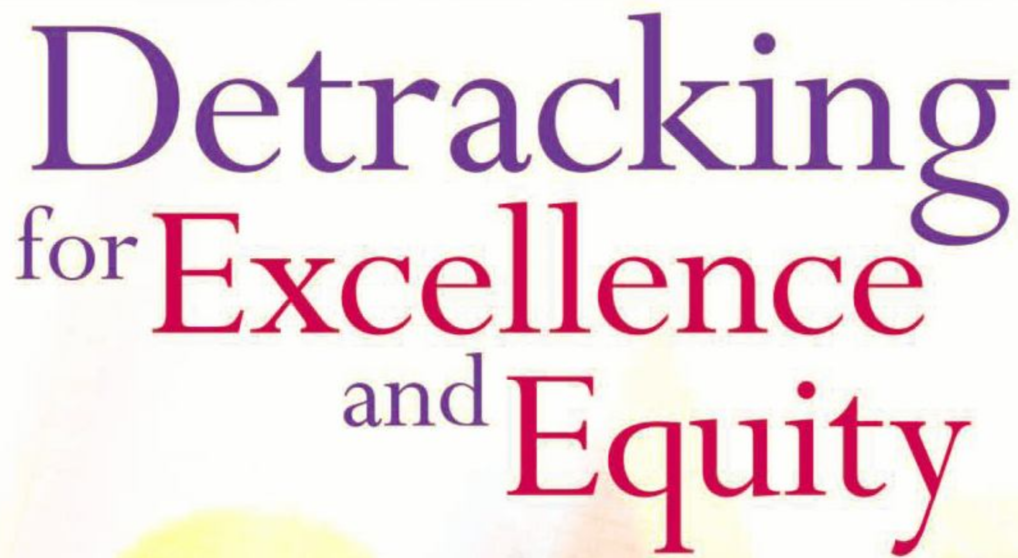
Detracking for Excellence and Equity



Carol Corbett Burris
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Foreword

by Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton

There was a time when few policymakers, educators, or members of the public presumed that all school children could reach the same level of standards-based proficiency. Indeed, schools, districts, states, and the federal government promoted the idea that different children should strive for different levels of accomplishment. That has changed.

Today's standards-based education reforms and the No Child Left Behind act require all children to reach proficiency. Furthermore, official policies and rhetoric encourage the highest levels of achievement—going far beyond the lowest tolerable definitions of "proficiency." And yet, ability grouping and tracking remain robustly persistent in schools, even though no other schooling practice leaves children behind more systematically. The result is that countless children will not reach even the low proficiency thresholds many states have set.

In the face of standards-based reform, many but by no means all policymakers, researchers, and educators have proposed eliminating tracking. Such recommendations have been bolstered by research, including the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, which concluded in 1998 that tracking "fails to provide satisfactory achievement for either average or advanced students," and by research syntheses, such as that by the National Research Council in 1999 documenting strong negative

effects of low-track classes (Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Schmidt, 1998). The evidence runs deep that tracking is rife with problems and that *detracking*, if allowed to proceed, is good for students. Nevertheless, educators, parents, and others have worried that there are no well-defined alternatives to tracked schools. At every turn, skeptics have warned that heterogeneous classes will either leave slower students behind or force quicker ones to wait. Less often acknowledged is a widespread fear that racial diversity in classrooms will have a negative impact on standards and rigor.

Carol Corbett Burris and Delia T. Garrity put such concerns to rest. Here in this book is evidence that heterogeneous grouping can foster high achievement and diminish racial and socioeconomic gaps. The detracking reform of the Rockville Centre School District resulted in the near-elimination of the district's racial achievement gap and South Side High School being named a U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon School of Excellence. In addition, the school is consistently listed as one of *Newsweek* magazine's "100 Best High Schools in the United States." What's more, the considerable gains made by lower-income African Americans were not won at the "expense" of students from groups that had achieved well under the old three-track system. The traditionally high-achieving students in this mostly affluent suburban community also succeeded at much higher rates than before detracking began. In 2004, the overall Regents diploma rate increased to a remarkable 94 percent, with 30 percent of the graduating class also earning an International Baccalaureate diploma.

This is first and foremost a practical book that shows how educators can make detracking work and provides evidence to back up the approach recommended. Burris and Garrity make the detracking process clear without trivializing the need for hard work and long-range commitment. They stress that success springs from providing all students access to a rich and challenging "accelerated" curriculum, and then map a course for doing that, with chapters full of useful guidelines and examples. And they show how school leaders can engage teachers in developing, implementing, and sustaining constructivist, multidimensional, and differentiated instruction; these are the practices found most often only in high-track classes or in schools in wealthy neighborhoods.

The authors also make it clear that detracking is more than a straightforward curriculum reform or change in the school organization; it is the work of a career, not something to accomplish in the short term before moving on to the next challenge. Rockville Centre's detracking reform has taken years of steady and thoughtful work, with parallel attention to adults' and students' learning needs. The authors give due credit to the resources that allow them to support students who struggle academically, the well-qualified teaching staff, the school district's willingness to take risks, and parents who stood by the reform.

