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ABSTRACT

The results of a 2-year study examining the ways that four major urban school systems (New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston) sort students into different schools, tracks, ability groups, and grade levels are summarized in this report. The study looked carefully at the effects of these sorting practices on low-income, minority, limited English-proficient, handicapped, and low-achieving students (described as at risk). Three key systems were examined: (1) admissions to high school; (2) tracking and grouping within high schools; and (3) promotion and non-promotion from grade to grade. The overall effect of the 46 observed program and policy deficiencies was restriction of educational opportunities available to students, especially high risk students. Many so-called reforms proved to be nonbeneficial. For example, some schools increased graduation requirements without helping students meet the new standards. Others had abolished rigid tracking only to institute educational options programs that segregated students. A few recommendations are summarized, including the need for: (1) strengthening groups supporting equity; (2) analyzing the equity and effectiveness of student placement and labeling practices; (3) halting the development of additional options schools and programs; and (4) designing an effective strategy for implementing changes in current placement and labeling practices. (MLH)

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QUESTIONING THE NEW IMPROVED SORTING MACHINE

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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December 20, 1988

This summary of key findings from a study of student placement and labeling in four large school systems, coupled with key questions raised by the study that are designed to stimulate thinking among educators, parents, and concerned citizens, is based on *The New Improved Sorting Machine,* available from Designs for Change, 220 South State Street, Suite 1900, Chicago, Illinois 60604, 312-922-0317.

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Disappointing Results

While urban school systems can point to success stories of individual students, special school programs, or a few high-achieving schools, the overwhelming news from most systems is bad: high dropout rates and low academic achievement.

> Example: Even after 35% of the original class has dropped out, juniors and seniors in the New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston public schools fail to approach national averages on standardized tests.

> Example: In the eighteen Chicago high schools with the largest percentages of low-income students, 6,700 students entered in ninth grade, but only 300 both graduated and could read above the national average.

The dismaying results come from *The New Improved Sorting Machine*, a two-year study of the ways that four major urban school systems sort students into different schools, tracks, ability groups, and grade levels. The study, by Designs for Change, a Chicago-based education research and child advocacy group, looked carefully at the impact of these sorting practices on low-income students, minority students, students whose native language was not English, handicapped students, and students with poor academic performance. We use the term "students at risk" to describe these students. And we looked at their school experiences in four large cities: New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston.

We found that the sorting policies and practices of these school systems were often short-changing these students at risk—making them more likely to fail in school. Some of these problems grew out of recent changes. For example, some school systems were increasing their graduation requirements without providing these students with any effective help in meeting these new standards.

However, other harmful practices were of long-standing, and recent reforms had merely put a new face on long-standing inequities. For example, some school systems had abolished rigid tracks in the 1970s, but they continued to track students, for instance, by calling what used to be tracks "educational options programs."

What Will Restructuring Mean for Vulnerable Students?

Current calls for "restructuring" the public schools, especially those performing the worst, may foretell the next wave of reform. Yet, no clear consensus exists to define "restructuring." Because we have clearly documented the ways in which unfair sorting

practices persist for students at risk from one reform period to another, we want to spell out some of our key results and recommendations and urge you to think about how they might apply to your own situation.

Basic Facts About the Study

Our two year study has looked at three key systems for placing and labeling students:

- Admissions to high school, including admissions to the growing number of options high schools and programs
- Tracking and grouping within high schools, including programs and services intended to address special learning needs
- Promotion and non-promotion from grade to grade

We were interested both in how these sorting systems worked individually and how they combined with each other to either help or harm students, especially students at risk. The four school systems where we studied these issues were among the twenty-five largest in the country. Table 1 presents some basic information about their enrollment, size, and organization.

Each of the four systems in the study has made important changes in placement and labeling practices over the past decade. In fact, many placement and labeling practices have been the focus of intense controversy in the past ten years.

> Example: Options schools and programs had been hailed as a way to improve educational quality by giving students more choice, but critics of these options programs have argued that these new options were often available only to a select few.

