

IF TRACKING IS BAD, IS DETRACKING BETTER

BY JAMES E. ROSENBAUM

PEOPLE HAVE been debating the merits of tracking—grouping students by ability for the purpose of instruction—at least since Plato’s *Republic*. More recently, sociological research of the 1970s, including some of my own, identified many problems that result from high school tracking, among them inappropriate criteria for selecting students, overrepresentation of poor and minority students in lower tracks, and rigidities that prevent students from moving into higher tracks.¹ In the 1980s, some researchers, building on these criticisms, advocated “detracking”—getting rid of high school tracking.² In a remarkable testament to the political potency of that idea, a number of schools, notably in California and Massachusetts, have followed this advice.

Tracking as it is usually practiced does have serious problems, and the claims that detracking will increase equity and achievement—especially for poor and minority students—are appealing. However, these claims have been

tested mostly by detracking advocates, and few people have examined the effects of detracking in the classroom.³ One notable exception points out some potential difficulties. A large study of restructured schools found only one detracked school that showed clear signs of educational success.⁴ However, this school also enjoyed some extraordinary advantages: small classes, additional foundation funding for Saturday programs, and enormous latitude in selecting students and faculty. Because few schools can recreate these conditions, the study’s findings do not provide strong evidence for the success of detracking.

The discussion that follows examines the experiences of teachers in a detracked high school in more ordinary circumstances. Although a small study cannot be definitive, it raises questions about the practical realities of detracking that were not anticipated by the advocates of detracking or by the teachers in this school.

“Progressive High” Detracks

This study consisted of interviews with eight of the 10 teachers in the social studies department of Progressive High School, a suburban public high school in the Midwest. The school is relatively homogeneous: Students come from largely working- and middle-class families and a few from low-income families. The majority of the student body is white, with very few black students. There

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are some Hispanic students, most of whom are proficient in English. The school has few special needs students and few upper-middle-class families (who are usually quick to complain about detracking), so it was an excellent candidate for detracking.⁵

The entire school went from a tracked system with three ability groups to a completely detracked system, except for foreign languages and math, which were still taught in distinct levels. Detracking began with the lower grades and was carried out in the early 1990s over a four-year period. By the time these interviews were conducted in 1999, the detracking reform had been in full operation for five years.

The study focuses on social studies because there is general agreement that, unlike math or foreign languages, it is not hierarchical—that is, it is not a field in which one of the conditions of success in a given year is having mastered the material from the previous years. This made it a good testing ground for detracking. Also, because every student must enroll in U.S. history and one of two world social studies courses, all students in the school at a given grade level were mixed in the detracked classes.

Detracking was generally well implemented at Progressive High. All the teachers in the social studies department began the reform with great enthusiasm. They believed strongly in the principle of detracking and were eager to raise the performance of *all* students in their detracked classrooms. They also devoted a great deal of effort to making detracking work. Indeed, the teachers made a point of using many of the practices that supporters of detracking advocate: simulation activities, flexible (block) scheduling, small group activities, projects, thematic instruction, and extra help periods.⁶ If these teachers' perceptions were tainted by any prejudice, it was in favor of this reform. They firmly believe in the ideals of detracking even today.

Moreover, the school accomplished many of the goals of detracking. Teachers were pleased to see that detracking "diversified" their classes in terms of ethnic composition and socioeconomic status, just as detracking advocates had predicted.⁷ Three teachers stated that detracking removed institutional labeling of students as "low ability" and reduced feelings of "ostracism and isolation" among slower students.⁸

However, teachers were also disappointed by detracking because of three important outcomes that they had not anticipated:

- Detracking presented them with irresolvable conflicts.
- It imposed a uniformity that deprived faster students of challenge and slower students of mastery.
- It raised doubts about the legitimacy of the class, even in the teachers' own minds.

