

# How to Make Detracking Work

*Successful detracking is tantamount to school restructuring, the authors point out. Viewed and handled as such, it offers much promise both for ending an inequitable arrangement and for improving educational practice.*

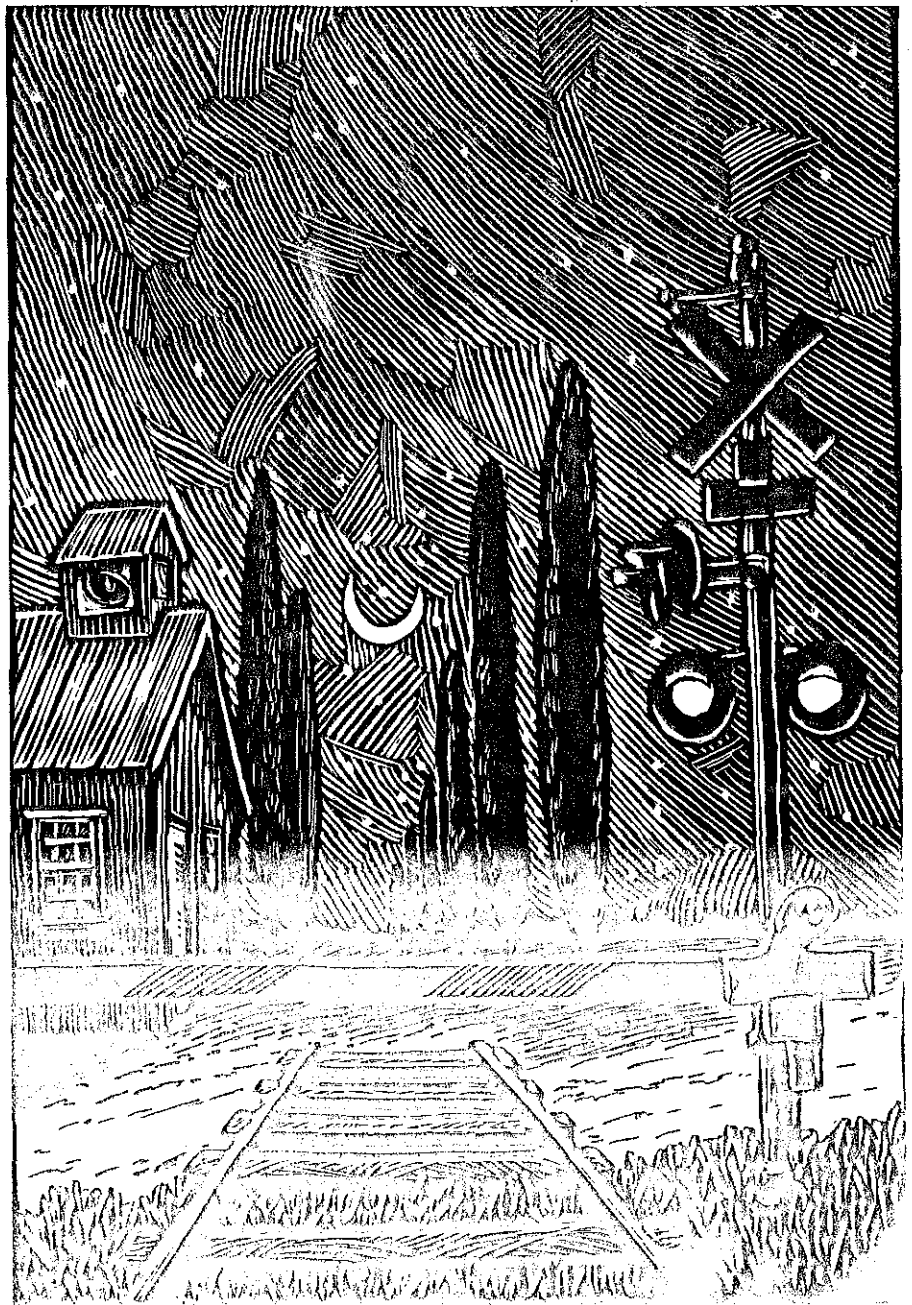
By Richard S. Marsh and Mary Anne Raywid

**T**HE CASE for detracking the schools continues to be compelling, and the pressure to detrack is mounting steadily. It is still too early to cite a substantial research record on just how to go about it, but a recent study of 10 Long Island school districts with successful detracking efforts has yielded a number of suggestions.