> Example: New policies of strict promotion from grade to grade were hailed by some school superintendents as a way to raise standards and student achievement, but condemned by others who cited research which showed that flunking students did not raise their achievement and increased the chance that they would drop out of school.

The Study's Methods

To sort out such conflicting claims, we carried out more than 300 interviews, worked closely with researchers, school administrators, and child advocates in each city to understand their differing perspectives, and collected and analyzed a great deal of statistical

Table 1. BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT THE FOUR SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Types of High Schools	New York		Chicago		Philadelphia		Boston	
ENROLLMENT TOTAL	**931,768**	**100.0%**	**432,226**	**100.0%**	**196,660**	**100.0%**	**55,411**	**100.0%**
Black	355,763	38.2%	261,386	60.5%	124,790	63.5%	26,440	47.7%
White	212,137	22.8%	64,430	14.9%	48,752	24.8%	15,175	27.4%
Asian	54,287	5.8%	11,421	2.6%	5,521	2.8%	4,339	7.8%
Hispanic	308,906	33.2%	94,246	21.8%	17,362	8.8%	9,194	16.6%
Native American	675	0.1%	743	0.2%	235	0.1%	263	0.5%
Other	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
SCHOOLS	**911 schools**		**559 schools**		**242 schools**		**121 schools**	
High Schools	111 schools		64 schools		35 schools		17 schools	
Junior High/Middle Schools	178 schools		6 schools		39 schools		28 schools	
Elementary Schools	622 schools		489 schools		168 schools		76 schools	
DISTRICT ORGANIZATION	32 community districts. K-8/9, geographic; within boundary lines of the five boroughs (elected boards). 1 high school division 9-12 city-wide, with borough subdistricts.		20 districts K-8, geographic. 3 high school districts, geographic.		7 districts K-12, geographic.		5 districts, K-12. 4 geographic districts. 1 city-wide district containing all magnet and selective schools.	
SCHOOL COMMITTEE	7 members, 2 appointed by mayor and 5 by borough presidents.		11 members, appointed; nominating committee recommends to mayor.		9 members, appointed; nominating panel recommends to mayor.		13 members, elected; 4 at-large and 9 from geographic districts.	

data and reports about the four districts. Below, we briefly describe some of the study's key conclusions and recommendations.

Further, we want to make this summary as useful as possible to you as you consider the implications of the issues that we have raised for your own school system—whether you are a teacher, administrator, parent, or concerned citizen. Therefore, after each brief summary of a conclusion or recommendation, we ask one or two key questions designed to stimulate your thinking about how our results apply in your own situation. You might want to explore some of these questions systematically, by getting some hard data about them. Or you might simply want to mull them over and see what answers come from your own experience and what new ways of looking at your school system these questions suggest.

Findings: Admissions to High School

Selective and Non-Selective High Schools

1) Options Have Multiplied. Twenty years ago, almost all students in these four school systems attended neighborhood high schools. Yet today, each school system has dozens (in New York's case, hundreds) of options schools and programs, from Edward R. Murrow High School for Communications to Aviation High School to High School Redirection. And during eighth grade, students in these four cities, in theory, have the opportunity to choose among such options.

Q: What has been the history of options in your school system, and how many do you currently have?

2) Six Different Types of High Schools. To understand the high school options in these cities, as well as to understand the kind of schools being attended by those students who didn't make it into the options, we divided all the high schools in these cities into six types:

- Non-Selective Low-Income High Schools: neighborhood high schools serving large percentages of low-income students.
- Non-Selective Low- to Moderate-Income High Schools: neighborhood high schools serving substantial percentages of low-income students, but also some moderate income students.
- Non-Selective Moderate-Income High Schools: neighborhood high schools serving substantial percentages of middle-class students.
- Selective Vocational High Schools: vocational high schools that usually required at least average reading skills and good behavior.

- Selective Magnet High Schools: selective schools, often with a particular emphasis like communications or the arts, which are frequently very hard to get into.

- Selective Exam High Schools: the elite exam schools for the highest-achieving students.

Table 2 provides detailed information about the six types of high schools as they operate in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston.

