

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

## A Disparity in Standardized Testing Outcomes: Farmington High School and Canton High School

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Tracking, or between-class ability grouping, has recently come under strong criticism in the United States educational community. Although it is common in many other countries and is still prevalent in many US school systems (Slavin, 2006b), it is now thought to be contributing to and exacerbating the current achievement gap between low-achieving and high-achieving students in the United States public schools, as well as maintaining the achievement gap between low-income and high-income children (Oakes & Wells, 1998). Subjects most often tracked primarily include core subjects like math and science, but sometimes include English or the social sciences (Slavin, 2006c). While within-class ability grouping has proven helpful in the early years of reading and math (Lou et al., 1996), between-class ability grouping or tracking is a practice which separates students that are behind in the curriculum from those that are already ahead and then tailors the curriculum to the perceived ability levels of the students in these classes (Slavin, 2006d). Unfortunately, this practice often involves “dumbing down” the curriculum and reducing conceptual content in the lessons of lower track students while continuing to foster creativity, curiosity and conceptual abilities in those who are already ahead of their lower-tracked classmates (Gamoran et al., 1995). Very little research supports the practice of ability tracking, because it primarily benefits the upper-track kids and further disadvantages those who need the most teacher help (Oakes & Wells, 1998), a trade-off many would argue is unacceptable. However, some argue that it is not the tracking that causes problems, but rather the quality of the classes in each track, specifically arguing that students benefit from ability-tailored instruction as long as the classes in every track have good teachers and high standards for students (Reis, et al., 1998). They argue that the reason tracking appears to be harmful to lower-track students is because research has demonstrated that most teachers of lower-track classes actually do little to differentiate their curriculum in a way that would benefit their students (Reis et al., 1998). This may be why Canton High School’s MEAP scores do not seem to indicate that they are behind Math or Science. If Canton has good, enthusiastic teachers who do actually tailor their teaching style to their students, perhaps no negative effects would be evident in the student’s MEAP scores. However, this is mere speculation and would require further analysis into the teachers and teaching-styles used in Canton’s different tracks.

While both Canton and Farmington High School’s appear to have a somewhat tracked science curriculum, only Canton has the very strictly tracked math curriculum. Canton students are placed upon entry into high school into one of three different tracks of math, each with its own pace, its own text-books and a somewhat different curriculum. It is possible to transfer into one of the slower tracks from the faster tracks but students are highly discouraged by guidance-councilors from moving from the slower track to the faster track, unless it is abundantly

clear that the student is simply much too bored in the lower track he/she was placed in. Even then, they are often encouraged to wait out the year before switching to one of the faster tracks. The slowest track is designed to meet the minimum requirement of 2 years of math within the 4 years of high school, the intermediate track is designed to get a student the approximate equivalent of 3 years of high school math, whereas the fastest track is designed to give the student the full 4 years of high school math in the 4 year period.

As Farmington states in its website, the school firmly disagrees with tracking. However it should be noted that the school does have a program for gifted students, which provides creative and experiential learning opportunities for gifted students from primary through secondary school. The program also provides parents with extra help in how to best stimulate the minds of their gifted students and to provide ample opportunity for academic challenge. I would argue that this is a form of tracking in its own way, only much less formal. Farmington also *does* start placing students into advanced math as early as middle school to identify the advanced students and place them in more challenging math classes. I'm not sure why Farmington does not consider this tracking. Canton does this as well, but at a different time and in a different way. According to two students from Farmington High School, students are placed in an advanced math course starting in 6<sup>th</sup> grade based on the recommendations of the student's 5<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher and are then a full year or so ahead of their peers in math. In Canton, the placement into a higher level of math does not occur until 8<sup>th</sup> grade, when students in 7<sup>th</sup> grade take a math placement exam and either remain in the normal math curriculum or are placed into freshman-level math in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, allowing those who placed out to learn the math curriculum a year ahead of other students. Advanced students from both schools are at the educational advantage of being able to take calculus prior to graduation, whereas other students will not have this opportunity. Both schools also offer advanced placement and honors courses which require no teacher approval or testing. While accelerated programs like the early entrance into high school math and the offering of advanced placement and honors courses may be justified due to its benefit for interested students (Swiatek & Benbow, 1991), research has indicated that these classes do tend to unintentionally enroll far fewer low-income students and minorities (Solorzano & Ornelhas, 2004). I would personally argue that any school that has these programs should be required to *actively* encourage lower-income students and minorities to take classes which interest them and to emphasize that no particular previous grades are necessary as long as they are enthusiastic and willing to do the work. Even programs like these that are not usually considered tracking must make some sort of effort to ensure that students of all income-levels and backgrounds know about the opportunities and are encouraged to take them.

Although there is a huge push for schools to "detrack" their curriculum by combining ability groups into heterogeneous classes in all subjects and providing student-based help or enrichment for different students, many schools have not done this because it is extremely difficult to do. It is not hard to switch over to a completely different curriculum but there are a number of factors involved in how to do this effectively without causing even more problems. Studies have shown

that a gradual “phasing-in” of the detracked curriculum is best to allow students and teachers to adjust to the new dynamics of the school and classroom (Ascher, 1992). The changes involved in detracked classes would be a significantly different experience from what students might typically experience in an ability-grouped classroom. Often detracked classes encounter the problem of students segregating themselves into ability-groups on their own (Rubin, 2002) and it is the teacher’s job to know how to handle this situation and to foster interaction and collaborative learning between the students of different ability levels in the heterogeneous classroom. It is for this reason that a school would have to offer considerable amounts of training for teachers of newly detracked classrooms (Ascher, 1992) and it is likely that these teachers would not get the hang of teaching to the whole class and understanding how to use the new classroom dynamics right away (Ascher, 1992). It might take time, and could also be very frustrating for teachers who are used to the ease of teaching a single ability-level curriculum to a fairly homogenous group of students. A more controversial issue in how to detrack a school is the problem of being sure to allow “gifted” students to reach their fullest potential while still placing them in classes with lower-achieving students, whom they will hopefully help to engage and challenge in the classroom (Ascher, 1992). How does a teacher or a curriculum prevent holding back the gifted students in the school, if they cannot be placed in especially enriched courses? I would propose that schools whole-heartedly take on the charge of teaching in the mastery learning method combined with cooperative learning, so that when gifted students are done learning something there is always enrichment activities planned for them while other students can continue to learn until they have mastered the material, as well. This way all students would be able to learn the important material and the gifted students could excel at their own pace with the enrichment activities while still contributing to the educational experience of lower-achievers in their classes. I would guess that this has not happened primarily due to the pressure put on schools by standardized testing.

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