We polled the area's more than 120 districts to learn which had been involved in such efforts. Then, to confirm and extend the reports, we visited those districts that had undertaken detracking. Conversations with key local figures — teachers and parents as well as administrators — revealed a number of suggestions on when and how to go about the process.

Tracking has a long history, growing

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Early 20th-century efforts to prepare youngsters for the quite different careers and lifestyles awaiting them. As larger percentages of the nation's youth attended schools, their different talents, abilities, and destinies became increasingly apparent. Schools adapted to such awareness first with differentiated programs (e.g., college preparatory and manual training) and later with tracking — the practice of separating youngsters into differentiated classes of low-, average-, and high-ability students.

Over the years, we have had cause to become increasingly aware of the negative effects and injustices of tracking. Today the evidence clearly calls for its elimination. Yet tracking remains standard practice in a large majority of the nation's schools, probably 80% or more.<sup>1</sup> And programs at both state and federal levels support and perpetuate the practice.

In New York, for instance, the very existence of two sets of state tests serves to endorse course differentiation and homogeneous grouping. Upper-track students take Regents Examinations; lower-track students take Regents Competency Tests. At the federal level, legislation providing for the handicapped and for compensatory education has entrenched the practice of separating youngsters for targeted instruction given by teachers specially prepared to offer it. Not surprisingly, then, teachers have come to endorse tracking, believing that they can deal effectively only with groups of youngsters whose abilities all fall into the same narrowly defined range.

Yet the sense that tracking is unacceptable has been growing for some years and has come to challenge the widespread practice. It has been almost two decades since the first major exposé of the extent of tracking in the schools and of the ills and injuries accompanying it.<sup>2</sup> And nearly a decade has now passed since Jeannie Dakes' classic *Keeping Track* was published in 1985, a study that both updated and underscored what we know about the harm done by tracking. We are now seeing works that look toward alternatives, such as Anne Wheelock's *Crossing the Tracks: How "Untracking" Can Save America's Schools*.<sup>3</sup>

But, despite growing agreement that tracking is unfair and injurious, it remains a prominent organizational feature of most American high schools as well as

most junior high schools, where the practice begins in earnest. (Many elementary schools also have grouping arrangements that are tantamount to tracking, but in most districts it is in junior high school that the practice becomes formalized and official.)

Tracking has been standard procedure even where it is unannounced and not generally perceived. For example, in one school where the principal denied the existence of tracking, nine distinct tracks were identified and acknowledged by the guidance office that maintained them.<sup>4</sup>

Teachers have been especially skeptical about the feasibility of other arrangements, since they tend to assume that alternative setups would simply remove ability grouping without making any other changes. Understandably, they are dubious about making a classroom work under such circumstances. But the evidence points to at least eight major drawbacks inherent in grouping students by ability levels. The students assigned to lower tracks and even to average classes often suffer from these drawbacks.<sup>5</sup>

1. The best teachers are often assigned the ablest students, and the least-experienced — or least-favored — teachers are assigned the weakest and most challenging students.

2. There are differences in the content presented to the different groups, with less — and lesser — substance presented to low-ability students.

3. There are differences in the quality of instruction delivered to the different groups, with higher-order thinking reserved largely for high-ability classes.

4. Teachers of students assigned to low-ability classes expect and demand little of them.

5. Students excluded from high-ability classes encounter lower motivation among their peers and develop less motivation themselves; thus they achieve less.

6. Students in low-ability classes include such disproportionate numbers of minority youngsters that tracking often functions as a form of resegregation.

7. Students in average and low-ability classes are restricted in their subsequent educational and career opportunities.

8. Compounding the above inequities, there are many cases in which youngsters have been erroneously assigned to lower-track classrooms (often on the basis of standardized test scores).