Q: How do these six types of high schools fit with the different types you see in your own school system?

4) Options Programs Within Schools Also Growing. Within the past several years, the biggest expansion in high school options has occurred through the growth of options programs set up within existing high schools, which often offer educational programs similar to separate options high schools.

Q: What types of options programs within high schools exist in your school district?

5) Most Students Don't Get Admitted. Although some smaller school systems have moved toward giving everyone an educational choice, the options in these big cities leave many students out in the cold. For example, in spring 1984, New York eighth graders made 380,000 total choices of options schools and programs, but only 32,000 students received any choice.

Q: What percentage of students in your school system actually get to attend an options school or program if they want to?

6) Students At Risk Lose Out. Although there were some variations among cities and among different six types of schools, the three types of selective schools generally had fewer low income students, more white students, fewer black and Hispanic students, fewer students with attendance problems, fewer handicapped students, fewer students with limited English proficiency, fewer low-achieving students, and fewer students who had been held back in school than the average for their school systems. On the other hand, Non-Selective Low-Income High Schools served substantially more of these students at risk than the average for their school systems.

Q: Do your options schools consider all students who apply and use a lottery if there are an excess of applicants, or do they use various kinds of criteria to screen out many

Table 2. SIX TYPES OF HIGH SCHOOLS

Types of High Schools	New York	Chicago	Philadelphia	Boston
NON-SELECTIVE LOW-INCOME				
Number of Schools	25 schools	18 schools	7 schools	5 schools
Student Enrollment	62,391 students	28,614 students	11,718 students	4,356 students
% Total System Enrollment	24.4 %	25.8 %	20.4 %	26.4 %
Example	Theodore Roosevelt High School	DuSable High School	Franklin High School	Charlestown High School
NON-SELECTIVE LOW- TO MODERATE-INCOME				
Number of Schools	25 schools	18 schools	7 schools	4 schools
Student Enrollment	73,069 students	27,109 students	18,294 students	4,576 students
% Total System Enrollment	28.5 %	24.5 %	31.9 %	27.7 %
Example	Louis D. Brandeis High School	Lakeview High School	Overbrook High School	South Boston High School
NON-SELECTIVE MODERATE-INCOME				
Number of Schools	26 schools	18 schools	7 schools	4 schools
Student Enrollment	71,988 students	33,910 students	15,955 students	3,014 students
% Total System Enrollment	28.1 %	30.6 %	27.8 %	18.3 %
Example	Benjamin Cardozo High School	Kenwood Academy	Northeast High School	West Roxbury High School
NON-SELECTIVE SCHOOL TOTALS				
Number of Schools	**76 schools**	**54 schools**	**21 schools**	**13 schools**
Student Enrollment	**207,448 students**	**89,633 students**	**45,967 students**	**11,946 students**
% Total System Enrollment	**81.0 %**	**80.9 %**	**80.1 %**	**72.4 %**
SELECTIVE VOCATIONAL				
Number of Schools	9 schools	6 schools	4 schools	not
Student Enrollment	16,555 students	11,870 students	6,072 students	applicable
% Total System Enrollment	6.5 %	10.7 %	10.6 %	
Example	Aviation High School	Chicago Vocational High School	Dobbins Voc-Tech High School	
SELECTIVE MAGNET				
Number of Schools	9 schools	1 school	3 schools	not
Student Enrollment	19,295 students	2,497 students	1,977 students	applicable
% Total System Enrollment	7.5 %	2.3 %	3.4 %	
Example	Edward R. Murrow High School	Whitney Young High School	Carver High School for Engineering & Science	
SELECTIVE EXAM				
Number of Schools	4 schools	2 schools	3 schools	3 schools
Student Enrollment	12,689 students	6,775 students	3,363 students	4,545 students
% Total System Enrollment	5.0 %	6.1 %	5.9 %	27.6 %
Example	Bronx High School of Science	Lane Technical High School	Central High School	Boston Latin School
SELECTIVE SCHOOL TOTALS				
Number of Schools	**22 schools**	**9 schools**	**10 schools**	**3 schools**
Student Enrollment	**48,539 students**	**21,142 students**	**11,412 students**	**4,545 students**
% Total System Enrollment	**19.0 %**	**19.1 %**	**19.9 %**	**27.6 %**
TOTAL CITYWIDE				
Number of High Schools	**98 schools**	**63 schools**	**31 schools**	**16 schools**
Student Enrollment	**255,987 students**	**110,775 students**	**57,379 students**	**16,491 students**

applicants? Do your options schools admit their fair share of handicapped and bilingual students?

