

Reaching Real Equity in Schools

**By Joseph DiMartino
and Sherri Miles**

From Principal Leadership

At the Secondary School Showcase, which was held by Brown University's Education Alliance, in Providence, Rhode Island, in January 2004, schools from across the country showed that educational equity can be achieved through heterogeneous grouping of students and through differentiating instruction to meet all learners' needs. The schools presented their reform strategies, many aligning with the seven cornerstone strategies in *Breaking Ranks II*, published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals in 2004.

The fourth strategy focuses on ensuring teachers use a variety of instructional strategies and assessments—such as differentiated instruction, experiential learning, and integrated assessment—to fit individual learning styles. To promote equity, instructional strategies should take place in heterogeneously grouped classrooms.

"While it is true that all students, no matter what our expectations, may achieve unequally, they deserve to go to school in a system that does not guarantee it," said Pam Fisher, of the Center

Joseph DiMartino (joseph_dimartino@brown.edu) is Director of Secondary School Redesign, Education Alliance, Brown University, 222 Richmond St., Providence, RI 02903, where Sherri Miles is a Senior Writer/Editor. Condensed from Principal Leadership, 5 (December 2004), 44-48. Published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), from which related educational materials are available by contacting NASSP at 1904 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191.

for Inquiry on Secondary Education for the Maine Department of Education. "They deserve schools that are intelligent and equitable by design, assure access to knowledge, and have the creativity and flexibility to give students the additional resources they need to attain that knowledge."

"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," said Paul George, University of Florida education professor.

"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, and then to design and deliver differentiated learning experiences to each group of students." This practice, tracking, has been "in virtually every school district in the nation sometime in the last 120 years."

Says Fisher, "We've grown up in a system that urges us to believe that some kids are smarter than others and that somehow we can accurately sort this out. We place less emphasis on effort and the value of long-term persistence than on one's perceived native ability. Thus, when students have difficulty in school, our tendency has been

to place that student in an 'easier' class with less challenging work."

Although widespread, tracking is a highly controversial approach. Over 700 studies have been done in the past 50 years on tracking and ability grouping, and the majority of the research says not to do it. Even so, some estimates say up to 85% of today's schools still group students for instruction this way.

Research for Real

Why? For three main reasons: It creates greater efficiency and ease for teachers, students learn better and feel more positive about themselves, and it lessens the sense of failure for slower students.

But the research shows tracking doesn't benefit the great majority of students it was expected to. Studies have shown that: It is impossible to place students into ability-grouped tracks equitably and accurately based on test results; students don't do better academically when tracked with others like themselves; students grouped in lower tracks have lower self-esteem; and tracking produces no positive results. Rather, it polarizes students into pro- and anti-school camps, creates a "caste system" of elite and struggling students, sets expectations lower for the lowest-track teachers, wastes time on management issues, and encourages segregation and stereotyping.

Knowing this, *Breaking Ranks II* calls for schools to present alternatives to tracking and to ability grouping to create a culture of high expectations for all students. And many high schools are beginning to consider the alternatives.

For example, Manual High School, in Denver, Colorado, moved first to block scheduling, and then put students into ninth- and tenth-grade small learning communities with full-inclusion classrooms. North Berwick, Maine's Noble High School created seven teams for ninth- and tenth-grade students. Teams of 80-90 heterogeneously grouped students complete a common curriculum to graduate.

After 20 years of small learning communities, Boston's Fenway High School is now heterogeneously grouping math classes, and Bullard Havens, in Bridgeport, Connecticut, has heterogeneously grouped cohorts of students who are together for all classes.

Amherst, New Hampshire's Souhegan High School implemented heterogeneous grouping when it opened in 1992. Six students who complained of the new structure became an advisory group that launched an Honors Challenge for students who wanted to do more advanced work, and 14 years later, the school is still heterogeneously grouped.

