Potential Pitfalls of Systemic Reform: Early Lessons from Research on Detracking

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Using findings and emerging themes from their three-year study of 10 racially mixed schools, the authors discuss the potential pitfalls of systemic reform in education. They argue that the goal of creating centralized standards, curricular frameworks, and tests while encouraging decentralized decision making and local control is likely to backfire because the micropolitics of more autonomous schools will prohibit educators from the equalizing opportunities to learn within schools.

The enactment of the federal Goals 2000: Educate America Act in March 1994 ushered in the era of "systemic reform" in education. Goals 2000 was designed to create *centralized* standards, curricular frameworks, and assessment programs while encouraging *decentralized* decision making through which local schools design and implement strategies for teaching the frameworks and meeting the standards for students outcomes. More specifically, the federal government was to set voluntary national standards that would be reflected in state standards and frameworks and measured by state examinations. At the same time, schools and their communities were to be granted the autonomy to implement the frameworks as they saw fit while being held accountable for student outcomes as measured against the standards, frameworks, and tests (O'Day and Smith 1993).

Since the fall 1994 congressional election and the rise in antigovernmental political rhetoric, the role of the federal government and its voluntary national standards in systemic reform have been called into question. As a result, more emphasis has been placed on state standards as the accountability measures, although political battles over the content and purpose of these standards have also erupted (see, for example, Archer 1996). As efforts to create agreed-on centralized standards have increasingly been attacked, efforts to decentralize decision making and goverance continue to accelerate and have led to a proliferation of deregulated and more autonomous schools, such as charter schools. Thus, the future of the standards movement seems far more fragile than the future of enhanced local control.

Still, proponents of the systemic reform strategy of simultaneous centralization and decentralization believe that freeing schools of bureaucratic constraints while ensuring that all students meet the same high standards will create more equal opportunities across schools and districts. Yet when the federal legislation was first proposed, many educators, researchers, and advocates (see for example, Darling-Hammond 1992) argued that efforts to hold all schools accountable on the basis of standards and student outcomes were being cast onto an uneven playing field in which some schools would be less able to provide students with opportunities to learn the curricular content reflected in the state tests. To address these concerns, policymakers expanded the federal legislation to include voluntary opportunity-to-learn standards against which students' access to educational resources and high-quality instruction or practices could be assessed.

States that developed "improvement plans" and received a portion of the $400 million in federal funding for Goals 2000 included opportunity-to-learn strategies comparable to the voluntary national opportunity-to-learn standards (Lewis 1994; U.S. Department of Education 1994).

But many observers are concerned that states' opportunity-to-learn strategies will be insufficient to overcome the existing inequalities in the educational system and will remain of secondary importance to the central political forces that drive systemic reform efforts, namely, the educational standards movement and the push to deregulate local school districts. Furthermore, opportunity-to-learn standards have consistently been discussed in relation to equality across schools, but little attention has been paid to equal opportunities for students to learn within schools.

QUESTIONS ABOUT SYSTEMIC REFORM

Sociological research raises important questions about systemic reform, particularly the potential effects of opportunity-to-learn standards within a system of decentralized educational governance. For instance, sociologists have demonstrated how cultural and political forces, similar to those that re-create inequalities in the larger society, are easily reproduced at the micro, or local, level when schools and their communities are granted the authority to implement reforms as they see fit. Most federal and state policymakers choose to ignore past lessons of "local control" in American education and the history of how, in our once highly decentralized system, Whites were free to deny African American and Latino students access to knowledge and high-quality educational programs. Sociologists must remind policymakers and the public that many of the "regulations" and the resultant centralization of educational decision making over the past 30 years—especially federal legislation and court orders—were designed to address unequal access in locally controlled schools. We must also keep a carefully watch, in this era of decentralization, over the opportunities provided to students who have traditionally suffered in systems of local control.

According to Wise (1982), the centralization of educational policy in the 1960s and 1970s was designed, in part, to address equity issues and to overcome problems, such as segregation or the rights of disadvantaged students, that the local schools were unwilling or unable to solve. Wise argued that these "equity problems" of access to resources and programs should not be decentralized to the local level because "community control and citizen participation tend to serve the dominant political interests within the community" (p. 209). It is unlikely, he said, that in a system of decentralized governance, the interests of minority students will be well served: "There is no reason to believe that local officials would not revert to their former discriminatory behavior" (p. 205).

