

# Which Way Should You Go?

## To track or not to track, that is the question

Brookings scholar Tom Loveless tackles the issue in his report *Tracking and Detracking: High Achievers in Massachusetts Middle Schools* examining changes that have occurred over time and their implications for high-achieving students. Here are excerpts adapted from his report.

What are the implications of tracking, or grouping students into separate classes based on their achievement? Many schools have moved away from this practice and reduced the number of subject-area courses offered in a given grade.

Massachusetts is one of the leading states in reforming tracking, and the changes that have occurred there over eighteen years (1991-2009). Loveless' report documents a dramatic transformation: middle schools have significantly altered the way in which they group students into classes for instruction, an issue of particular interest to those concerned with the educational fate of gifted and talented youngsters.

### Tracking's Breadth

Tracking is the practice of grouping students into separate classes based on achievement. Tracking policy is typically made at the local level and therefore does not attract much national media attention. Yet it annually affects more than 14 million young people in the middle grades alone.

Furthermore, it is the type of policy that controls critical aspects of education—the classes students take, the curricula they are taught, the peers with whom they learn, and the teachers who instruct them. These elements of education largely define a child's experience in school—and all of them have changed significantly because of tracking reform.

In the middle of the twentieth century,

traditional tracking systems were rigid and deterministic. Students and families had little input regarding classroom placements. Based predominantly on IQ scores, schools assigned youngsters to tracks—academic, general, or vocational—that cut across all subject areas, ignored students' individual strengths and weaknesses in particular subjects, made unjustifiable assumptions about children's destinations in life, and systematically discriminated against pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

That system eventually gave way to a more open form of tracking—one allowing, for example, a precocious reader to take advanced ELA classes while still enrolling in a less challenging math class.

Reliance on IQ tests fell by the wayside and track placement came to be based on past performance and achievement test results. Students who did well in a particular subject could take a more advanced class the following year. Parents could challenge course placements and insist that their children take the classes that they deemed best.

But this more flexible form of tracking also came under fire, most notably in Jeannie Oakes' 1985 book, *Keeping Track*. Even less rigid tracking, she insisted, made distinctions among students that often reflected their socioeconomic backgrounds. (To be sure, allowing parents a

say in track assignment favored school-savvy families.)

### Social Inequities

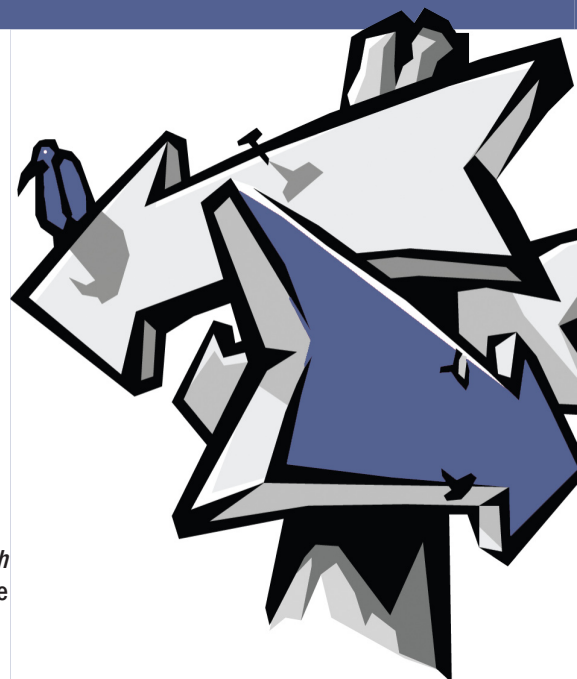
Oakes and others charged that the changes that had been made to tracking were largely cosmetic and that its fundamental unfairness had not been ameliorated.

Citing the social reproductionist theories of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, among others, Oakes argued that tracking exists to maintain the existing distribution of power and privilege in society, one that is stratified to meet the demands of capitalism. Summarizing her study of twenty-five schools' tracking systems, Oakes claimed that “track levels in schools, reflective of social and economic groupings in society, were provided differential access to school knowledge in such a way that the children of more powerful societal groups had greater access to the kind of knowledge that may, in turn, permit them greater access to social and economic power.” And she demanded that schools “relinquish their role as agents in reproducing inequities in the larger society.”

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Association, the ACLU, the Children's Defense Fund, the Carnegie Corporation, the College Board, and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

## Tracking and Middle Schools

The middle school movement, as it was called, also gained traction during this time. It embraced a long list of reforms reflecting progressive educators' longstanding desire to alter the education of young adolescents.