Thus the evidence suggests that, for all but the youngsters in the highest track, the practice of tracking renders school less interesting, less productive, and less rewarding. The result, not surprisingly, is that the longer students remain in school, the greater the achievement gap between those enrolled in lower and upper tracks.<sup>6</sup>

THESE ARE grave charges. Why have they failed to prompt more frequent and more extensive attempts to change the system? Our examination of Long Island school districts that have successfully detracked suggests that context is important and that particular ways of conducting the undertaking will make success more likely.

First, in the districts we examined, detracking had not been launched as a separate project. It was adopted either as a part of the solution to a larger problem or as part of a broader reform effort. Detracking might be one feature of a school restructuring plan, or it might become part of an effort to pursue equity or excellence. We concentrated our search at the junior high school level because that is the point at which tracking becomes formal.

We found that in some districts detracking became part of the process of converting a junior high school into a middle school. In other districts it was prompted by revelations of inequity — such as the absence of minority students in upper-ability classes. In still other places, detracking began with districtwide efforts to improve student outcomes and performance.

The widespread move toward middle schools certainly fosters detracking. Both the concern of middle schools with youngsters and their needs and the middle school commitment to equal access to education are incompatible with efforts to track students. And the literature on middle schools, such as the influential *Turning Points*, vehemently rejects tracking as "one of the most divisive and damaging school practices in existence."<sup>7</sup> Thus districts that are adopting the middle school orientation are embarking on detracking.

Elsewhere among our 10 districts, examination of existing local data revealed that minority students were underrepresented in upper-ability classes and in extracurricular activities. Such data prompted some districts to consider detracking, as

well as other measures.

In still other districts, detracking began with a concern about the dwindling number of students taking Regents Examinations. When studies suggested that some of the students in non-Regents classes could handle the exams, one district abolished the lower track in an effort to prepare all youngsters for Regents-level work. In addition, it obtained an agreement from the state that students who failed the Regents Examinations by less than 10 points would be considered to have passed the Regents Competency Tests. Thus, in the interests of encouraging more students to pursue an academic program, this district moved simultaneously to reduce tracking and to provide some reassurance for youngsters facing increased academic demands.

We found that a genuine and widespread understanding of the need for detracking was perhaps the most fundamental element of a successful detracking effort. Studies of change have recently begun to turn away from an exclusive focus on structures and practices, emphasizing instead the importance of the meaning of change proposals to the people involved.<sup>8</sup> The evidence suggests that unless those expected to implement a reform genuinely understand its meaning and the need for it — and unless they are personally committed to carrying it out — only minimal success can be expected.<sup>9</sup> This puts a premium on finding ways to change the culture of schools and districts.

We found leadership to be crucial in this regard. Although teacher leadership could prove important, it rarely emerged in relation to detracking — a venture in which the time and resources involved require strong administrative leadership anyway. But the administrative leadership could emerge from either the school or district level. To initiate detracking requires transformational leadership: the ability to articulate and communicate a vision in ways that convince others of both its desirability and its feasibility.

But convincing people of the desirability and feasibility of detracking is even harder and more complicated than merely getting them to take on new convictions; they must also be persuaded to reject and replace old ones. This sort of reeducation typically demands more than information and inspiration. We encour-

tered some ingenious activities intended to make participants question their own beliefs.