At the same time, Wise contended that "productivity problems," such as teaching and instruction, should not be centralized to the federal or state level because educators will resist efforts to overrationalize their behavior and place important professional pedagogical decisions in the hands of distant bureaucrats. Obviously, Wise wrote before efforts to develop national standards were under way, but it is interesting that in the 1990s, systemic reform appears to be doing the opposite of what he called for by centralizing curricular standards, which affect instruction, while decentralizing many equity and student-access issues through parental-choice plans and charter schools.

According to Elmore (1993:51), the central policy issue is not whether to centralize or decentralize educational governance but, rather, "how much influence of what kind any given level of government should exert over what factors." Both Wise and Elmore are concerned about the tension between local, more parochial interests versus the broader interests of the common good. According to Wise (1982:209), "the polity to which the schools must be responsible is larger than the polity which is represented in the schools' community."

LITERATURE ON TRACKING

One area of sociological and educational research that provides particularly valuable insights into the issues of local control and within-school opportunity-to-learn standards is the literature on tracking and detracking. Researchers have found that rigid tracking persists in schools throughout the country even though many educators and policymakers acknowledge that students in the low and middle tracks are not held to high enough standards and thus are not adequately prepared for either college or the transition to work. In trying to understand the persistence of tracking practices, researchers have examined various factors that contribute to their reproduction and regeneration, including educators' beliefs about the purpose of education; teachers' expectations for various students; the organizational structure of and distribution of resources within schools; and the social construction of race, social class, and ability (Gamoran 1987; Labaree 1986; Oakes 1985, 1987, 1990; Rosenbaum, 1986; Rosenholtz and Simpson 1984).

Some of the most recent research on tracking has described the complex but subtle interplay among the technical or structural characteristics of schools as organizations, the cultural norms that permeate those organizations and create a school climate, and the political inequality in local school communities that allows some parents and students to "work the system." Woven together, these structural, cultural, and political factors create and re-create profound advantages for only the most politically and socially powerful students and families even when educators are committed to making the educational experiences of all students more meaningful (Oakes and Guiton 1995). For instance, even when the tracking system in a school is less rigid and educators state that students have choices and free will to take higher-level classes, the technicalities of scheduling teachers and students, the norm-driven beliefs of educators regarding the ability of some students, and the lack of personal efficacy or political clout of certain students and parents lead to a messy perpetuation of the existing separate and unequal system (Oakes and Guiton 1995; Useem 1991).

In this body of literature on tracking and in the emerging research on schools' attempts to dismantle track structures lie many lessons about structural, cultural, and political obstacles to the implementation of world-class standards for all students in a decentralized system of more local control. For instance, in our study of 10 racially mixed secondary schools that are in the process of "detracking," or moving toward more heterogeneous (in terms of prior achievement) groupings of students, we see many parallels between the national standards movement and the efforts of some educators in these schools to create greater access to the most valued classes and curriculum for all students. Although national and state standards represent the macrolevel policy that is designed to increase all students' exposure to high-status knowledge and high-quality education, our research on the local community and within-school context of detracking reform presents a microlevel perspective on a similar educational change. Thus, although they occur at different policy levels, efforts to ensure that all students achieve according to world-class standards are not philosophically different from many detracking efforts, in which schools do away with their low-track remedial classes and try to give low-achieving students greater access to the most rigorous classes.

More specifically, we think it would be helpful for policymakers to gain a better understanding of local political resistance to reforms aimed at giving low-income and non-White students access to high-status knowledge and for them to consider how this resistance is related to cultural domination and inequality in our highly stratified society. Furthermore, policymakers must realize that such resistance at the local level will be difficult to counteract in a highly decentralized system. When school-level educators and parents are "empowered" through decentralization to make important educational decisions, politi-

cally powerful groups who resist reforms, such as high standards for all students, will have a greater impact (Elmore 1993; for accounts of the political backlash against the standards movement, see Diegueller 1995).

STUDY OF DETRACKING

Our three-year, multiple-site case study of schools that are detracking was guided by a straightforward research question: What happens when someone with power in a racially mixed secondary school decides to reduce ability grouping or tracking? The schools in our study vary in size from more than 3,000 to fewer then 500 students. Geographically, they are all over the map; one is in the Northeast, three are in the Midwest, one is in the South, two are in the Northwest, and three are in various areas of California. Different schools include significant mixes of White, African American, Latino, Native American-Alaska Native, and Asian students.

