooms. Many schools have introduced all their teachers to research and training in cooperative learning and complex instruction. Some, like Milwaukee's Parkman Middle School, have designated one or more teachers as implementers to assist other teachers in incorporating new techniques into their classrooms. Finally, staff development must also accompany the

introduction of any new curriculum—whether it is a packaged one or one designed by teachers.

## Phase-In Implementation

Finally, untracking schools recognize that reform does not happen overnight. To the contrary, given the deep changes in school culture, curriculum, and instruction that accompany successful untracking, schools often introduce alternatives in stages. Their strategies differ, depending on such factors as teachers' readiness, parents' concerns, and availability of resources for professional development, curriculum change, or instructional innovation. Whatever the beginning point, most schools understand that the end point is a more-inclusive learning community.

Some untracking schools start by merging the bottom tracks in all or most subject areas into the middle tracks, while providing extra support through co-teaching or additional time for tutoring. Other schools phase in heterogeneous grouping beginning at the lowest grade level and add a grade every year. Still other schools introduce changes department by department, as subject-area teachers identify and prepare to implement new curriculum specifically designed for groups of diverse learners. Finally, schools that have already organized into teams or schools-within-a-school may untrack one team at a time—with the ultimate goal of introducing heterogeneous grouping schoolwide.

## Is It Worth It?

While untracking demands focused, purposeful attention over a number of years, seasoned educators tell us that it *is* worth the effort. In untracking schools, achievement is up for “low” and “average” students, while undiminished and sometimes improved for “high” students. Untracking schools cite improvements in discipline, school climate, and teacher morale. As Roene Comack, a teacher at Harding Middle School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, says, “I’ve never worked so hard being creative, but I’m also convinced that I’m teaching better.” And Sue Galletti, former principal of Islander Middle School in Mercer Island, Washington, speaks for many educators involved in untracking when she concludes:

What I’ve *stopped* seeing is very talented, bright children feeling they’re not worth a bit of salt because they haven’t made it into an elitist program for students labeled “gifted.” I’m seeing all kids realize there are lots of kids who can contribute to learning even when what they contribute is different from them.

This is excellence. This is equity.

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