Irresolvable Conflicts

First, teachers reported that detracking pulled them in conflicting directions. Increased variation among students made extra attention to the various groups a necessity, but when teachers offered this help to one group, students in the other groups tended to become restless and disengaged. Teachers tried to steer a middle ground by teaching to the middle of the class; but as they did, they were

acutely aware of losing students at both extremes.

The teachers particularly emphasized the impact on faster students. Every teacher stated that detracking poorly served the needs of these students, who were often bored and rarely challenged. Initially, teachers believed that making some simple adjustments would keep faster students engaged. However, when tracks were merged, teachers found themselves pulled in conflicting directions—in regard to the tasks they assigned, the topics they covered, the language and pace of lessons, and the standards for judging students' achievement. They tried to resolve these conflicts, but in every case they discovered obstacles that they (and the detracking literature) had not anticipated.

Tasks. The problems here were especially difficult to resolve for faster students. For example, when teachers found that the tasks they assigned did not challenge faster students, they tried to give those kids extra assignments. This failed because the teachers had not anticipated how much extra preparation time it would take and because the students themselves resisted doing extra assignments. As one teacher put it, "Piquing the interest of the brighter kids would require extra readings, extra writing assignments, and extra discussions that we would have to schedule outside of class. It's too hard to do all of this. I really don't do enough for them. There's not enough time."

In addition, teachers found that their faster students were rarely receptive to doing more work, especially when they knew that teachers couldn't reward them for it. These students already had an easy A in this class. What incentive did they have for doing extra assignments?

Topics. Teachers initially expected that they would enrich the material covered in class when they responded to questions raised by faster students. In fact, detracking advocates see this as a way of raising the intellectual level of slower students. However, teachers had not anticipated that two-thirds of the class often did not understand the questions. Explaining the faster students' questions would take time that was needed to help the rest of the class understand the key issues of the lesson, and teachers concluded that they could not devote class time to topics that served only one-third of the class. So if faster students asked questions, teachers tended to give only brief answers and quickly return to the lesson before losing the interest of the other students.

Teachers were also surprised at how often they had to ignore many topics that are regularly covered in upper-track classes and many approaches to history—including interpreting evidence and dealing with conflicting views of historical events. One teacher said, "Social history is what draws the most students in. So we really stay away from political and economic history, except at obvious points, like the early presidents or the Great Depression." In detracked classes, teachers did not feel they could present demanding topics or approaches without confusing most students and failing to help slower students with basic topics they had not understood.

Language. Although teachers faced difficult choices about tasks and topics several times during a class period, they faced a conflict about language virtually every minute. Because they had to be intelligible to all students, teachers used language that was generally far below the

vocabulary of faster students. One teacher initially tried to solve the problem by explaining the big words she used, but this was distracting to everyone. She eventually reverted to using only words that the slowest students could understand.

When faster students used difficult words, teachers had to decide whether to interrupt the ongoing lesson to explain the word; they often decided not to. When they did explain, they were conscious of being translators. "The bright kids often speak on my level," said one teacher, "and then I rephrase what they have said to the whole class." The faster students did not fit into the class, except by translation.

Pace. Running a classroom with students at different levels created a constant tension over how quickly to move. If the pace was too fast, slower students became confused. However, when teachers slowed the pace and rephrased a point three or four times to make sure that everyone understood, faster students gave up. Several teachers mentioned the problems associated with giving directions. One teacher said, "I quickly learned to give verbal and visual instructions and to repeat them and have a student repeat them." Often, the faster kids tuned out after the third round of instructions: "They stop raising their hands." Nearly every day, teachers watched with frustration as some students shifted from active engagement to disengagement.

Standards. But as difficult as these classroom issues were, they were dwarfed by the problem of what level of performance to expect of the students in the detracked class. One standard? Several? The bind the teachers were in is obvious, and I'll take it up in detail later on.