We visited each of these 10 schools three times over a two-year period. Data collection during our site visits consisted of in-depth, semistructured interviews with administrators; teachers; students; parents; and community leaders, including members of the school board. We also observed classrooms and meetings of the faculty, Parent-Teacher Association, and school board. Finally, we reviewed documents and wrote field notes about our observations in the schools and the communities. Once the data were collected, we carefully organized them according to themes that emerged from the voices in the field.

Two Emerging Themes

Two central themes emerged from our research that are particularly relevant to discussions of systemic reform: parents' demand for differentiation and the stratified higher education system.

Demand for differentiation. Local reform efforts to implement high standards for all students and to provide greater access to a curriculum as rigorous as that offered in high-track classes will reach a tipping point, beyond which efficacious parents of high-achieving or identified "gifted" students will demand greater differentiation between what their children learn and what is offered to other students. For example, in the schools we are studying, parents of high-track students frequently complain about efforts to offer the advanced curriculum to all students. Generally, they want to know what their children will "get" that other students will not have access to. As one parent put it when a principal announced that the advanced curriculum would be offered to everyone in heterogeneous classes, "What else is my child going to get? Because if this [the advanced curriculum] is the base, . . . he's supposed to get something extra." Another inquired, "If my kid's in Advanced English next to her kid, what's my kid going to get next, for my kid is GATE [identified gifted and talented]?" In another reforming school, a parent of a high-track student demanded of the principal, "What are you going to offer them that takes them to the cutting edge of education? My kid's gotta be on the cutting edge!"

These quotes illustrate what we call the "demand for differentiation" that we have found in all the schools we are studying. These demands most often come from politically powerful parents who have a great deal of authority in locally controlled schools. Furthermore, parental resistance to policies aimed at significantly improving opportunities for students in lower-level classes generally plays out along racial, social class, and cultural lines, with White and/or wealthy, well-educated, and politically powerful parents pressuring administrators of schools and districts to maintain separate and unequal classes for their children, leaving non-White and poorer students in classes that are, by definition, less challenging and meaningful.

Unlike the more blatantly racist parents of an earlier generation, who resisted school desegregation policies because they did not want their children in schools with "colored" children, these influential parents are more subtle and savvy in their resistance to detracking efforts that lead to desegregation within schools. They couch their opposition to

detracking mainly in terms of the low-track students' "behavior"—lack of motivation to learn, lack of commitment to school or interest in higher education, tendency to act out, and so forth—without making the connection between these behaviors and the low-track students' "penetration" of an unequal and hierarchical system in which they are at the bottom (Apple, 1985; Willis 1979).

Politically powerful parents of the students who have succeeded and even excelled in the current system are often able to maintain the status quo, despite educational research that suggests that a new system could better serve all students. These powerful parents demand something in return for their commitment to public education—for keeping their children in public schools, as opposed to fleeing to the private schools that many could afford.

The principal of a suburban high school with a student population that is 25 percent low-income African American and 75 percent White and middle- to upper-middle class stated emphatically that he had gone as far as he could with detracking after he had simply removed the lowest of many tracks. Any further effort, he argued, would upset "most of the really supportive parents of this district—who support with their money, and their time, and their influence." Almost all these "really" supportive parents are White and well educated.

What does this political behavior tell us about efforts to implement national standards in a decentralized educational system? Perhaps policymakers should consider how a more decentralized educational governance system could exacerbate unequal access to a high-status curriculum as more politically powerful parents advance their "private interests"—what they believe is good for their children—often at the cost to what is a good reform for the school as a whole (Fine 1993; Oakes 1993). As Elmore (1993: 38) pointed out, advocates of centralizing reforms accuse decentralizers of "making public education the private preserve of narrow, parochial often corrupt constituencies that are less concerned with general improvement than their own concern."

Meanwhile, research has demonstrated that less-educated parents, particularly those who have not succeeded in the educational system themselves, often feel alienated from schools and the governance process (Comer 1984). Under a decentralized educational governance structure, certain parents, not only low-income and less-educated parents, but those with limited proficiency in English, could easily be shut out of the local political process while more powerful parents, who often resist reforms that give students greater access to high-status classes, will play a larger role (Delgado-Gaitan 1991; Useem 1991).

