

Quick Takes

Tracking decisions change lives.



Tim and Jim had been friends since preschool but when they entered middle school something changed and their lives and interests diverged. The school required that all students take a mathematics placement test. Tim scored 97 and Jim scored 93. Since the cut-off point was 95, Tim was scheduled into pre-algebra and Jim was advised to take basic mathematics (which, by the way, he found incredibly boring). Tim was able to move into algebra and geometry before Jim did. Although Jim was a good student in the mathematics classes he took, he did not reach calculus in high school and had to study it in junior college before he went to a four-year institution. This put him a semester behind before he even started in college. He eventually earned a bachelor's degree but never got over his feeling that mathematics is dull. Tim got into a more prestigious university because he had fulfilled all of the requirements, including calculus, and had taken several AP science classes, an avenue opened to him by his mathematics classes.

This vignette, while fiction, reflects a reality of our schools: Tracking decisions change lives.



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ndividual tracking decisions also affect the distribution of knowledge across the student population. Researchers connected with the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), for example, have reported that whether a student had been assigned to an algebra class or a nonalgebra mathematics class was a good predictor of how he or she would do on the TIMSS (*Education Week*, February 18, 1998). Long before there was a TIMSS, however, tracking was contentious.

Why is tracking a contentious issue?

Tracking is an emotionally charged issue stoked by the fear that one's own children might be shortchanged educationally. Both proponents and opponents of tracking advocate good education but their assumptions about what makes education good differ.

Proponents of tracking argue that students learn best when they are in classes or groups made up of others with more or less the same abilities and interests. Human resources are wasted, they contend, if well-prepared students are not allowed to excel in challenging courses without being pulled back by inadequately prepared students. Those who favor detracking counter that even more human resources are lost if some students are never exposed to challenging material. They add that low-track classes are disproportionately filled with students from impoverished homes and with African-American and Hispanic children and that tracking often degenerates into a system that rewards privilege rather than ability.

Criticism of tracking can be summarized into a few statements:

- ✘ Tracking disproportionately assigns to lower tracks students from certain ethnic and lower socio-economic groups.
- ✘ It fosters segregation by race and class and permanently labels students.
- ✘ Parents with higher incomes or more education pressure schools to put their children in high-ability tracks. Parents who do not participate in the informal power relations of the school, or do not have the ability to take time from work to discuss scheduling with teachers, can not advocate for their children when tracking decisions are made.
- ✘ Parents from cultures that value trusting teachers expertise might be less likely than others to push for re-assigning their children to advanced classes.
- ✘ Once assigned a track high or low students find it nearly impossible to move either up to higher tracks or down to more appropriate levels (even if they are not doing well in higher-track classes and might do better in a less-intense class).
- ✘ A disproportionate share of resources, especially well-prepared and experienced teachers, goes to high-track classes.
- ✘ The curriculum and instruction in low-track classes are frequently dead-end and boring for both students and teachers.
- ✘ High-ability students need to collaborate with those different from themselves in culture, class, ability, and interests. This is more possible in detracked classes.

Let me get this straight. We're behind the rest of our class and we're going to catch up to them by going slower?

Bart Simpson,
after being placed in the
Leg-Up Program

Proponents of tracking make these arguments:

- ✘ Students learn better in classes where everyone is learning more or less the same material at the same pace.
- ✘ Teachers find it time-consuming and complex to teach intricate material to students at different levels of understanding.
- ✘ Certain subjects, like mathematics and foreign languages, often require that students master basic material before they advance to higher levels.
- ✘ Students of average abilities will perform better in the company of their peers than they will in daily competition with above-average students.
- ✘ Better resource allocation is addressing the inequities of tracking.
- ✘ Mixed classes depress achievement levels by holding high achievers back.

How does tracking affect students?

The effects of tracking reach long and deep into a student s education. The types of resources devoted to classes and kinds of instruction often vary by the level of track. In addition, the

very fact of being in a low-track class can cause students to lose educational ground at an ever-increasing pace. A student may be placed in a lower-track mathematics class, for example, because his basic arithmetic skills need improving, while others at his grade level are learning how to manipulate fractions. Those who can work with fractions move on to more sophisticated tasks, while the student in the lower-track class is still polishing his basic skills. Before he can move into learning fractions, his classmates have moved several steps beyond him. Catching up with others in his age group becomes more difficult. This process begins before high school; often children are hopelessly behind by ninth grade. Changing the tracking system in high school will be too late to help these students.