Thus, while teachers initially believed that students' disparate needs could be handled with some simple adjustments, these needs created conflicts in the detracked class that could be resolved only at the expense of one or more groups, and faster students were the biggest losers.

Slower Students and Kids in the Middle

For slower students, teachers thought detracking brought clear social benefits: They "feel more comfortable in a detracked class. In a tracked low-level class, they knew they were labeled as 'the dumb ones.'" Another teacher said, "The labels these kids used to have really hurt them; their attitude was 'I'm in the low track, it's over for me.'" With detracking, all the teachers agreed that these labels lost their force.

However, regardless of detracking's social benefits, nearly all the teachers said they believed that detracking harmed slower students academically because teachers could not retard the pace of the class enough to allow the slower students to keep up or give these kids the individual attention they needed. If teachers answered faster students' questions very briefly to avoid boring most of the other students, they gave slower students' questions the same treatment so they could return to the main lesson before the middle-level students tuned out. As one teacher said, "When the middle students start to get impatient, that's the signal to us that it's time to move on." Overall, the teachers found that the slowest students needed extra

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help the teachers could not give during the class period, and they urged these students to come after class. Few ever did.

Middle-level students were the least likely to be neglected in a detracked class. During whole-class instruction, tasks, topics, language, and pace were generally geared to them. Teachers also said they spent more time on these students' questions than on questions from faster or slower students. However, when it comes to individual attention, middle students are often overlooked in schools,⁹ and detracking may make this even worse. When classtime activities were done individually or in groups, the teacher went to the slower students first to make sure they understood the task and could get started. By the time the teacher was finished answering their questions, the faster students were done, so the teacher had to run to help them, perhaps giving them an additional task to make sure they didn't become behavior problems. What became clear in teachers' accounts was that middle-level students rarely got individual attention even when they needed it. Detracking creates a situation where teachers can't use whole-class time to meet the needs of faster or slower students and can't give individual attention to middle students. It is hard to find any winners in terms of instruction.

When the school shifted to detracking, the social studies teachers at Progressive High School thought they would be able to address each topic *sequentially* on multiple levels. They discovered that students do not wait patiently through presentations not aimed at them, so they tried to present topics *simultaneously*. Insofar as they were able to pull this off, their classes were like United Nations sessions simultaneously translated into three languages, with this difference—everything was done by a single translator. At every minute of class, these teachers felt pressure to employ language, pace, tasks, topics, and standards appropriate to three different audiences. When the teachers settled for trying to reach the kids in the middle, they had the frustration of watching the slower and the faster students drift away and of knowing they were not giving these students what they needed. No wonder some teachers reported that detracking imposes impossible demands.

Bright Minority Students

One of the strongest arguments against tracking is that it harms minorities.¹⁰ Minorities do tend to be underrepresented in upper tracks.¹¹ However, social studies teachers at Progressive High reported an opposite problem—short-changing bright minority students. Progressive High has many Hispanic students, mostly from poor families. One teacher said that there were 10 Hispanic students in her world history class, three of whom she would classify as “high ability level,” and they were “slowed down and bored, just like the other bright kids.” Moreover, “the brighter Hispanic students seem to face a lot of peer pressure in the class from other Hispanic kids who aren’t doing well in the class.” Here we are seeing the potential for harm to minorities from the policy that is supposed to help them. These minority students come from working- and lower-class families; their parents do not have strong educational backgrounds. If these students do not find academic challenge at school, they may not find it at all.

Equality Is Not Equity: Standards and Grading Practices

The teachers’ second big disappointment was finding that they could not expect all of their students to meet the same standards. Teachers felt it was unfair to demand as much from slower students as from their classmates: Students who struggled many hours over an assignment deserved some reward for effort even if they didn’t finish. The pressure to adjust standards was so great that seemingly objective systems were not exempt. One teacher who uses a clear rubric (skills checklist) for grading writing admitted that a “rubric can be skewed. I can fix the numbers given my expectations. An advanced student will get a point off for not formulating a proper topic sentence because he should know that by now. A slower student would not lose points for that.”