Lewis and Nakagawa (1995) argued that in implementing an "empowerment model" of parent involvement, policymakers must take into account the existing relationships between parents and schools. In their research on the Chicago School Reform Act, which places parents in decision-making positions on school-site councils, they found that many parents accept the authority relationships inherent in the bureaucratic structure of the schools and thus simply support the decisions of the educators instead of pushing for reforms that could improve the learning of students whom educators have not served in the past. Therefore, we are concerned about the impact of decentralization on the political empowerment of parents in schools in low-income communities, as well as the empowerment of low-income or non-English-speaking parents whose children attend schools in wealthier communities.

Although the political theory behind decentralization efforts states that local control will necessarily enliven the political process by empowering those who were previously disempowered, Cohen (1990) contended that instead, political agencies will expand and gain more power, which will make it difficult for low-income minority communities to take advantage of new political opportunities.

In the 10 schools we are studying, educators are keenly aware of local resistance to change and the political power of those parents who want to maintain a rigidly tracked system of high

standards for only a few. For example, in one middle school, parents have succeeded in halting any further reforms. After a skirmish with an ad hoc advocacy group for separate programs for gifted children whose members call themselves "the gatekeepers," the faculty decided not to submit its restructuring plan for a large state grant because they viewed it as too "bold" and "radical." The plan retained tracking in the eighth grade to help prepare students for the cold realities of senior high school. But it included a proposal to create small, heterogeneous teams of teachers and students for seventh graders, on the assumption that this structure might ease the difficult transition between elementary and secondary school. The principal later reflected:

> As I look back at it now, I would never, ever, make such a radical change. . . . I thought everybody would think just like I did, that it would just make sense. It was so democratic and fair. And when I look back at it now, I think how could I have been so stupid? How could I have thought that there were people out there who would not want the good for everybody? I mean, I was very idealistic. . . . It never dawned on me that people had a vested interest.

Educators who are committed to change often try to straddle the fence between pleasing powerful parents and giving low-achieving students greater access to a high-quality curriculum by reducing the number of tracks and trying to move everyone up in the system. The problem with this strategy is that it reproduces a hierarchical structure supported by a culture that values the knowledge and life experiences of some students more than others, rather than by dismantling the track structure.

This strategy allows White and wealthy parents to maintain separate classrooms for their children and any lower-income or non-White students who "act white and wealthy," which means that they buy into the dominant culture's view of the educational system as fair and meritocratic. This persistent tracking structure, albeit with fewer and ostensibly "higher" tracks, drives ongoing curricular differentiation, which leads to unequal expectations and inevitably to unequal standards for students of different racial, social class, and cultural backgrounds.

This is not to say that we "blame" individual parents for their responses to detracking efforts. These parents are enmeshed in a broader structure and culture that rewards their political agency. But we do believe that efforts to incorporate world-class national standards into the existing structure, culture, and political reality of American public schools will most likely produce similar results, especially when weak opportunity-to-learn standards ignore within-school inequalities (see Beck 1994). If such standards are implemented, educators will be trapped between centralized standards and local control, between a philosophy of high standards for all students and the reality of powerful parents who insist on separate and unequal classrooms.

The stratified higher education system. The second emerging theme from our study that relates to systematic reform has to do with the higher education system and how it forces high schools to differentiate between various courses and, ultimately, the students in those courses. In the schools in our study, we have seen that the demands of competitive, high-status universities and politically powerful parents who want their children to attend these institutions drive elementary and secondary school teachers to use differentiated credentials as exchange value for students in separate and distinct tracks.

Given that the parents who are the most likely to influence curricular policy making at the school level are generally those who are college educated themselves, the symbiotic relationship between tracking and stratification at the secondary level and the college-admissions process again perpetuates the intergenerational transmission of advantage. Parents who have attended college, particularly high-status schools, have a clear understanding of what their children's high school transcripts should look like to ensure admission to the colleges of their choice (McDonaugh 1994). For example, in several of the

senior high schools we are studying, parents believe that the College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) courses, with strict entrance requirements and an academically rigorous, test-driven curriculum, are essential for making their children competitive for slots in the best colleges. These parents bolster their support for these courses on economic grounds—as a way to cut high tuition costs at elite colleges by allowing bright students to earn college credits while they are still in high school—although the educators and parents we spoke to admit that few students actually shorten their college stays because of their AP credits. Still, this parental pressure for more AP courses overrides the concerns of educators at these schools, who complain that the AP curriculum neither provides students with access to the most engaging subject matter nor involves them in inquiry-based learning experiences that are consistent with high standards.