Enriched curriculum and small class size, rather than the homogeneity of their classes, may be the actual benefits for students in high-track classes. Such curricula and class size could benefit all students, especially those in lower-track classes. In fact, some argue that since genuinely high-achieving students are often the most motivated learners, they have the least need of

superior teaching and resources, while lower-track students may need the more interesting instruction and curriculum especially in subjects like mathematics. Tracking systems, however, usually allocate the best resources only to high-achieving students.

Instruction in lower-track classes usually focuses on repetition and drill over basic skills. Inexperienced or ineffective teachers often staff these classes. More experienced teachers claim the classes with

enriched curriculum since these are seen as more rewarding to teach. Since moving out of lower-track classes becomes a teacher s reward for years of service, faculty develop vested interests in preserving the tracking system. School cultures usually do not encourage teachers to think about offering enriched material and instruction to all students, even though lower-track students might benefit from them.

Tracking can distribute resources unfairly even among students who do well in school. If a school has many high achievers and only a few spaces in the upper-ability classes, some above-average students will not be allowed into high-track classes. This situation can result either in a proliferation of tracks or in limiting access to only the very highest-scoring, as the case of Jim in the opening vignette shows.

When schools do offer all students enriched curriculum, most children respond positively. In the early 1990s the Achievement Council, a California advocacy group, reported on an inner-city school in a poverty-ridden area. The school set up a college-preparatory curriculum and more than 65 percent of its students subsequently went on to college and university. Before the program had been instituted, 15 percent of the students had gone on to higher education. The high expectations of an enriched curriculum had engaged these students who previously had been shunted into slowed-down programs with low expectations for their success.

What does the research show?

Despite this California school s experience, little research has been done in this area; little support has been provided for either side of this controversy. Since detracked schools are a relatively recent phenomenon, a body of research on them has not been established. No long-term study involving many schools has examined the costs and benefits of tracking or detracking. Until more research compares what actually happens in tracked schools to what happens in the detracked, research-based statements will be incomplete.

People do have opinions about tracking, however. Surveying participants in its National Issues Forums, the nonpartisan group Public Agenda found that parents, students, and teachers tended to prefer tracking, while administrators and educational researchers and professors of education preferred detracking. Many civil rights and human rights groups also advocate detracking. Perhaps a person s understanding of how tracking works forms his or her attitude toward it.

What do people know about tracking?

Knowledge about the implications of tracking is not evenly distributed. Better-educated parents know that children need algebra and calculus to be considered for certain colleges and to qualify for some kinds of employment. Other parents may not understand college requirements or the market for technical positions. Consequently, they may not protest when their children are placed on tracks that will eventually limit life choices. If a family has little experience that school success affects life success, parents may not realize that unfamiliar courses, such as calculus, will be useful to their children.

To make sure that parents understand the future repercussions of present choices, schools have a duty to communicate the realities of educational decisions to all families. Simply sending out a parent newsletter will not ensure that everyone is aware of the implications of, for example, following the general mathematics track. The possibilities of college and technical careers should be clearly and fully explained to everyone in the school community. This information also has to be disseminated at a much earlier age than usual; long before their sophomore year students are already on the tracks that will take them to college or leave them out. Enough adequately trained guidance counselors early in children s schooling can make a difference.

Schools can not assume that some students and their parents are naturally uninterested in postsecondary schooling or in certain career options. If schools truly believe that all students can learn, they also have to believe that all learning is potentially useful for all students.

How do schools go about detracking?

Many possibilities have been presented as alternatives to tracking. The most frequently mentioned include cooperative learning, interest grouping (where students within a class are put into smaller groups), schools within schools (where students are placed into groups within a school and stay together usually with the same teachers for several years), and integrated college preparatory and vocational classes.

Alone, however, none of these methods gets to the inequities that detrackers want to change. Interest groups and within-class ability groups, for example, can reproduce the inequitable aspects of tracking by attracting more advantaged students to specific classes or groups. Cooperative learning and schools within schools are neutral and can be used by tracked schools as well as detracked. None of these alternatives grapple with attracting successful teachers to teaching students who are not high achievers.

If a school is going to detrack, several factors will contribute to success:

- ✘ The culture of the school must support the belief that each student has a right to the best curriculum and instruction.
- ✘ Parents need to be involved in all aspects of the decision to detrack. If curriculum is seen as watered down, more educated parents will not support it. Schools can show the parents of students who have traditionally been left out of advanced mathematics and science classes that the knowledge and skills learned in these classes are relevant to their children s lives.
- ✘ Teachers must be actively involved in the change from tracking to detracking and have support for any professional development necessary to make that change successful.
- ✘ Individual school administrators, the district, and other policy makers must actively support the effort.

Can tracking be equitable?

