

Advocate's editorial was wrong on the issue of ability grouping

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By Georgiana D. White

So now The Advocate has weighed in on the debate of how best to teach the youth of Stamford, and with typical arrogance, declares the discussion over. With a tone of condescension and palpable disdain, it labels all those who disagree "misguided" ("Don't backtrack on school reform," editorial, Nov. 12). As one of the misguided, I beg enlightenment. What exactly guides you besides Superintendent Starr's mantra of "reform" and "moving forward" which you echo with giddy pride?

I may be mistaken, but I infer from your editorial you embraced your conclusion that ability grouping must go with little more than Dr. Starr's assurance that he is right. You offer little of substance to convince us of its validity. What insight, experience and knowledge do you bring to the argument you declare to have won? Had the editors taught in Stamford? Did they even attend Stamford schools? Did they assemble groups of teachers and school administrators to discuss the various and complex issues involved and listen with open minds?

Most revealing is the fact that you misrepresent the educational system in Stamford. Stamford does not have a tracking system it has an ability grouping system. You use the terms interchangeably as if they were sparkplugs. The difference is essential, not semantic. Tracking is best understood if we examine the old New York system wherein, relatively early in their education, students chose the Regents or non-Regents track (commercial

or vocational). The course of studies clustered appropriate subjects toward the goal of a Regents or non-Regents diploma. Students did change tracks, but with difficulty. Ability grouping, on the other hand, is based on the effort to take every student from where he is to a point where he can be successful in a higher group. Fluidity is crucial to ability grouping. I taught in the Stamford high schools for 34 years, and I was English Department chair for 24 years. As teacher and department head, I personally moved hundreds of students to different groups. I know of any number of students who as ninth graders were in a low-achieving group and graduated from a college preparatory class. I daresay, had we placed them in that class any earlier, they may well have failed. And success and achievement -- with resultant confidence -- are what motivate "upward" movement.

Unlike The Advocate, which seems to prefer the private wisdom of the current superintendent of schools, I spoke to many current staff, and at a recent reunion of 28 of my former colleagues -- teachers of different disciplines, guidance counselors, principals, supervisors -- asked their opinion. Not one said ability grouping should be abandoned. (Please note, Mr. Buchetto, a middle school teacher, was not one I canvassed -- and, granted, he expresses an opposing view in the Nov. 15 letter to the editor, "All mixed up.")

Dr. Starr's "reform" is rather like using a well-performing car as a parts shop for an auto that is disabled. Most probably, the best you will achieve is damage to the working vehicle and the possibility of a running substitute vehicle. But why not fix both? Why is this always couched in an either/or choice? Let me be clear: Ability grouping has flaws and needs change, refinement and adjustment, such as greater fluidity between groups, smaller groups for students needing individual attention and closer adherence to individual learning styles. To have successful students tutor those having difficulty is a wonderful idea. As advisor to the National Honor Society, I insisted each member devote hours to this service, and I have long been an advocate of a community service requirement for graduation.

But this activity should not be a substitute for the learning and growth of accomplished students. We show greater respect for sports in that we establish teams and leagues to match the level of performance. Examine the NEASC accreditation reports of the high schools to identify areas for improvement. Ask the classroom teachers and school administrators what needs to be changed. Foster improvement not mere change. By the way, at that luncheon of retired educators alluded to earlier, I heard repeatedly, "Don't worry. Doing away with ability grouping was tried before. They'll see it doesn't work and go back to it." But I do worry about students in school now. The cure for cancer may be in one of those remarkable heads. Do we really want that student waiting for the rest of the class to grasp fundamentals before he is challenged to acquire new knowledge and insights?

When will Stamford learn that not all radical change is progress, and that "different" isn't necessarily "better"? When will The Advocate?

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