Some teachers who said they initially maintained high standards could not continue to do so. Because detracking creates a situation in which 20 percent to 30 percent of a class have difficulty meeting standards that mid-level students can manage, it may force teachers to lower the minimum acceptable standards. Unknowingly echoing TheodoreSizer’s statement about how the composition of a class affects standards,¹² one teacher said “I can’t fail half of the class, which is what would happen if I kept the same standards, so I’m more lenient when I grade the lower-level students if they show up, are trying, and come in for extra help.”

When teachers tried to give faster students extra assignments to make sure they were working up to their level, this also raised questions of equity. Extra assignments take teachers’ time away from planning lessons for slower and middle-level students, and many teachers felt it was unfair to sacrifice their planning time for the whole class to help a few faster students.

In addition, the students themselves thought that extra assignments were unfair. Everything they could see indicated that they had already learned more than they needed to know. Indeed, when they exhibited a better vocabulary or asked a more complex question, the teacher couldn’t or wouldn’t respond. So when a teacher offered

an extra assignment to a restless faster student, the student replied, “Why do I have to do it? No one else does.” Another teacher reported that out of 25 faster students who were offered an extra assignment, only two actually did it. As a result, all students got the same homework. Faster students finished most of it at school and did little homework at night.

Although advocates speak confidently about creating higher standards for slower students, detracking creates a situation where equity argues against high standards for faster and slower students alike. For faster students, extra assignments that would challenge them seem unfair and arbitrary. For slower students, high achievement standards are unfair unless the class can wait while they master the material—and this would be unfair to the rest of the class. As a result, faster students rarely need to exert much effort, and slower students rarely get enough time to meet achievement standards.

Detracking increases the conflicts between challenge, achievement, and effort. These teachers responded by grading faster students on achievement, and slower students on effort. This deprived faster students of challenge and slower students of mastery. Moreover, the teachers’ use of different standards for different students created an ambiguity about what was an acceptable level of work that undoubtedly left many students unaware of their deficiencies. Despite its intentions, detracking creates inequities.

The Loss of Legitimacy

The third disappointment was that detracking raised doubts about classroom legitimacy, even in the teachers’ own minds. Teachers are charged both with providing challenging instruction and keeping order. However, as Waller¹³ noted, the two goals sometimes conflict. Detracking increases this conflict so that teachers often feel compelled to diminish challenge in order to keep all students involved. As already noted, this takes its greatest toll on faster students.

Teachers do not know how to respond to the anger of faster students. When less-motivated students are neglected, they respond with passive disengagement or active disruptions, which teachers can punish as deviance. But when motivated students are ignored or given material that bores them and their discontent turns into open conflict and even anger, teachers find it harder to punish them. Ignoring interesting questions makes teachers feel that they are not doing their professional duty, so many teachers agree with students’ challenges to their legitimacy.

These statements from two Progressive High teachers indicate the extent of their uneasiness. One confessed to embarrassment about some assignments: “The high-level kids sometimes laugh when I pass them out.... If I were in my own class, ... I would be bored.” Another said that sometimes she apologizes to the high-level kids: “It’s sort of like ‘I’m sorry kids, but bear with me.’” Teachers found that sort of teacher-student exchange embarrassing and said it raised doubts about the class’s legitimacy among students at all levels—especially since teachers agreed with students’ impatience and were reluctant to criticize their challenges.

Detracking raises problems that no teaching strategy can easily solve.

Apathy and deviance are the ultimate indicators of the breakdown of legitimacy. Some of the faster kids in the classes displayed their frustration quietly, taking out books from other classes to get started on their homework for the night. Others were more disruptive, talking to other students or passing notes. One teacher reported, "Lately, I've had trouble with the gifted students, who are bored and make trouble." Most of the students' bad behavior did not amount to insurrection, but it was a clear signal to all that the class was losing its legitimacy. One teacher observed that a slower student who frequently misbehaved found a new ally in a faster student who was also bored. If detracking's goal is to democratize the classroom, it succeeds in a perverse way—by democratizing apathy and deviance.

