

One Classroom, Different Learning Styles

"All students can learn, they just learn in different ways."

- Nicole Missere, teacher
Roosevelt High School, Yonkers, NY



At The Education Alliance's third annual Secondary School Showcase in Providence, RI in January 2004, schools from across the country demonstrated that creating a culture of fairness for all students regarding opportunity, access, and respect for diverse learning styles is a necessary step toward educating all students to high standards. Schools presented various strategies that can promote this change in school culture, including grouping students of different abilities together in the same classroom (detracking, or heterogeneous grouping) and teaching to their diverse learning styles (differentiated instruction).

A classroom open to all levels of learners

"Faced with a dizzying array of differences among the students they attempt to teach, educators have struggled with ways to reduce these differences and make teaching more effective. One very common, and common-sense, way of dealing with these differences has been to divide students into class-size groups based on a measure of the students' perceived ability or prior achievement," writes University of Florida education professor Paul George.

With *tracking*, students are separated into "career," "college prep," or "honors" tracks based on their grades and test scores. This practice has long been thought to be beneficial because of the perception that it creates greater efficiency for teachers, improves student learning, and lessens the sense of failure for slower students. But research has found that tracking doesn't benefit the great majority of students it was expected to help. On the contrary, according to George, tracking creates a "caste system" of elite and struggling students, sets expectations lower for the lowest track teachers, and encourages segregation and stereotyping.

Studies have shown that students don't do better academically when tracked with others like themselves, that students grouped in lower tracks have lower self-esteem, and that tracking produces no positive results. Yet, despite the research and real-life effects on students, tracking persists.

Knowing this, the National Association of Secondary School Principals' new field guide to improving high schools, *Breaking Ranks II*, developed with the Alliance in 2004, now calls for schools to "present alternatives to tracking and

to ability grouping" in order to create a culture of high expectations for all (NASSP, 2004).

Many high schools are beginning to move in this direction, and detracking is popular with some educators because they believe that it establishes fairness among teachers as well as students. It also puts every student in a challenging class. Some teachers also feel that students from the lower tracks excel when grouped with higher achievers. In *What's the truth about tracking and ability grouping really???*, George writes that whenever possible, "students should spend significant parts of their school day in heterogeneous groups so that they learn to see themselves as important members of this diverse group."

Teaching to individual learning styles

When there are different levels of learners in one classroom, there are likely to be different learning styles, too, and that's when teaching to each student becomes an important instructional strategy. "All students can learn, they just learn in different ways," enthused Nicole Missere, a social studies teacher in the Academic Improvement Magnet (AIM) alternative academy at Roosevelt High School in Yonkers, NY, one of the schools presenting at the showcase. "Introduce material through their perceptual strengths and they will retain more information."

Teachers in the AIM program want their students to do more than retain material. They want them to show up at school, look forward to classes, and catch up to their cohorts in credits. Structured in two teams of 100 students and four teachers each on the third floor of the school, the students in the program are ninth grade repeaters, often described as tough, hardened kids who have all the problems associated with an inner-city environment.

"We asked ourselves, how do we get them to want to come to class? They already failed once. We didn't want to do the same, conventional teaching styles. We wanted to make a huge change so we could really capture our students," said Missere. "We started to differentiate instruction—at any given time, many different activities are going on at the same time in a classroom. Students say they come to school now because they are afraid they're going to miss what their teachers do."

The teachers recognize that their students have different learning styles—some focus better with background music, some without bright lights. "We accommodate those differences," said Missere. "Most importantly, students know in this program that they are not going to see the same routine all day, they're not going to sit still for 45 minutes each class and listen to a teacher talk." "If you just stand in front of the class and lecture, you set yourself up for failure," said Oscar Letona, an AIM math teacher. "I use motivation strategies like games, riddles, and logic to help students remember formulas. There are also socioecological accommodations we have to consider: Not all students learn in cooperative groups, we learned that we need to be flexible."

The teachers use a wide range of approaches, including role play and tactile/kinesthetic activities. "I use a lot of theatrical techniques," said AIM English teacher Janice Young. "These are tough kids, angry kids. I can turn the room into a stage and have the kids move, be physical. When I teach Shakespeare—the kid who won't take his walkman off may be interested in researching the music of the time; the kid who's drawing all the time may be interested in researching the art. Ultimately, we want to prioritize them learning; if we can capture their imagination and give them the skills and show them how, then they will walk out and be able to learn."

Conclusion

"A lot of kids are dropping out, sliding through school, doing whatever they can to get by because they are not engaged," said Chris Unger, a Breaking Ranks coach at the Alliance. "[The AIM program at] Roosevelt is working with kids who do not come to school, who don't want to come to school, who are not engaged. They are working with a particular group of students and can be considered an alternative program, but all students would enjoy being in their program. We can find the opportunity to work in this way with all students."

High schools from across the country will once again be presenting at the Alliance's Secondary School Showcase, to be held February 2-3, 2005 in Providence, RI. Nearly 20 schools will share reform strategies that promote fairness and achievement, student by student. More information about the next showcase is available [here](#).

This article is adapted from a longer version appearing in the National Association of Secondary School Principals' (NASPP) *Principal Leadership* magazine, December, 2004.

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Photograph: thic0022109 © Getty Images .