

Dumping the Tracks

Changing Instruction to Create Equity, Rigor, and Choice

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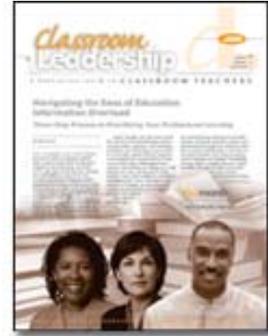
Welcome to Gresham High School, a large, comprehensive public school located near Portland, Oreg. Over the years, my colleagues and I had become quite routine in our work—from the ways in which we named our courses to the ways in which we thought about our students.

For a long time, we wrestled with reform. We wanted to infuse Oregon State Standards into our work, but always attempted to do so within the context of our old structure—all of our 11th and 12th grade students grouped into one of three separate English classes: honors, regular, and noncollege-bound. Our expectations of students and what they were capable of doing, based on these tracks, pervaded the culture of our department and, indeed, the entire school. In practice, students could earn college-bound credit in either of the first two tracks by earning any grade above failing. Conversely, a student in the third track could not receive college-bound credit even by doing exemplary work.

Tied to the Tracks

Our first move toward change involved testing how students' ability led to their track placement. Using data from teachers, counselors, and statewide testing, we observed that in any given section of honors or regular English, some students met or exceeded state standards in reading and writing, and some students did not meet state standards. The testing scores of students in the noncollege-bound track presented a similar picture. Clearly, students were not being placed into a specific track solely on the basis of their ability. Teacher attitudes and student self-perceptions, as well as parental, cultural, and social influences, also played a role.

In response to these findings, we disbanded all 11th and 12th grade English tracks. Our teachers explored high school English courses across the United States, considered statewide standards in English, surveyed students and faculty, and created a new curriculum for 11th and 12th grade English. Out of this effort, 11 new semester-long English classes were born, including such diverse courses as Science Fiction Literature, Writing for the Media, and Women Writers. For the first time, students had a choice of how they fulfilled their final two years of high school English.



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Derailing Through Differentiation

Structural changes of this magnitude do not come easily. The entire school community was brought in to shepherd the process. We revised our department's section of the course catalog, identified necessary materials, developed curricula, and made presentations to parent and student groups. In addition, we recognized that our teachers needed technical assistance with instructing groups of students with a wide variety of ability levels. Even though our teachers agreed that all students would benefit from instruction formerly reserved for college-bound courses, we faced the considerable challenge of creating activities and assessments related to bringing this instruction to a diverse student body.

We began by exploring differentiated instruction. We lobbied the district office for support and, thus, were able to design and deliver two differentiated instruction workshops. Then, each English teacher designed lessons and piloted them with their classes. We turned to already-existing state standards—the Proficiency-based Admission Standards System (PASS)—to develop assessments for our new courses. Though not designed to determine credit for high school courses, the PASS standards adapted nicely to our needs. Their definition of a level of quality in a variety of English skills was particularly helpful. Teachers also began developing ways to create instruction and assessments that tied proficiencies and performance to the type of credit being earned in a given course.

We don't ask students to enroll in a certain course configuration. Instead, after entry into a class, students who demonstrate a level of proficiency on more complex tasks receive college preparatory credit. As a result, different students attempt higher-level work because they have a range of assessment tasks from which to choose. Their work isn't stifled or dictated by arbitrary tracking enrollment. Data collected during the first year of this major shift testify to the benefits of our changes. Nearly 30 percent of our 11th and 12th graders earned regular high school graduation credit in English, and 66 percent earned college preparatory credit. Compared with previous years, our total number of failures in English dropped by 60 percent.

Be Your Own Conductor

These reforms introduced equity, rigor, and choice for all of our English students. They also affected the attitudes and achievements of the teachers in our department. Our teachers are getting more creative, trying literature circles, and thinking about lesson design in terms of multiple intelligences. This new energy has had, and continues to have, a positive effect on students, too. For the first time, all students have the opportunity to earn college preparatory credit based on their performance, not their track.

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