Looking for Solutions

Oakes¹⁴ has noted three possible barriers to detracking: technical—it is hard to do; normative—teachers' beliefs prevent it; and political—vested interests of faster students' parents prevent it. Oakes addresses only the latter two. She seems to regard technical obstacles as trivial. However, in Progressive High School, teachers believed strongly in tracking, and there was no political opposition in the early years. Instead, the difficulties were "technical"—teachers could not figure out how to teach all students in detracked classes. These findings support and elaborate the conclusions of a previous study which found that, except in the case of a school that had extraordinary resources,

the technical challenges of providing high-quality instruction to students at diverse performance levels are formidable obstacles for many teachers who wish to reduce the reliance on grouping and tracking....most teachers were not able to provide a challenging, engaging curriculum to an academically diverse array of students.¹⁵

Indeed, the experiences of teachers at Progressive High suggest that detracking raises a number of problems that no teaching strategy can easily solve:

- *Detracking did not abolish inequality among students; it ignored inequality as much as possible—and therein lay its successes and failures.* Ignoring differences among students when placing them in classes reduced the institutional labeling of students. At the same time, teachers who ignored these differences as they

conducted lessons and graded students came to feel that, as educators, they were poorly serving both faster and slower students. Equal treatment deprived the first group of challenge and transformed them from positive models to disengaged and disruptive influences. It also deprived the second group of mastery. Ironically, equal demands led to serious inequities.

- *Detracking forces teachers to ignore high-level topics.* Most teachers subscribe to the ideal of setting standards that challenge all students. Detracking puts them in the position of delegitimizing high-level language, sophisticated questions, and challenging subject matter in order to keep most students interested and on track. In the process, teachers begin to doubt the legitimacy of their own classes. Moreover, in ignoring faster students' questions, they send clear signals that such additional knowledge is irrelevant or inappropriate. No wonder these students see no reason to learn more than the unchallenging mid-level material.
- *When standards are lowered, students' further education may suffer.* While detracked schools can brag that all their students enter college, this is not much of an accomplishment since almost anyone can enter open-admissions colleges. Studies of these colleges find that more than one-third of students lack basic competencies and must take remedial college classes. As a result, many of these students soon drop out of college.¹⁶ If detracking gives the impression that slower students have basic mastery, but prevents teachers from slowing the class enough to make sure that they do, then students will only discover their poor preparation when they get assigned to remedial college classes, where it may be too late to remedy their achievement gaps.
- *Detracking may be harmful to low-income and minority youth who are high achievers.* These kids cannot afford extra tutoring or summer enrichment programs, and their parents often cannot help them with homework, so these students are especially at the mercy of the instruction provided in school. If detracking reduces the challenge for bright low-income youth, they won't get it elsewhere.

One cannot blame teachers' efforts for these failures. The social studies teachers in Progressive High worked very hard to make detracking succeed. They put in long hours: With the ordinary school day beginning at 8:15 a.m., they came to school 60 minutes earlier than that to set up simulations and meet with students who had special needs. They also followed the practices endorsed by tracking advocates. This was an effective implementation of detracking, and teachers found that it just did not meet their expectations.¹⁷ Nor can one question the teachers' competence. Though detracking made them feel inadequate, they were all successful teachers before the reform. Dreamers may hope for super teachers who could do better, but policy cannot be built on the assumption of super teachers.

What it comes down to is that if tracking is bad, detracking may be no better. Indeed, it may be more harmful than tracking in some respects. Although tracking as ordinarily implemented has many problems, that does not mean detracking solves these problems or has better outcomes.