Advocates of both tracking and detracking want what is best for children. Issues begin to arise when best has to be defined and resources have to be allocated. Should the best content be available only to the highest achievers? Will the best be diminished if it is made available to all?

As long as enriched curriculum and better teachers are more accessible to certain students than they are to others, advanced tracking will be a route preserved for the privileged. If privileged families see no advantages for their children and their futures in detracking, changing that system will be difficult. Natural concern for one s own children will take precedence over concern for the good of all in the community.

The parents of high-achieving students will not settle for a dumbed-down curriculum that distributes the same low-level content and simplistic instruction to everyone. Schools have to show such parents that making good instruction available to a wider pool of students does not dilute the learning of high-achieving students. And the schools have to make sure that no student s learning actually is diluted and that teachers have incentives to offer enriched curriculum to all students. At the same time, schools have to show less-privileged families the benefits of their children studying such subjects as calculus and physics.

If schools make good instruction and challenging content available to all students, even the parents of high-achieving students will support detracking strategies. Detracking should be a process of pulling all up, not lowering standards for anyone.

"Hi Pat, why so glum?"

"Oh hi Chris, I was just going over these applications for the advanced science class."

"Why is that making you worried? I would think that would be one of the real joys of teaching. Putting intelligent motivated students into classes that will show them how to learn and think for themselves. Sounds great to me."

"I guess if that were the way it went, it would be. But, look, the class will have 20 students but here are applications from 35 students—each one of them could certainly bring a lot to the class."

"Well, then, you have to come up with some criteria that will enable you to cut some of them out. How about upping the test-score requirements until you get the class whittled down to size?"

"That's not the problem! Every one of these students has something to offer a class like this and every one of them could benefit from being in the class. I don't want to figure out ways to separate the very best students from the next best. I want to figure out a way to have them all in advanced science."

"Well, if anyone can be in the advanced class, what's the point?"

"If advanced classes don't include those who have a contribution to make, what's the point?"

"That kind of reasoning will end up with every student in the school being in advanced classes. They all have a contribution to make, so why exclude any of them?"

"You know, Chris, you have a point there. Maybe we could refashion the science classes so every class was taught like the high-track class. The reading material is not that different and most of the difference comes from the class discussion and the hands-on opportunities."

"Whoa, Pat, that sounds like a lot of work. Most of the science teachers would not be able to get up to speed for teaching advanced students."

"Well, I would be willing to help them. I've been teaching this class for seven years. I could show them some of the stuff I've learned, where to get extra material, how to help kids find what they need to work on projects. How to make sure a cooperative class is really working. I have tips on most of the things that make these kinds of classes work and I know where we can get some professional development too."

"Even if you could convince the teachers, you will never convince the parents to do away with high-track classes. Too many of them want to make sure their kids learn enough to get into really good schools."

"But don't you see Chris? This plan doesn't call for getting rid of advanced classes. What I want to do is broaden them so they include more students. Look, here is an application from Mary Brown. You remember her don't you? I think she was in your basic math class?"

"Who? Oh her? Kind of quiet and mousy? I don't have a real good memory of her. I think she did about B work. Why would you want her in the class?"

"I've had her in a class and, you're right, she doesn't say much unless you go to the trouble of drawing her out. But she is a born naturalist. She would bring so much; she has volunteered at the zoo and knows the animals and their habits first hand. If you start talking to her about the zoo, she can go on for hours and hours. She would bring real experience to the class and, look, here is Patrick. His English is not real good but he has been all over the world with his parents. They were some kind of aid workers or something. Talk about real world experience. He and his father had to live in the jungle somewhere for days when the revolution started in some country they were in. He can go on for hours about how they managed to live off of berries and roots and stuff. He could practically teach the class himself."

"Well, he could if they could understand him."

"The rest of the students could understand him o.k. especially if they had access to this curriculum I have developed for the class. There are also some applications here from kids whose families have lived in this area for generations. They have been teaching me about the local herbs and how to use them for headaches and things. Think about what that would add to the class but none of them has a high enough cumulative grade on the state test to get into the class. I think it would be great if every student in school could be exposed to the kind of teaching and curriculum that would let them all experience the natural world as it really is around us and share what they already know. How can any parents be opposed to that?"

"Well, for one thing, they will think that the only way you can do that is by watering down the stuff that is already in advanced classes. They are going to think that you want to make the advanced classes easier so more kids can take them and graduate and go to college. Kids who probably don't deserve to."

"If every kid in this school is given the same chance to learn complex material—then we will finally know which ones don't 'deserve' to go to college and which ones have been unfairly cut off from that opportunity. I think I need to go talk to the principal about this."