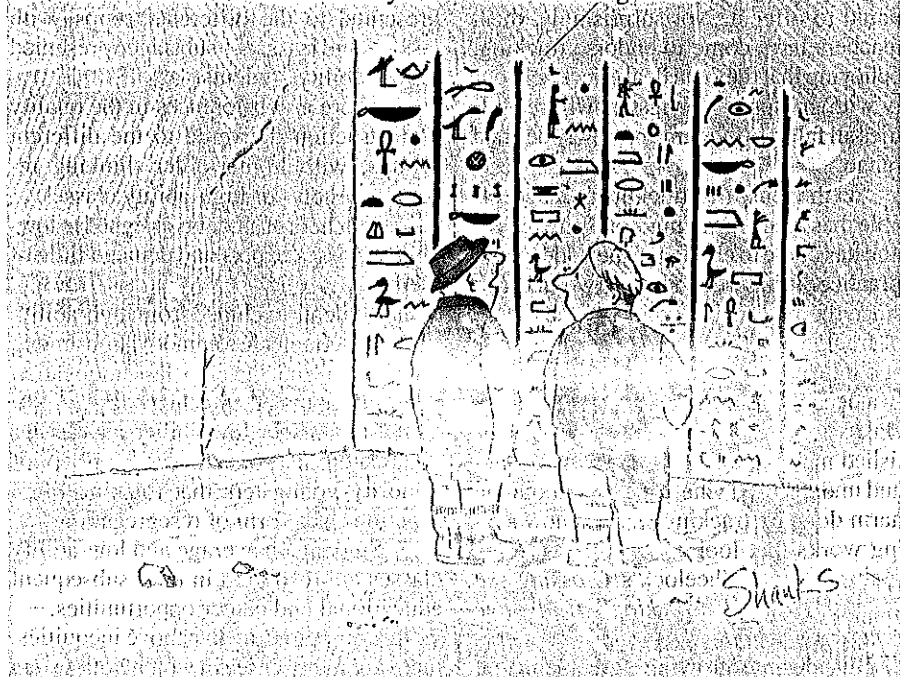
For example, one assistant superintendent used a reasoning test to demonstrate the range in thinking ability among a group of youngsters assigned to high-ability classes. If some were capable of formal thought and others were not, just how homogeneous was this presumably similar group? And how important to instructional effectiveness was the lack of homogeneity on this critical ability? Teachers and board members later took the test as well — which stimulated substantial reflection on the part of staff members and policy makers.

Another top administrator distributed Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind* to his board and presented a seminar on Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences to challenge the conception of ability on which homogeneous grouping is typically based. In yet another district the assistant superintendent sponsored an open forum to which he invited members of the staff and community representatives to bring prepared position papers on heterogeneous grouping, both pro and con. Elsewhere, a new principal suggested that the school enter a national "school of excellence" competition, which required the staff to reflect collaboratively on

school practices and achievements. Together they completed the application and were successful in winning recognition.

Generally, however, so fundamental a change in school culture as detracking demands more than collaborative reflection; it requires collective examination of a challenge to existing beliefs. Cultural change involves a modification of what has been assumed to be true and desirable. Such modification requires that somehow the taken-for-granted be redefined as problematic. The most effective way of accomplishing this goal appears to be the presentation of some sort of convincing challenge to the beliefs of group members.<sup>10</sup>

As such cultural change begins, two sorts of skeptics and resisters are not uncommon. One group doubts that classrooms can work effectively in the absence of ability grouping; the other believes that something important is lost with the elimination of ability grouping. People who have successfully detracked schools insist that the most effective way of convincing the first group of resisters is to take them to see successfully detracked schools. So visits to such schools, with opportunities to observe in classrooms and talk with the teachers involved, are often a part of the early phases of effective detracking efforts.



"It appears to be an account from the pharaoh's young son, titled 'How I Spent My Summer Vacation.'"

The resisters who fear to lose present advantages are another matter. Frequently these are the parents of children assigned to high-ability groups. And — given the advantages their children have enjoyed, as enumerated above — their concern is hardly surprising. Thus it is important that these resisters, like doubting teachers, come to see that detracking is not simply a matter of substituting heterogeneous for homogeneous classes. They must come to see that much more is involved and that detracking holds promise for their children as well.

Some schools have combined the termination of grouping by ability with the substitution of grouping on the basis of interest. Thus they have introduced themed programs from which youngsters and their families can choose, such as a micro-society school, an aerospace school, or a service academy. Other districts have focused instead on instructional strategies associated with successful detracking, such as cooperative learning, reciprocal teaching, interdisciplinary content, and teaming.

Either way, doubters must be acknowledged, and some attempt must be made to deal with their concerns. This is especially true with the parents of high-ability youngsters, since they are likely to be vocal and influential. But it is also sometimes the case with families of lower-track students who fear that their children will be faced with challenges and demands that they cannot meet.