In the past, researchers who presented negative findings about popular programs have been criticized as being biased or even intending to scuttle a program they didn't like. However, when this study began, I hoped detracking at this high school would be successful. I have written about the problems of tracking for many years and have been interested in finding solutions. But regardless of my hopes, it is a serious disservice to students to pretend that detracking has no problems or that it solves problems when it does not. The interviews did not ask teachers to express reservations. I was unhappy to hear them—and teachers were unhappy to state them. These were unanticipated outcomes, and they caused former advocates to want to end the detracking reform.

Of course, the problem of inequality is created before high school. If students enter ninth grade with vast disparities in achievement (often ranging over five grade levels), then a high school is faced with only bad choices. Policymakers should not wait until high school to begin addressing these problems. Inequalities are evident in the earliest grades, but they increase over time.¹⁸ It is essential to make major additional efforts to remedy achievement gaps before fourth grade, and Farkas¹⁹ and others have shown that considerable success can occur in reducing inequalities at this early period. However, this requires identifying students at risk and giving them extra help during part of the school day or after school.

What can be done in high school? Researchers sometimes fail to make an important distinction. When research shows negative effects of tracking, it is showing the effects of tracking as ordinarily practiced. If tracking dumps low-performing students into classes where little is asked of them and no effort is made to help them deal with their deficiencies—where indeed they are expected to fail—it is no wonder if they do. But this problem with tracking as ordinarily implemented is not inevitable.²⁰ It is possible that modifications of tracking may reduce negative outcomes.²¹ For example, Gamoran²² showed that successful lower-track classrooms can effectively present high-level material if they do it at a slower pace—a strategy that would be difficult to manage in a detracked classroom without losing the attention of middle and faster students.

In another tracked high school, students whose achievement was below the ordinary cut-off for honors track were admitted to the honors track if they were highly motivated. The school gave them supplementary help in a special summer class (before ninth grade), a special study hall which offered extra help, and a special help session after school. These students had to exert extra effort to keep up with the honors classes, and the extra sessions helped them to do so. Without lowering the standards in honors classes, this program helped large numbers of students enroll in honors track and led to a vast increase in the number of minorities in honors.²³ Similar enrichment programs were noted in some of Oakes's detracked schools and in Gamoran and Weinstein's²⁴ Cibola High School, so one must wonder whether this enrichment, and not detracking, should be the focus of reform. Instead of "tracking as usual," such enrichment efforts can modify tracking in ways that help all students. These programs de-

mand more time and effort from students and more resources from the school district, but they can have great benefits.

This is a study of a single department in a single school told from teachers' vantage point, and it does not present test scores or other outcomes. But it began without a preconceived opinion about detracking, and Progressive High was an unusually promising place for detracking to succeed. It clearly did not serve any students well. While some readers will probably dismiss these results as an aberration, I do not know any reason to believe they are. Rather, these results are a warning to reformers and researchers.

In the eyes of the social studies teachers at Progressive High School, detracking accomplished many transformations in a few short years. It transformed teaching from difficult to impossible. It transformed the ideal of equal instruction for all into practices offering less instruction for all. It transformed faster students from motivated allies to disengaged threats. And it transformed teachers from detracking enthusiasts into advocates for a return to tracking.

These results pose challenges for researchers and practitioners. While tracking often has bad outcomes, detracking is not necessarily better. Researchers who have played a role in criticizing tracking must also consider the potential problems of detracking. Until such studies are done, high school practitioners should be cautious about proceeding to detracking reforms just because they sound appealing. There is too much at stake, and there is great risk of unanticipated negative outcomes. These teachers' experiences indicate that good intentions and hard work are not enough to make detracking successful. □

NOTES

¹ Rosenbaum, J. E., *Making Inequality*; New York: Wiley, 1976. See also Alexander, K. and E.L. McDill, "Selection And Allocation Within Schools," *American Sociological Review* 6 (1976): 963-980; Cicourel, A. V. and J. Kitsuse, *The Educational Decision-Makers*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964; Heyns, Barbara, "Social Selection and Stratification Within Schools," *American Journal of Sociology* 81: 364-394.

