

Another view regarding middle school reform

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By Gary Klein

As a member of the Middle School Advisory Council (MSAC), Stamford Public School parent and graduate, and member of Stamford Residents for Excellence in Education (www.stamfordree.org), I carefully read Dr. Starr's Jan. 10 article. Stamford Public School parents all support Dr. Starr's goals of giving all children access to a rich, standards-based curriculum and seeing all children perform at the highest level. Moreover, everyone who lives in Stamford appreciates and respects diversity and is proud of our community's history of integration and inclusion. However, Dr. Starr continually asserts that anyone who disagrees with a few of the specifics of his plan is somehow "against reform" or wants to thwart children from succeeding. This is a troubling rhetorical device that attempts to paint those of us who support the vast majority of the reforms (while disagreeing with a few aspects) as against having all children succeed.

The Middle School Reform program has many positive attributes, namely the adoption of a standardized, enhanced, standards-based curriculum, the elimination of tracking, the grouping of students in different academic disciplines at different levels based on their abilities, and the standardization of the placement process. I support de-tracking and equal access to the highest level of instruction for all students.

While I support many of the changes and believe that the system required reform, I (and some other members of MSAC) do not "resoundingly support" all of the changes or the eventual move to total non-ability-based placement that Dr. Starr hints is coming. Some members of MSAC do support the current program. However, many members of MSAC are teachers and administrators who report to Dr. Starr and are understandably unwilling to criticize aspects of the plan publicly. Moreover, Dr. Starr's senior staff hand-picked the members of MSAC. MSAC has not been working for two years. MSAC first convened in February 2009 and Dr. Starr announced sweeping changes in May 2009. Dr. Starr instituted the changes without piloting them, or having a Board of Education debate or vote. If these changes are as important as Dr. Starr states (as I believe), then Dr. Starr should have piloted the changes and offered the elected Board of Education and the public a chance to debate and approve them. Now, with this "revolutionary" reform in place for just a short time, Dr. Starr is declaring success and pushing for more unspecified reforms without comprehensive honest feedback, open debate or parental input.

There are several problems with the administration's new program that jeopardize our children's education.

First and most important, the new program's "college preparatory" level, which consists of 70 to 80 percent of the children, has an unreasonably broad spectrum of ability squeezed into one class. In a college preparatory language arts class for example, teachers must simultaneously instruct students who scored a 4 (the second highest and at or above grade level) on the CMT at the same time they teach students who scored a 1 (the lowest, and far below grade level). Common sense dictates that in such a set-up, the teacher will either have to (1) leave those lower-performing kids behind to keep the higher-performing kids moving according to the curriculum, which is terrible for the lower-performing kids; or (2) focus on the needs of the lower-performing kids, which will leave those higher-scoring children bored and neglected.

Second, throughout the debate, Dr. Starr has refused to acknowledge the significant research, including that of scholars from the University of Michigan, Northwestern, the Brookings Institution and others, which indicates that flexible ability grouping (not tracking) is best for all students.

Third, Dr. Starr ignores success in Stamford and looks to outside dissimilar communities for guidance, such as Rockville Center, which spends approximately 25 percent more per student than Stamford and is able to have enrichment classes with fewer than 10 students per class. At Westover, ability grouping for math and reading has consistently produced the best CMT scores in Stamford for all CMT racial, ethnic, and socio-economic sub-groups.

Unlike Dr. Starr, the GE Foundation, or the "Center for School Change" who do not live or send their kids to school here, I "walk the walk," having graduated from our schools and by sending my children to our schools. I live the "progressive and bold approach to confronting social issues" that Dr. Starr rightfully applauds. Had I not valued Stamford's progressive approach, I would not live here or enroll my children in our schools, just like Dr. Starr, most of his staff, and most of the Middle School principals, who do not live here or send their kids to our schools. When Dr. Starr announced the roll out of Middle School Reform at the May 2009 meeting of MSAC, he proudly claimed "this is not about who sits next to who in class, this is about challenging every child." I agree with him. Yet Dr. Starr's article, especially the last few paragraphs, implies that no matter what the educational outcome, we need to stop teaching children at the appropriate ability levels and lump kids together regardless of ability because "it's the right thing to do."

In fact, the "right thing to do" is challenge every child at the highest level. The best way to do this is to group children by ability in core classes such as reading and math, so that their teachers can appropriately tailor instruction to the students' needs. That does not mean tracking students and locking students on a path to failure. Moreover, it does not mean lumping children of all abilities together for all classes as Dr. Starr hints is what is coming next. Rather, it means grouping children by ability on a flexible basis, moving children up and down as appropriate to their level of success, and focusing on educational excellence.

Tracking is bad. Recognizing students' abilities and tailoring teaching so that every child is challenged is the right approach. A move to placing students without regard to their needs and abilities (which is what Dr. Starr hints is the next phase of his plan) is a grave mistake that our children will pay for over the long term. Rather than radicalizing and politicizing the reform process, we should focus on educational excellence. As Dr. Starr's slogan for the school system states, "Excellence is the Point!"

Gary Klein is a Stamford resident and member of the Middle School Advisory Council.