Under some circumstances, our informants reported, it may be best to lower the sights and strike compromises that limit the scope of detracking plans. Some districts made the decision to phase in detracking gradually, carefully examining its progress and reporting to the community. Thus they have, for example, detracked entering seventh-grade classes — or English and/or social studies or science classes — while retaining tracking elsewhere. Others have compromised by eliminating the lower track but maintaining a separation between groups of high and average ability. In all such cases, eventual full detracking seems to have remained the goal, but a gradual phasing in has been pursued as necessary to its initial acceptance.

One thing that all our informants emphasized was the need for careful planning and preparation prior to the imple-

mentation of a detracking proposal. Reluctant teachers in strictly tracked programs are probably correct in thinking that the instructional strategies most familiar to them will not work in heterogeneous classrooms. Thus a major need for successful detracking is to provide teachers with additional pedagogical strategies. This translates into increased staff development, especially in such areas as cooperative learning, workshop or learning laboratory techniques, and differentiation of content. They also need help in learning how to work with colleagues — always a particular need when teachers launch new programs and thus require both moral and intellectual support.

Nor do the requisites for successful detracking end with staff development. In addition to instructional and curricular changes, several of our respondents were convinced that new kinds of assessment were necessary to determine student progress. And new class-ranking arrangements might also be called for in some schools.

People in our 10 districts were convinced that a number of organizational changes play a vital role as well. Class size must be held to an absolute minimum. "Safety nets" — in the form of extra help and tutorial sessions — need to be created for students previously treated as marginal. As these changes imply, corresponding changes must be made in both student and teacher schedules. Staffing may also need to be adjusted. In one school one teacher was made the school math tutor and was available all day to students on an "as needed" basis. Elsewhere, the presence of a second teacher supervisor converted study halls into real, small-group study sessions.

If this sounds as though detracking is an expensive proposition, it need not be — although some new costs are surely involved. Any serious reform or restructuring effort requires staff development, and detracking is certainly no exception. In fact, where there are likely to be doubters and resisters, staff development may be even more crucial to detracking than to other changes. And for most districts, serious, sustained staff development of any kind will be an added expense. New materials may also be necessary for the re-grouped classrooms. However, smaller classes and new staff roles may not prove as expensive as they might initially seem. The elimination of the lower-track class-

es, which are usually small, permits other class averages to decrease. In one case, a Minnesota elementary school that adopted a policy of total inclusion for all its youngsters, including special education students, managed thereby to halve class size throughout the school. This was a substantially changed staffing policy, but it did not add much expense.

As all this suggests, successful detracking is tantamount to school restructuring. Viewed and handled as such, it offers much promise both for ending an arrangement that has proven highly inequitable and for improving educational practice. But if it is to succeed, a detracking effort must acknowledge the magnitude of the changes involved. As our respondents suggested, it must be carefully planned and initiated, it must acknowledge and meet the concerns of skeptics and resisters, it must prepare teachers adequately for their new circumstances, and it must align organizational structures and practices to support the new grouping arrangements.

1. John O'Neill, "On Tracking and Individual Differences: A Conversation with Jeannie Oakes," *Educational Leadership*, October 1992, pp. 18-22; and Carol Spencer and Michael G. Allen, *Grouping Students by Ability: A Review of the Literature* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1988).
2. James E. Rosenbaum, *Making Inequality: The Hidden Curriculum of High School Tracking* (New York: Wiley, 1976).
3. Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985); and Anne Wheelock, *Crossing the Tracks: How "Untracking" Can Save America's Schools* (New York: New Press, 1992).
4. Rosenbaum, p. 33.
5. Emily Dentzer and Anne Wheelock, *Locked In/Locked Out: Tracking and Placement Practices in Boston Public Schools* (Boston: Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1990); and Oakes, op. cit.
6. Thomas Hoffer, "Cumulative Effects of Ability Grouping on Student Achievement," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, April 1994.
7. Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1989), p. 49.
8. Michael Fullan, *Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Reform* (Bristol, Pa.: Falmer Press, 1993).
9. Ibid.; and Gary Wehlage, Gregory A. Smith, and Pauline Lipman, "Restructuring Urban Schools: The New Futures Experience," *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 29, 1992, pp. 51-93.
10. William T. Pink, "Competing Views of Change: Reforming School Culture," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, April 1994. **K**