

### Key points from *Detracking for Excellence and Equity*

- This hidden heterogeneity can become a powerful argument in favor of the elimination or reduction of tracking. If some lower achievers are already doing well in high-track classes, why can't more students have the same access? And if some higher achievers are assigned to low-track classes, what does that say about the efficacy and equity of the system?
- Detracking should begin where tracking begins. If your elementary school tracks, that is the place to start. If tracking is delayed until the middle school years, begin there.
- In our district, we encountered some resistant teachers who wanted to start by changing the curriculum in the elementary schools, even though there was no grouping for instruction at the elementary level. However, Superintendent Johnson wisely recognized that the true agenda of delay was overall resistance to the reform. He identified the critical beginning of mathematics tracking in grade 6 and determined that was the place to begin detracking. Therefore, we implemented accelerated math in heterogeneous classes in 6th grade, and then followed that with the next year's 7th and then 8th grade programs, moving with the student cohort.
- We carefully collected, analyzed, and communicated data each step of the way in order to provide continued impetus to move forward. Comparing the passing rates and grades of the students in the detracked cohorts with students in tracked cohorts made it clear that the students were doing better in the heterogeneously grouped classes than tracked students had done in past years. These data provided an objective counterbalance to those teachers who felt that the acceleration of all students was not working.
- Teachers get to know their students better. As teachers work to differentiate the curriculum, they develop an awareness and understanding of their students as learners.
- Students feel respected and cared for by teachers who make the effort to reach them by developing careful, differentiated lesson plans. Such students become assured that their classroom is a safe learning environment.
- Differentiation allows more students to feel invested in the lesson, thereby decreasing behavioral problems. Students who previously opted to be viewed as "bad" rather than "stupid" will have their learning needs met and other talents explored, allowing them to drop the "bad" act and become instead a valuable member of the class.
- Students who might have been considered less intelligent because they learn in a nontraditional way become invaluable contributors to the heterogeneous classroom. For example, an aural learner who struggles with textbook assignments can add in-depth perspective in a social studies class discussion by contributing what he or she has learned through documentaries or tapes.
- Struggling students who are part of heterogeneous groups and classrooms observe and learn the techniques of less-inhibited learners. They begin to see that "smart kids" don't always know the answers, have to pause to think, and use questions to orient themselves. Students in low-track classes are cut off from exposure to the habits of successful learners.
- Differentiated instruction encourages flexibility. Teachers thus become adept at adapting lessons to fulfill each student's individual needs.
- Detracking removes the limits that come with rigid thinking about how learning should and does occur. Fair does not always mean "the same." For example, allowing a student who struggles with the physical act of writing to type his notes can benefit that student and the rest of the class. Not only does the student get access to the material, but the entire class has a reliable set of notes that can be used for those who were absent. This student now becomes an expert—and essential—note-taker who takes pride in his responsibility and sees himself as a member of the class.
- During the first phase of detracking in our school district, we reduced the number of high school tracks from three to two, phasing out the lowest track. At the same time, the district opened enrollment in honors courses, the higher of the two tracks. Students were allowed to

enroll in honors courses in grades 9 and 10, and IB and AP courses (the honors courses) in grades 11 and 12. Teachers and counselors still made placement recommendations, but parents and students made the decision. A similar process was followed in the middle school prior to the mathematics acceleration of all students.

- There were several advantages to this approach. First, it allowed parents who were worried about the influx of the former "low-track" students into the middle track to move their children up to the honors track. Although this is a less-than-noble reason for opening access to the high track, it did quell some parent opposition and allowed the reform to proceed politically. More important, this approach demonstrated that far more students could study the school's most challenging curriculum with great success. Students felt more in charge of their educational destiny. Counselors no longer needed to defend teacher recommendations that excluded students from taking the high-track classes in which they were interested. And most important of all, teachers adjusted to greater heterogeneity in honors, IB, and AP classes. Teaching strategies changed so that less time was spent on lecture and more time was spent on activities that engaged students in learning. Alternative ways to present concepts became the norm. Extra help became more important. The academic climate of the school "leveled up." All of the above helped smooth the way for the heterogeneous grouping to come, as the two tracks became a single enriched course for all students.
- It is important, however, to stress that this type of two-track open enrollment should never be the final outcome, especially at the middle school and beginning high school levels. Our open enrollment process resulted in some stratification associated with the choice, counteracting the intent of the detracking process. We recommend that if you have a choice system, make the high track the default track and allow parents and students to opt out if they so desire. This approach should alleviate some of the problems we encountered. For a fuller discussion of the limitations of choice, we recommend an excellent research study on the topic: "Choosing Tracks: 'Freedom of Choice' in Detracking Schools" (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serena, 2002).
- No matter how and where you begin, however, you cannot achieve long-term success without making a commitment to the development of a strong curriculum that preserves high standards for student learning. Placing all students in the same class and then allowing teachers to "teach to the middle" will result in a short-lived reform that is not in the best interest of all students. Chapter 3 will discuss what we have learned about developing an enriched curriculum that challenges and supports all learners.