These reforms included converting 7th-9th grade junior high schools into 5th-8th or 6th-8th-grade middle schools; balancing adolescents' social, emotional, and academic needs in the school curriculum; recruiting into middle schools teachers with elementary training who would presumably possess more child-centered philosophies than their subject-specialist counterparts in high schools; and promoting project-based learning and other student-led forms of pedagogy over traditional teacher-led instruction.

Given the overlap between progressivism and egalitarianism, it is no wonder that tracking reformers found fertile ground in middle schools.

Their cause was bolstered by several high-profile publications in the late 1980s and early 1990s that promoted middle school reform. These included the Carnegie Corporation's *Turning Points* (1989) and two state policy documents, *California's Caught in the Middle* (1987) and *Massachusetts' Magic in the Middle* (1993). About this same time, a battle over detracking erupted in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

*The Boston Globe* ran an editorial cartoon illustrating the fear that high achieving children would receive instruction far below their capabilities. The cartoon showed Einstein at a chalkboard, sadly writing  $1 + 1 = 2$  and  $3 + 3 = 6$  on the board, with the caption: "Panel Recommends End of Tracking in the Cambridge Schools."

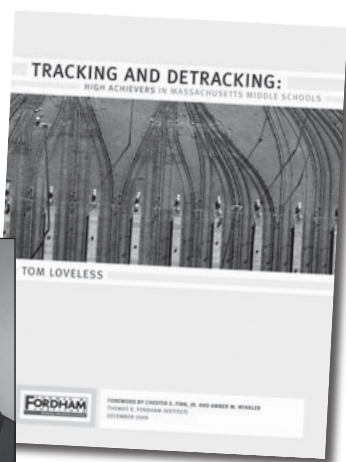
Opposition to detracking came from groups representing the parents of gifted and talented students. They argued that bright students should have advanced classes. The National Association for

Gifted Children (NAGC) passed a resolution in support of grouping for advanced students. But these arguments were swept aside by the charge that singling out high achievers in honors or accelerated classes is inherently elitist, and equity can only be attained when all students receive the same curriculum.

Many middle schools—but not all—steadily reduced the number of track levels offered in academic subjects. In most schools, today's middle school parents, like their predecessors fifty years ago, have few choices regarding the courses their children take. For most academic subjects, students are placed in a single,



Tom Loveless, a former sixth-grade teacher and Harvard public policy professor, is an expert on student achievement, education policy, and reform in K-12 schools. He also is a member of the National Math Advisory Panel.



heterogeneously grouped class offering the same curriculum and pace of instruction to all. The tracking that still occurs is generally confined to mathematics, but even options in math have been curtailed. Some middle schools have resisted the trend towards detracking, but they are in the minority, and in many cases, they must buck state and district recommendations to maintain their tracked systems.

## Key Findings

*Tracking and Detracking* reports four key findings:

1. Tremendous change has occurred in tracking since the 1990s. Nearly twenty years ago, eighth-grade students attended tracked classes for most of the day. They now spend most of their day in detracked classes.

2. Several factors influence tracking policy. Schools serving predominantly poor populations are more likely to have stopped tracking. Those serving students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more apt to have retained tracking.

3. Mimicking high schools, middle schools serving grades 7 and 8 are more likely to embrace tracking compared with their grade 5-8 and 6-8 counterparts. Finally, schools in which parents wield greater influence tend to keep tracking in place, as do schools in communities where local school boards have discussed the topic.

4. Detracking is more prevalent in urban, high poverty schools. Urban schools with children of lower socioeconomic status (SES) are more likely to detrack than suburban schools with children of higher SES. Consequently, the risks associated with detracking are concentrated in urban schools serving large numbers of poor, low-achieving children.

5. Detracking carries risks for high-achieving students. The study compared the percentage of students achieving at the advanced level on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in tracked and untracked schools. There was no difference in English language arts. However, with school-level SES held constant, each additional track level in eighth-grade math (up to three) is associated with a 3 percentage-point gain in students scoring at the advanced level. That means a school with 200 eighth graders that offers at least three levels of math is typically attended by twelve more students scoring at the advanced level than a detracked school of similar size and SES status. The study cannot link tracking policy causally to this outcome but, combined with previous research on the effects of detracking, it serves as a caution to schools and policymakers that detracking may adversely affect high-achieving students. ■

To read the complete report, visit [www.edexcellence.net](http://www.edexcellence.net).