

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### COMMENTARY

## The Gifted Express, Now Leaving on Track 1

By Stephen L. Gessner

When I think of the No Child Left Behind Act, the image that comes to mind is of a train pulling out of the station and a gruff conductor grabbing any wandering children on the platform and stuffing them onboard. They were not left behind, but were they on the right train?

With the federal law's reauthorization pending, there has been much discussion of its strengths and weaknesses. Missing is a recognition that the metaphor chosen to describe the legislation—leaving no child behind in the journey through life—may contain much of the solution to underachievement in American education.

Some readers may, by virtue of my opening paragraph, guess where I'm going with this. For others, I need to give fair warning: There is a dirty word looming on the horizon, and that word is "tracking," by which I mean not the slotting of students into pre-ordained academic paths, but their grouping by ability across the curriculum.

The story of tracking's implementation in schools in the 1950s, and its later demise, starting in the 1980s, has been well documented. What has not is the poor research used to support its elimination. Tom Loveless, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, has created a cottage industry researching this topic, and has written a number of pieces that review the research on tracking. According to his analysis, studies show not only that tracking does no harm, but that it is, in fact, beneficial to students of all ability levels. Similarly, James Kulik, a University of Michigan researcher, has found that grouping by ability and adjusting the curriculum to the different aptitudes in each group enhances achievement for all students.

Tracking is like the wage and price controls initiated under President Nixon in the early 1970s: Their success produced their demise. Yet wage and price controls were a time-limited solution that could be discontinued when political and ideological pressure dictated. Tracking, on the other hand, is an ongoing solution to poor academic achievement that needs to be continued to be successful.

The abandonment of ability grouping has been particularly harmful to highly able students. These are the students who thrived in the advanced and accelerated classes that existed in a tracking system. In their report **"A Nation Deceived,"** Nicholas Colangelo, Susan Assouline, and Miraca Gross show how acceleration works to meet the needs of bright students. Though it can take many forms, what is fundamental is the placing of bright students with others of similar ability, according to the authors. The consequences of not providing such learning

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environments are examined by Jan and Bob Davidson in their book *Genius Denied*. Highly able students, they maintain, are as much “at risk” as any group targeted for help under NCLB.

The law makes no provisions for gifted students. Ironically, it does provide a definition of gifted learners that inadvertently acknowledges schools will not be able to serve them well: “Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.”

This recognition that schools cannot “ordinarily provide” the appropriate services and activities that gifted students need prompts the question: Why not? It is, of course, because the law is totally focused on proficiency—making sure that every student reaches a level of minimal achievement. While the goal of bringing up underachieving students is certainly a good one, NCLB stops there. It provides no support for those students who can and must go beyond mere proficiency.

Ability grouping has been replaced primarily by two other instructional strategies: cooperative learning and differentiation. These are approaches that have proven to be challenging for teachers to implement. Each requires a great deal of training and class preparation. Both need to be done extremely well to be successful. And both are, in effect, compromises. Schools adopted them because they wanted to offer some recognition of differing student-ability levels, while not separating students into different classes. As with many compromises, neither goal is being achieved.

**The No Child Left Behind Act provides no support for those students who can and must go beyond mere proficiency.**

These techniques—cooperative learning, in particular—have proven to be especially unsuccessful with high-ability students, as research by Johns Hopkins University’s Carol Mills and others has indicated.

So, let’s return to having many trains leaving the station, traveling at different speeds, and even heading for different destinations, but each with a team of conductors and crew members who understand their passengers’ needs and can meet them all. That way, no child will be left behind, because no child will be put on the wrong train.

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**Concerned Parent** wrote:

Bravo to Stephen L. Gessner for speaking the truth and pointing out what parents of gifted kids know all too well. Public schools which deny the abilities of gifted children and don't provide support for these students are hurting our kids and our country. Every child in this country is entitled to a free public education. It's only equitable that public education should work for all children. Parents of gifted kids pay the exact same amount in school taxes as everyone else but our kids are not served. How is that fair?

If one child on the track team was able to run faster than another we'd never tell the faster child to wait for the slower one. However, that's exactly what happens to gifted kids in most heterogeneous classrooms. Time after time, I have encountered educators who base educational decisions on outdated ideas that the research does not support. A system that denies these truths is broken and should be fixed.

1/23/2008 9:18 AM EST on EdWeek

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**catalyst** wrote:

Ability groupings help not only the very advanced, bright child. THEY help the slower child by allowing him/her to work at a speed that is best for that child. Forgetting the artificial notion of "self esteem," it is much better for a child to feel in control and able to master tasks at his own level, and not always play catch up and then give up.

1/23/2008 10:47 AM EST on EdWeek

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**Angela Wiseman** wrote:

I think that the important thing is that groups should be dynamic and not static. There are times that students need remediation and more support with certain issues. There are times that some students, who might not be successful in some subjects, are very knowledgeable in others. For instance, I knew a girl who was terrible at spelling but an incredible poet.

To take the running/track analogy further, there are certain people who are sprinters, long distance runners, etc. A primary responsibility of a teacher is to help children identify the kinds of learners they are and the knowledge they possess and extend it in a supportive learning situation.

1/23/2008 12:20 PM EST on EdWeek

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**Gordeets53** wrote:

Unfortunately, Mr. Gessner fails to consider some important elements of teaching and learning in his support of ability grouping.

I am a public school teacher in strong opposition to ability grouping.

First of all, we must carefully examine our definition of "gifted" if we are to group students. I see our labeled "gifted" students as those who are teacher-pleasers, have parent advocates, and are generally good students. In my 4+ years teaching, I have encountered only one or two truly gifted children. Parents believe that getting their children labeled "gifted" is in the best interest of their kids. This is debatable. Students learn best interacting with each other, and more academically able students will learn better when given opportunities to teach and lead in mixed-ability classrooms. I agree with Gessner--it is not easy for teachers to set up and manage classrooms in which students of all abilities thrive, but it is the ideal we should strive for.

Another HUGE problem with ability grouping is the effect it has on teacher expectations. Teachers, unfortunately, end up setting the bar much higher for the "gifted" students than other classes. Kids will generally meet expectations, whether they be high or low. The majority of students suffer if this structure of ability grouping is present to create conditions of differing expectations for student achievement.

In a traditional classroom, skill and drill, feeding facts to kids, of course the "gifted" kids will display higher levels of

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