

ABOLISHING HONORS CLASSES A STEP TOWARD GREATER EQUITY OR MEDIOCRITY?

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No one likes tracking. But, it may not be something one can kick cold-turkey.

Will merging two tracks erode the quality of instruction for higher-achieving students? That is the question on the minds of many families with honors students. Will merging raise achievement for lower achieving students? Supporters of merging believe it will. Merging is motivated by a laudable quest for equity. The risk is that it will result in mediocrity.

Effective in the fall, there will be no honors programs at Goleta Valley, La Colina and Santa Barbara Junior High Schools. At least, not in English and social studies. Honors level students and general education level students will be placed in what those schools are calling “College Prep” classes.

Following a vision inspired by the College Board, La Cumbre is continuing honors level studies in the form of an Pre-AP program designed to prepare junior high students for Advanced Placement courses in high school. Pre-AP is grouped with La Cumbre’s GATE program in a small learning community.

To give you an idea of the challenges merged classes pose, here are some illustrative demographics for elementary schools that feed into Santa Barbara’s junior high schools. Consider a pair of schools with this profile.

- parents completing college or doing post graduate studies-- 80%
- parents below the poverty line-- 1%
- students not proficient in English-- 2%
- per student spending for direct educational services-- \$11,325
- Academic Performance Index (API) rating-- 940

In contrast, take a look at the combined profile for a different pair of feeder schools.

- parents not completing high school-- 62%
- parents below the poverty line—90%
- students not proficient in English—62%

- per student spending for direct educational services-- \$7,240
- API rating-- 700

How do the three junior highs plan to deal with such widely varying backgrounds in the same classroom? Through *differentiated instruction*. Differentiated instruction is not merely a shift from between-class tracking to within-class tracking. It employs different learning strategies involving students in heterogeneous groups, peer tutoring and individual activities. Of necessity, student-centered activities will replace many teacher-centered activities. Some people see this as more democratic and egalitarian.

Does *differentiated instruction* work? It is represented as “research-based.” I am a research professional, and my search for evaluation studies turned up only advocacy articles. This is a matter of concern, because other research raises questions about heterogeneous grouping. For one thing, there is a well-documented tendency to “teach to the middle,” which serves the needs of neither low-achievers nor high-achievers. In addition, comprehensive school reform strategies such as “direct instruction,” which has been demonstrated to be effective for lower-achievers, are structurally incompatible with the student-centered classroom.

The real problem in our secondary schools is that tracks have become ruts. Students become stuck in them. Once in, seldom out. *Rutting* is a reflection of multi-level systemic problems. A definitive solution, if possible at all, requires comprehensive, sustained multi-level reforms. The quick-fix often becomes the entrenched failure.

Parents were not consulted about the elimination of honors programs. Established educational choices were substantially limited as a *fait accompli*.

For that matter, the school board was not consulted either. This was an important policy decision. But, it was not agendaized for public consideration. Transparency is the best antidote for public cynicism. Public policy calls for public deliberation. It should be before, not after the fact.

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