Thus, the call for higher standards for all students, like efforts to detrack in secondary schools, butts against external forces that are far more politically powerful in our society than any desire of a group of educators to equalize opportunities for students. As Clinchy (1994) and a growing number of critics of higher education have pointed out, colleges drive an extremely competitive educational system in which winners and losers are identified as early as kindergarten and the scholastic sorting and elimination process does its "best to fix every child's place in later life and excludes much of the population from the groves of higher academe" (Clinchy: 747). Clinchy also noted that this "intellectual oligarchy" will endure as long as colleges continue to focus on standardized test scores and letter or numerical high school grades in the conventional subjects when making admissions decisions.

Colleges send strong signals to the elementary and secondary school systems that they want high school graduates' credentials differentiated as much as possible—by school rankings, by class rankings, by honors courses or AP credits, and by weighted and nonweighted grade-point averages—to make their job of sorting and selecting that much easier. Rarely do parents or educators in grades K-12 find themselves in a position to question the set of assumptions that guide the criteria the colleges use to determine the various exchange rates given to weighted high school credentials. "In this way, our institutions of higher education are thus able to keep all of our lower schools in thrall to their disconnected, decontextualized educational mission" (Clinchy 1994:747).

In one of the schools in our detracking study, the principal insists on adding more and more AP courses to the curriculum and then tries (although he has not yet been successful) to push more African American students "up" into those classes. This principal works closely with the powerful White parents in the community and talks frequently about his fear of White flight. Meanwhile, teachers in this school comment on the pedagogical problems inherent in teaching AP classes. The economics teacher compared his regular economics class to his AP class and noted that the students in the regular class learn more because they can work creatively on stock market and investment projects while the AP students are simply trying to memorize facts and figures that they will most likely forget shortly after the AP examination.

Time and time again, educators in the schools we are studying told us that the admissions process of the higher education system drives their tracking structure and forces them to offer courses, such as AP, that fly in the face of more creative, interdisciplinary ways of thinking about learning and instruction. These more creative teaching techniques go hand in hand with detracking efforts.

It is easy to guess how the new national standards will fare in the college application process. How can they be "world class" when more advantaged students will quickly deflate their value by setting a new, higher standard for those on the top of the pecking order? Policymakers need to have a better understanding of the complexity of the system into which they are pouring their solution to mediocrity in education. If K-12 education stood alone, autonomous

from the local political pressures of powerful parents whose demands are driven, in part, by the often shortsighted and poorly conceived requirements of a highly competitive and stratified higher education system, then the idea of national standards that are gracefully imposed on decentralized schools with opportunity-to-learn strategies would seem feasible.

Given what sociological and educational research has already demonstrated about the "systemic" nature of the barriers to high standards for all students, it is clear that efforts to "detrack" the highly stratified K-12 system via higher standards for undereducated students will require restructuring of the entire pre-K-16 system. It will also mean that decentralization and greater local control may have to be partly sacrificed to the need for district, state, or federal intervention on behalf of students who are denied access to high-status curricula and opportunities to learn in their schools.

CONCLUSION

Policymakers can learn from sociological research that raising standards for all students is a huge challenge, not only for the educators who teach these students, but for our highly unequal society. On the basis of early lessons from our study on detracking, we know that parents of high-achieving students and college educators and administrators need to become part of the solution to the undereducation of students in the lowest-level classes and lowest-status high schools. Until these parents reconceptualize the issue, not as a zero-sum game in which one student's gain is another student's loss, but as an issue of helping more students achieve to their highest potential, there will be little movement to dismantle the current hierarchical, competitive structure in which only a handful of students are held to high standards. Until the higher educational system can ensure parents that this less hierarchical system is, in fact, the reality, world-class standards will remain beyond the reach of all but the "chosen few" who were placed at birth on the top tier of our stratified social structure.

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