This support in the form of resources and people stemmed from a process more intricate than proffering a plainly described, research-supported good idea. The reform required careful cultural and political work. Those undertaking detracking must remain alert and watchful, aware of quickly arising challenges that are not lightly dismissed with evidence that school programs and organization are actually working for students.

The vigilance advocated in this book is both pragmatic and principled. The authors explain how detracking won't seem logical to either teachers or parents unless credible school leaders counter some deeply held cultural beliefs: that innate ability is more important than schooling, that only some students can benefit from accelerated instruction, and that the racial achievement gap is intractable. Challenges to these conventional beliefs must be brought into teachers' work as they revise the curriculum, design lessons, and develop assessments. Moreover, practices that challenge the conventions cannot be optional, but instead must be as inherent to the curriculum as subject-matter content. Far from being a "softer," more discretionary approach to instruction that some fear detracking will promote, the instructional timeline, designated content, and specified assessments are mandated.

Surely, the authors deserve our admiration and praise for their role in the astonishing accomplishments in Rockville Centre. But we think they deserve far more: recognition as examples for all educators and policymakers, who can follow their practical, realistic, and wise guidance and work toward improving education for all students.

Introduction

In September 1991, Ronnie entered South Side High School with the reputation of a struggling student. Not wanting to see Ronnie "frustrated" in college prep classes, his well-meaning counselor placed him in remedial reading and writing, general math, general science, and general social studies. The counselor also assumed that Ronnie would enjoy working with his hands, so wood shop was added to his program as an elective. The only Regents-level course* that Ronnie took was 9th grade Regents English.

The next year, Ronnie took general biology and consumer math—both courses represented the "low track"—as well as two college prep courses (Regents English and Regents social studies). However, when Ronnie failed the social studies course that year, he was demoted to the non-Regents track for both English and social studies in 11th grade, and he continued in low-track classes until he graduated. For this student, college prep was over.

Peter also entered South Side High School in 1991. Unlike Ronnie, who lived in the public housing project, Peter lived three blocks from the high school on an affluent avenue. In 9th grade he took Advanced Biology

*Regents courses are high school courses in New York State that follow a specified curriculum. Students take examinations at the end of each Regents course that, if passed, lead to a Regents diploma. The courses are generally regarded as college preparatory courses.

and Advanced Sequential II Mathematics, a geometry-based course. Because he had studied accelerated mathematics and science in the middle school, his senior year courses would include BC Calculus and International Baccalaureate (IB) Chemistry, Higher Level. While Ronnie pursued technology electives, Peter played in the school's woodwind ensemble. The two young men, who both attended the same middle school and lived in the same town, *may* have crossed paths in physical education classes, but they were unlikely to meet in any other class.

By September 2002, much had changed. In that year, Ronnie's neighbor, Tyrone, followed the same curriculum as Peter's next-door neighbor, Anna, including the 9th grade pre-IB English class. Because Tyrone's 8th grade test scores indicated that he would need academic assistance in English, he was assigned to a support class that met every other day. In the support class, his teacher worked with a small group of students to preteach and post-teach concepts from the challenging English 9 curriculum. Tyrone and Anna continued to follow this curriculum trajectory, and in 11th grade, both students took IB courses for English and history. Anna's elective courses were in art; Tyrone chose music. Both students declared themselves to be full International Baccalaureate diploma candidates in their junior year.

The advantages in the educational experiences of Tyrone over those of Ronnie are neither an example of extraordinary motivation nor the result of a gifted, young African American from a poor household having his talents uncovered by a caring mentor. They are not evidence of successful remediation, test prep, or improved preschool or reading programs. Rather, they are the result of a diverse suburban school district abandoning the practice of sorting and selecting students and choosing to put a rigorous curriculum in place for all students.

We believe that schools can improve if they are willing to re-examine and challenge traditional ideas about who should have access to the best curricula they offer. We believe that excellence and equity are compatible, and that schools that are willing to do the hard work of detracking with vigilance and care can effect remarkable improvements in learning for all students.

This book is intended to provide a guide for educators who are interested in understanding how schools can meet the challenge of providing both equity and excellence by eliminating the school-created structures that sort and select students, resulting in unequal educational opportunities. Throughout, we provide wisdom from our own experiences with tracking and detracking. We offer examples of the complexity of detracking reforms from the boardroom to the classroom, from meetings with teachers to meetings with parents. We share longitudinal data that demonstrate the efficacy of a detracking reform. Most important, we explain how schools can successfully undertake this complex reform that requires educators to examine and challenge their beliefs about intelligence, ability, and instruction. From our experiences as teachers, school leaders, and researchers, we have learned one simple truth: When a school community dismantles systems of educational stratification—whether they are called *tracking, ability grouping,* or *leveling*—remarkable benefits to students follow.