² Oakes, J., *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

³ Oakes, J., and A. S. Wells., *Beyond the Technicalities of School Reform*, Los Angeles: UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, 1996.

⁴ Gamoran, A., and M. Weinstein, "Differentiation and Opportunity in Restructured Schools," *American Journal of Education* 106 (3) (May 1998): 385-416.

⁵ See note 3 above.

⁶ See note 3 above.

⁷ See note 2 above.

⁸ Teachers used various terms to distinguish among students ("high/low ability," "high/low achievement," "faster/slower"). Except when I quote from teachers' own words, I use the terms "faster" and "slower," which focus on teachers' observations of how quickly a student learns new material. Students may be "faster" because they have more ability or better previous preparation, because they prepare for class by reading ahead in the textbook, or for other reasons.

⁹ Powell, A., E. Farrar, and D. Cohen, *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985.

¹⁰ Braddock, J. H. II, and R. Slavin, "Why Ability Grouping Must End:

Achieving Excellence in Equity in American Education," in H. Pool and J. Page, eds., *Beyond Tracking*, Bloomington:Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1995, and see note 2 above.

¹¹Heyns, B., "Social Selection and Stratification Within Schools," *American Journal of Sociology* 81 (1974): 364-394, and Rosenbaum, J.E., "Track Misperceptions and Frustrated College Plans: An Analysis of the Effects of Tracks and Track Perceptions in the National Longitudinal Survey," *Sociology of Education*, April 1980, 74-88.

¹²Sizer, T. R., *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984.

¹³Waller, W., *The Sociology of Teaching*, New York: Wiley, 1965.

¹⁴Oakes, J., "Can Tracking Research Inform Practice? Technical, Normative, and Political Considerations," *Educational Researcher* 21 no.4 (1992): 12-22.

¹⁵See note 4 above.

¹⁶Grubb, W. N., *Working in the Middle*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.

¹⁷We noted two departures. First, teachers were not given special instruction in how to teach detracked classes. Second, while detracking proponents urge that small group work be done in mixed-ability groups (of three to five students), the six teachers who initially tried mixed-ability groups stopped using this procedure. Some reported that fast students did all the work, and it wasn't clear that slow students learned anything. After a while, all eight teachers let students choose their groups, which tended to vary by achievement level. Detracking advocates will focus on these points to explain the failures, and they may be right. But altering these features will not address all the problems teachers noted. Moreover, it is not clear how to alter these features. The often-dismissed technical questions are fundamental: How can detracking be done and under what circumstances? Available models for instruction in detracked classes are mostly for elementary and middle schools (where skills are simpler and variation narrower), so they may not be appropriate for detracked high school classes. Nor have detracking advocates stated what conditions would prevent detracking from being effective. Does detracking work equally well in classes with high and low variation in student achievement? Should teachers do the same activities when achievement ranges across many grade levels (e.g., seventh- to 12th-grade achievement) and when all students are at the same level? These are the kinds of "technical" questions that some detracking advocates have tried to ignore, but they cannot be dismissed as mere technicalities.

¹⁸Farkas, G., *Human Capital or Cultural Capital?* Hawthorne, N.Y.: Aldine, 1996.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰It should be noted that it is not clear whether the best studies (the ones using randomized designs) are applicable to high schools, since they were done in elementary and middle schools.

²¹Hallinan, M.T., "Tracking: From Theory to Practice," *Sociology of Education*, April 1994: 79-91.

²²Gamoran, A., "Alternative Uses of Ability Grouping in Secondary Schools: Can We Bring High-Quality Instruction to Low-Ability Classes?" *American Journal of Education* 102 (1993): 1-22.

²³Rosenbaum, unpublished.

²⁴See note 4 above.