Notes

1. The list of groups condemning tracking comes from a foreward written by Jeannie Oakes to the book by Anne Wheelock, Crossing the Tracks: How Untracking Can Save America's Schools (New York: The New Press, 1992), p. xi. Several studies conducted by the Public Agenda Foundation report sentiments on tracking and heterogeneous grouping. When professors of education were asked whether they'd like to see more or less mixed ability grouping in K-12 classrooms, 50% said more, 15% less; in Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson, 1997, Different Drummers: How Teachers of Teachers View Public Education, (New York: Public Agenda Foundation, 1997), p. 32. Only 34% of the public and 40% of teachers believe heterogeneous grouping will improve education; in S. Farkas and J. Johnson, 1996, Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk about Public Education Today (New York: Public Agenda Foundation, 1996), p. 41. Parental opposition to heterogeneous grouping is reported in First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools (New York: Public Agenda Foundation, 1994). High school students' support for more ability grouping is reported in Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools (New York: Public Agenda Foundation, 1997). A survey conducted during the Howard County, MD controversy found that two-thirds of middle school teachers, three-fourths of students, and almost three-fourths of parents thought students learn better with classmates of similar ability. See Katherine Shaver, "Middle Schools Wrestle with Complaints About Levels of Learning," Washington Post (9/4/97), p. M1.


7 In a study of twenty Baltimore schools conducted in the 1980s, only one school reported that it didn't use ability grouping in reading. See Aaron M. Pallas, Doris R. Entwisle, Karl L. Alexander, and M. Francis Stluka, "Ability-Group Effects: Instructional, Social, or Institutional?" Sociology of Education, 67, 1 (1994): 27-46. An extremely high estimate of between-class tracking in elementary schools can be found in a Pennsylvania study conducted by researchers from Johns Hopkins University. In the study, 45% of first grades used between-class homogeneous grouping in English and about 15% in math. Between-class tracking in English rose to over 60% by grade four. This is by far the highest estimate of tracking in elementary schools I have seen. But the data should be taken with a grain of salt. The same survey shows nearly 80% of first graders remained in the same class all day, which makes between-class ability grouping in several subjects nearly impossible. Then, the survey shows 90% of first grades using within-class ability grouping in reading and over 20% in math. If these estimates are all accurate, then one thing is for sure: an awful lot of grouping is going on Pennsylvania. See James M. McPartland, J. Robert Coldiron, and Jomills H. Braddock II, School Structures and Classroom Practices in Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Schools, Report No. 14 (Baltimore, MD: Center for Research on Elementary & Middle Schools, 1987).


10 Joyce L. Epstein and Douglas J. MacIver, Education in the Middle Grades: Overview of National Practices and Trends (Baltimore: Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, 1990). Another survey, the Longitudinal Study of American Youth (LSAY), includes data on science and math curricula from 51 middle schools from 1987 to 1989. In science, 38% of schools tracked in 7th grade and 49% in 8th grade. In math, 81% tracked in 7th grade and 92% in 8th grade. See Thomas B. Hoffer, "Middle School Ability

11 Parent interventions into tracking decisions are potential sources of inequality. Highly educated parents have been found more likely to push for high track placements than other parents. See Elizabeth L. Useem, "Middle Schools and Math Groups: Parents Involvement in Children's Placement," *Sociology of Education*, 65, 4 (October 1992): 263-279.

12 Joyce Epstein and Douglas J. MacIver, *Education in the Middle Grades*. Some middle schools start with self-contained classrooms the first year and then move students to departmentalized or team structure in the second year. See Tom Loveless, *The Fate of Reform*.

13 Jomills Henry Braddock II, "Tracking the Middle Grades: National Patterns of Grouping for Instructions," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 71, 6 (February 1990): 445-449. Adapted from Table 1, p. 446. Data from a representative national sample of 1,753 schools, *Education in the Middle Grades: A National Survey of Practices and Trends*, a study conducted by the Johns Hopkins University Center on Elementary and Middle Schools, spring 1988.

14 Many middle schools are abolishing remedial classes in response to the middle school reform movement, which champions heterogeneously grouped classes.


16 See Bruce L. Wilson and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Mandating Academic Excellence: High School Responses to State Curriculum Reform* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), pp. 86-87. In this study of transcripts from five Maryland high schools, only 35% of student movement among math tracks mirrored that of science tracks, indicating that science and math placements are largely independent. The authors caution, however, that the data could contain "noise" (p. 88).


18 Tables 4 and 5 illustrate that track designations depend on the survey question that is asked. The data in both tables were collected from teachers in NELS.

19 As shown in Table 4, the NELS 10th grade (1990) enrollment in vocationally-oriented courses within academic subject areas was miniscule. This does not reflect enrollment in electives, shop classes or classes in computer programming, business, or other vocational skills. When the NELS students were asked in 12th grade (1992) whether they were in a general, college preparatory/academic, or vocational
program, 45% said they were in a general program, 43% college preparatory/academic, and 12% vocational. Why the drop in college prep students and rise in vocational students from 10th to 12th grade? Possible reasons include discrepancies from sampling teachers in 10th grade and students in 12th, changes in student's plans as high school graduation approached, or students regarding electives, where they are allowed to take non-academic courses, as the signature elements of their program. On the issue of counseling low track students, Rosenbaum found counselors misleading low track students as to their prospects for college; J. E. Rosenbaum, *Making Inequality* (New York: Wiley, 1976).

