

Contents

Introduction.....	5
<hr/>	
The Story of Jermoe School District: A Case of What Went Wrong With Reform.....	6
Tracking's Resilience and Detracking's Challenges	15
<hr/>	
Understanding Tracking's Foundation	15
Reformers' Need for Greater Preparedness	17
Strategies for School Reformers	21
<hr/>	
For the School Board	21
For the Central Administration	28
For All Schools	35
For Elementary and Intermediate Schools	39
For Secondary Schools	40
Conclusion	43
Recommended Reading	45
References	51

Introduction

Although the Jermoe School District doesn't exist, the following story is very real. Tracking, or the practice of assigning students to high- and low-level classes according to their perceived abilities, remains widespread throughout the nation. And it usually consigns children substantially to unequal educational opportunities. We have studied school districts around America that, like the fictional Jermoe, recognized this inequality and tried to detrack. We have also witnessed the obstacles to such efforts. In this booklet, we offer an explanation for the potential staying power of tracking and suggest a series of strategies designed to contribute to future efforts to detrack schools.

Our starting point is our belief, based upon our research in detracking schools, that districts and schools that initiate detracking reforms are likely to see their change efforts largely undermined if they fail to prepare for political obstacles and challenges related to the beliefs and values of educators and parents. How well a detracking reform fares, we contend, depends upon the commitment and resourcefulness of teachers, administrators, counselors, parents, students, lawyers, and others in attending to these needs. But most of all, it depends upon what people believe about learning and students, about who can and must learn, and about whether some students must receive less in school in order for other students to receive "the best."

***The Story of Jermoe School District:
A Case of What Went Wrong With Reform***

The leadership of Jermoe School District knew that something was amiss. While some students met or exceeded the stated expectations of the district motto, “All Children Can Learn,” many others were falling through the cracks, particularly at the secondary level. Also, the leadership could not help but notice that African-American students were not doing nearly as well as White students. And lower achievement seemed to be tied to residence in the less wealthy area of town (which was largely African-American).

Jermoe’s school board asked the superintendent to investigate possible causes of the problematic outcomes they saw at the secondary level. “Offer us some policy options,” board members said, “that will give our students more opportunities for academic success.” In response, the superintendent headed up a task force, made up of teachers, parents, and administrators, that went into the schools to ask questions, observe, and gather information.

First, the task force visited classes in the district’s top-notch gifted/honors program. This program was the district’s crown jewel. It produced very high achievers, boasting nearly 100 percent college admittance rates. Further, when the task force visited the gifted classes, they observed students engaged in challenging, interdisciplinary projects. The students were clearly performing higher-order thinking—applying their lessons in new and exciting ways to their individual interests in the real world.

Next, the task force visited classes at the college preparatory level. They saw many things that they liked, but it was all a considerable step down from the gifted

Tracking's Resilience and Detracking's Challenges

Understanding Tracking's Foundation

Most educators know tracking only as a structural feature of their schools (i.e., an organizational device). At the secondary level, this device sorts students into classes based on perceived ability. Once sorted, students are offered (at least in theory) a curriculum tailored to their perceived academic abilities or achievement levels.

Every year, educators in schools throughout America decide to move beyond such tracking mechanisms—to engage in a detracking reform. While the reasons for embarking on such a reform are somewhat varied, they generally include a recognition that students placed in low-track classes are denied equal educational opportunities. Students in high-track classes are usually presented with an interesting college preparatory curriculum. Students in low-track classes are usually given a much less challenging, non-college preparatory curriculum—in the nature of rote memorization and instruction designed principally for classroom control.

Reformers, then, tend to share two perceptions: (1) they overwhelmingly see tracking and, therefore, detracking as organizational issues, and (2) they see detracking as equitable and educationally beneficial.

Both of these perceptions have a strong basis in reality. However, they both can also lead would-be detrackers into dangerous missteps, with the potential to doom the reform.

Supporters of tracking view detracking as much more than an organizational issue. Those supporters, whether teachers, students, or parents, invariably view detracking as a threat to preserving the quality of the high-track classes; they cannot defend, and thus rarely address, the poor-quality education routinely taking place in low-track classes. In fact, most parents who denounce their local schools' efforts to detrack would no doubt fight ferociously to keep their own children out of the low track. Tracking's benefits, if they exist, are received only by those outside the lowest tracks.

High-track classes are the jewels of any given school. They produce the college admissions, the science fair winners, the "good kids." Teachers enjoy these classes because, they say, the students are more motivated and better behaved. Students form cliques of friends within these classes, and they can be very reluctant to let go of that security and camaraderie. Parents value not only the higher-quality instruction in these classes but also the symbolic status tied to their children's being placed in a high-track class. All are aware of the college admissions criteria that place a premium on honors, Advanced Placement (AP), and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses.

For all these reasons, and many more, detracking is seen by many teachers, students, and parents as a policy that takes away from some children to give to other children. From this perspective, detracking is not a neutral organizational change; it is perceived as posing a severe threat to some of the most valuable aspects of some children's education.