

The Realities of Un-tracking a High School

A principal's six-step review and renewal process helped teachers at Newport Harbor High School evaluate and eventually dismantle their counterproductive tracking program.

Photograph courtesy of Dennis L. Evans



Principal Dennis Evans (center) meets with members of Newport Harbor High School's English Department to discuss grading patterns related to achievement-level tracking. L-R: Department Chair Gerald Tagami, Chet Malek, Evans, Martha Topik, Dale Hagey.

After 20 years as a high school principal, I never cease to be amazed by the naiveté and arrogance of many of those who propose changes in educational practice. The reason that most of their proposals are never enacted is that they so often fail to take into account two fundamental realities about schools: (1) teachers are professionals who are predisposed to do what is best for their clients, and (2) teachers have made an investment of time, energy, and personal and professional pride in their current practices. Because they stand to lose so much in the process of change, they will not change merely for the sake of change.

To help the teachers at our school—Newport Harbor High School in Newport Beach, California—evaluate new and old practices, I developed a six-step review and renewal process. We used the procedure recently to review our thoroughly entrenched, ingrained, and institutionalized practice of achievement-level tracking, which we had employed for some 20 years in the English and social studies depart-

ments. These six steps, discussed in detail below, include the following phases: (1) identify, define, and delimit the prevailing practice; (2) study the heritage of the prevailing practice; (3) review the research and theory; (4) operationalize the research and theory; (5) brainstorm implications of the practice; and (6) discuss and decide on potential changes in practice.

The Six-Step Evaluation Process

Identify, define, and delimit the prevailing practice. We decided to study our practice of tracking students into X, Y, and Z groupings in English and social studies. Of course, this determination to review or evaluate a prevailing practice did not arise magically—it is a legitimate and recognized responsibility of the school principal to initiate the review and evaluation of any and all school programs. I informed the involved department chairs that we would be beginning a study of achievement-level tracking.

Study the heritage of the prevailing practice. We reviewed the original rationales for tracking in social studies and English. Then, to assess their applicability to existing conditions, we compared those rationales to current school and departmental goals, demographic changes, and contemporary curriculum content. This review of the original justification for tracking allowed us to see how dramatically our school's conditions, teaching practices, and educational philosophies had changed over the years. Among other things, we found that enrollment had declined from 2,900 to 1,300 students and that there had been a 100 percent turnover in personnel in social studies and English since tracking had been instituted.

Review the research and theory. At first, I provided all members of the involved departments with journal articles and research summaries on the practice of achievement-level tracking. It wasn't long, however, before faculty members were finding and sharing their own literature on the subject. This review extended over a year and a half. I did not offer any value judgments or opinions regarding this prac-

tice; I merely functioned as a conduit for pertinent information.

Operationalize the research and theory. At this point in the process, I presented data concerning the progress (or lack of progress) made by students in the various tracks. These data, all based upon the actual past and present performances of our students, included longitudinal information related to mastery of subject, grades, attendance, dropouts, and disciplinary incidents. An example of our findings: Of the 28 students who were placed in the Z category (skill-deficient) during their 9th grade year in 1985, 24 remained in the Z track as 12th graders, 3 had been transferred to our continuation school, and 1 had dropped out of school. Those who remained in our school had a composite GPA of 1.17 on a 4.0 scale.

Brainstorm implications of the practice. We now initiated discussions, both formal and informal, in which all interested faculty members had the opportunity to present their insights and judgments related to the practice of achievement-level tracking. Early in the process I had stated that, regardless of the weight of external evidence and research aligned against achievement-level tracking, we would retain our prevailing local practice if a case could be made that the practice was contributing to the attainment of our local goals. But the data we had gathered on the achievement levels of our students made it quite clear to all of us that achievement-level tracking was counterproductive to the attainment of our goals. Our general feeling was that if the goal of achievement-level tracking was to assure that our Y- and Z-level students *would not* be successful, we had succeeded admirably!

Discuss and decide on potential changes in practice. It was only at this point, after achievement-level tracking had been slowly and systematically discredited, that we began serious conversations regarding substantive changes in that practice. Then, without undue fuss, we decided to eliminate achievement-level tracking—the X, Y, and Z designations ceased to exist. We instituted a heterogeneous system of student scheduling in their place.

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We retained our Advanced Placement programs, but with open enrollment. Students formerly identified as being Z-level were hand-scheduled into English and social studies classes to avoid the possibility that computer scheduling would, by chance, re-track certain sections. In addition, we initiated a before-school tutorial support system open to any student who wanted extra help.

A Shared Commitment to Change

This six-step process helped our teachers be the pivotal players in evaluating the practice of tracking. When they found that the practice was counterproductive to our school and departmental goals, the process allowed them to dismantle it and design a new approach. The teachers felt their professionalism respected and their prerogatives protected; they emerged from the process with a sense of shared ownership in and commitment to the change. Obviously, such a process takes time. But if the changes that result from the process prove to be substantive and enduring, the time will be well spent. □

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