20 National Center for Education Statistics, *Curricular Differentiation in Public High Schools* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1994), Table 13. Principals were asked to rate influences on the placement of students into differentiated courses. The top five responses, and percent responding that the particular factor is influential to a "great extent:"

1) Prerequisite courses taken, 66%; 2) Teachers' recommendations, 57%; 3) Students' previous grades, 52%; 4) Parents' requests, 34%; 5) Students' requests, 34%. Only 14% of principals said standardized test scores were influential to a great extent.


33 Ravitch, The Troubled Crusade.


37 Only nine of the 51 XYZ studies in the Kuliks' review adapted curriculum to ability level. Another key difference from contemporary tracking is that almost half of the XYZ studies, twenty-five, took place in elementary grades.

38 Slavin suspects a selection effect, a phenomenon that taints comparisons of two programs. Two students with the same test scores may differ in characteristics important to learning: for example, study habits, motivation, behavior, or attendance. If one of these students gets into a gifted program and experiences significant gains in achievement, and the other student is rejected and only attains mediocre test scores in the regular class, the achievement difference might be attributable to good screening on characteristics supporting learning, not to differences in program quality.

39 The studies vary on the grade levels and ages of pupils, whether the groups were for only one academic subject of an entire regimen of courses, whether IQ or achievement tests were used to assign students to groups, and, as already noted, whether curricular content was adjusted to ability levels. Omitted variables, factors that affect learning but
were left unmeasured, include: How curriculum was altered when it was altered, the qualifications of teachers, whether teachers changed their instruction according to each group’s level, and, if so, the instructional techniques teachers employed.

40 Adam Gamoran, "The Stratification of High School Learning Opportunities," Sociology of Education, 60 (July 1987): 135-155. In a study of streaming in England, high ability groups were found to learn more and low ability groups less than they would have in ungrouped settings. See Alan C. Kerckhoff, "Effects of Ability Grouping in British Secondary Schools," American Sociological Review, 51 (December 1986): 842-858. Whether the finding may be generalized to American schools is questionable.

41 The 10% greater probability for African-Americans to be placed in high tracks is reported in Adam Gamoran and Robert D. Mare, "Secondary School Tracking and Educational Inequality: Compensation, Reinforcement, or Neutrality?" American Journal of Sociology, 94, 5 (March 1989): 1146-83. In a re-evaluation of the data using transcript records, however, Lucas and Gamoran found that the advantage evaporates when the racial composition of schools is controlled, suggesting that predominantly minority, inner-city schools bias the estimate. They are more likely to place students with low test scores into the academic track than are predominantly white, suburban schools. Samuel R. Lucas and Adam Gamoran (1993), "Race and Track Assignment: A Reconsideration with Course-Based Indicators," Working Paper, University of Wisconsin-Madison. The important point is that high track African-American students in these inner-city schools would still lose out by being placed in heterogeneous classes unless the high track benefit varies by school racial composition, something not yet shown. The formation of the race gap before high school is reported in National Center for Education Statistics, Reading and Mathematics Achievement: Growth in High School, Issue Brief (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, December 1997). Available online at http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98038.html. On tracking and ability grouping's relationship to the race gap, see Ronald F. Ferguson, "Evidence that Schools Can Narrow the Black-White Test Score Gap," in eds. Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, The Black-White Test Score Gap (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, in press).


44 For the lingering effect of class in HSB data, see Adam Gamoran and Mare, "Secondary Schooling and Educational Inequality."


47 The Maryland transcript study is Bruce L. Wilson and Gretchen and Gretchen B. Rossman, Mandating Academic Excellence. The analysis of NELS data is in David Lee Stevenson, Kathryn S. Schiller, and


55 Analyzing LSAY data, Rochelle Gutierrez identified eight exemplary high school mathematics departments in schools serving low income students. The study supports the idea that high quality education can be found in both tracked and untracked settings. Four of the schools tracked and four didn't. Gutierrez concludes that "tracking is not the pivotal policy on which student advancement in mathematics depends." Rochelle Gutierrez, "Practices, Beliefs, and Cultures of High School Mathematics Departments: Understanding Their Influence on Student Achievement," *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 28, 5 (1996): 495-529.

56 Ron Ferguson quotes black male students who feel that they are perceived as stupid in heterogeneous classes. Ferguson makes the point that how teachers handle achievement differences probably matters more than grouping practices. See Ronald F. Ferguson, "Evidence that Schools Can Narrow the Black-White Test Score Gap," in eds. Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, *The Black-White Test Score Gap* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, in press).

58 All quotes in the paragraph are from: Jeannie Oakes, Amy Stuart Wells, and Associates, Beyond the Technicalities of School Reform: Policy Lessons from Detracking Schools (Los Angeles: UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information, 1996). The researchers, avowed opponents of tracking, studied ten middle schools and high schools that are attempting to detrack. The phrase "rethinking what it means to be smart" is used on page 18 and can be found elsewhere in the report. The hostility toward AP classes is revealed on pages 26, 29-30, 35. Middle-class suburban norms are seen as reinforcing tracking on page 17. The quotation about norms of competition and individualism is on pp. 20-21. The multicultural electives are described on page 10.


Copyright ©2003-2008 The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. All Rights Reserved.

The Foundation is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.