Heterogeneous grouping is popular with some educators because they think it establishes

teachers' fairness. It also puts every student in a challenging class. "When you put a stupid kid in a stupid class, you get stupid results," said one teacher.

Some teachers also think students from lower tracks excel when grouped with higher achievers. "Whenever possible, students should spend significant parts of their school day in heterogeneous groups so they learn to see themselves as important members of this diverse group," said George.

Just as heterogeneous grouping engages all levels of students, differentiated instruction engages all types of learners. "All students can learn, they just learn in different ways," said Nicole Missere, a social studies teacher at the Academic Improvement Magnet (AIM), an alternative academy in Roosevelt High School in Yonkers, New York: "Introduce material through their perceptual strengths, and they will retain more information."

Greater AIMS

But AIM teachers want more: for students to show up at school, look forward to classes, and catch up to their cohorts in credits. Their students are ninth-grade repeaters, often called tough, hardened kids with all the problems associated with an inner-city environment.

The program is structured into two teams, each with four teachers and 100 students, and is housed on the third floor of the

school. "The image of our AIM program has changed," said Bill Moore, Roosevelt principal. "At first, the impression was that it was a punitive program. But after the first year, the students sold the program."

"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 go 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."

Flexibility

"If you just stand in front of the class and lecture, you set yourself up for failure," said Oscar Letona, Roosevelt 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 also recognize their students' different learning styles: Some focus better with background music on, some without bright lights. "We accommodate those differences," said Missere. "Most importantly,

students know [here] they are not going to see the same routine all day, to sit still for 45 minutes each class and listen to a teacher talk."

To differentiate instruction, the teachers use a wide range of approaches, including role play, activities, web quests, and radio programs. "I use a lot of theatrical techniques," said 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 drawing all the time may be interested in researching the art. Ultimately, we want to prioritize their learning; if we can capture their imagination and give them the skills and show them how, they will walk out and be able to learn."

AIM science teacher Frank Magrino agrees: "We want them to succeed, to catch up to their cohorts and start eleventh grade as if nothing ever happened. What we're doing is lowering our stereotypical teacher attitude. Teaching what they have to learn doesn't get lowered. We're teaching to a Regents exam, so we can't lower that. It's *how* we teach that changes."

Some Roosevelt teachers don't like this. "There are dissenters in the school, and they are vocal," said Moore. "One of my roles is to

protect these teachers. You've got to allow your faculty to design and make choices, and you have to be prepared that what you try isn't always going to work. Support the fact that they tried what they tried."

Survey data and Regents statistics show that their efforts are valid in helping many students achieve the necessary credits to go directly into eleventh grade after a year in AIM. Their success demonstrates that differentiating instruction can help promote equity in achievement for all students.

Varied Assessments

Also part of the fourth cornerstone strategy is using a variety of methods to assess student performance. Two schools using innovative assessment strategies include Feinstei High School, in Providence, Rhode Island, and Champion Charter School, in Brocton, Massachusetts. These schools have not lowered their standards; they allow students to show they have met high standards through assessments that are more accurate than the typical multiple-choice exam.

Three years ago, Feinstei closed for poor academic performance, reopening in 2001 as a new high school where all students are held to high, academically rigorous standards and each student can learn at his own pace in a manner suited to his unique

abilities. Students get no letter grades; they must meet the standards by earning at least a 4 on a scale of 1-6 (1 = no work to be assessed, 6 = excel) per standard.

Champion gives an alternative route to a high school diploma for formerly out-of-school youth ages 16-21. Students don't receive credit hours or a GPA; they work at their own pace and move forward by defending portfolios of their best work.

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

Strategies promoting equity promote achievement student by student. Strategies perpetuating inequity promote disillusionment, distrust, and disengagement. Heterogeneous grouping and differentiated instruction create an atmosphere of equality and caring in the classroom, offering students a better opportunity for success. With each student's success comes greater success for the teacher, the classroom, and the school. 