7) Most Students Still in Neighborhood Schools. The vast majority of high school students in these four systems continued to attend academically non-selective (neighborhood) high schools. 72%-80% of high school students attended academically non-selective neighborhood high schools, while 20%-28 % of high school students in these four cities were admitted to academically selective high schools.

Q: What portion of students in your school system attend selective high schools?

The Admissions Process

8) The Ins and Outs of Getting Admitted. The high school admissions process is extremely complex, but school systems failed to adequately inform most students and parents about its intricacies. Students whose families serve as negotiators and advocates for their children had a big advantage in gaining admission to programs of their choice. Families who were poor, had not completed high school, or didn't speak English were unlikely to be among those who could help their children negotiate the admissions process successfully.

Q: To what extent does successful admission to your options schools and programs depend on elaborate strategy and gamesmanship? Is this fair?

9) Counselors Were Crucial. Junior high guidance counselors often played a critical role in guiding students into options high schools and programs. Lower-achieving students received less high school admissions counseling, and were usually assumed to be going to the non-selective neighborhood high school.

Q: Is the answer to this problem to hire more counselors? Are there other possibilities?

10) Options Recruited Selectively. Options high schools and programs often selectively recruited at public and private junior high schools, relying on a network of established relationships with junior high counselors. Such informal practices worked to the disadvantage of junior high schools serving many students at risk. Selective recruiting occurred even when the options were supposed to be open to everyone.

Q: Does this kind of selective recruiting at more affluent schools trouble you? Why or why not?

11) Questionable Admissions Standards. Options high schools and programs employed unclear and questionable admissions standards. The standards had often not been proven by the options schools and programs to be necessary for adequate performance in the program. Frequently the central board of education neither collected information about nor monitored individual high school admissions policies and practices.

Q: To what extent should individual options schools be free to set their own admissions standards? What is the situation in your school system?

12) A Bias Toward Choosing the "Best Students." Selective high schools admissions showed a consistent bias toward admitting the "best" students, defined as students with good academic records, good attendance, good behavior, a mastery of English, and no special learning problems, and a bias toward screening out "problem" students, who lacked those characteristics.

Q: What factors do you think account for this tendency to choose the "best" students? Do you see this pattern in your own school district?

13) Option School's Progress Almost Never Measured. Options schools and programs that began with high-achieving students naturally looked better when their annual achievement test results were published in the newspaper. There was almost never any assessment conducted of how much their students had progressed from the time that they entered the school. This led one neighborhood high school principal to observe that options schools were "seeking excellence through an admissions process rather than through the effectiveness of an educational program."

Q: Is any data analyzed in your school system about the effectiveness of options schools in developing their students' abilities over time?

Impact of High School Options on Non-Selective High Schools

14) Good Students, Parents, and Teachers Leave. Neighborhood high schools lost higher-achieving students and active parents to options schools and programs outside their neighborhood. Good neighborhood high school staff often sought transfers to options schools, where options school principals often had special prerogatives in selecting staff. Neighborhood high schools then received those staff that the options high school didn't want.

Q: Have you observed similar results? Is the impact of this problem being overemphasized?

15) Sending Students Back. Options high schools often formally or informally sent students "who didn't work out" back to neighborhood schools.

Q: What obligation should an options school have to keep a student who is not meeting their expectations?

16) Unequal Resource Allocations. Resource allocations, including per pupil funding, staff, capital improvement for repairs and new buildings, and supplies, often benefited options schools at the expense of non-selective neighborhood schools.

Q: When resources are allocated, what consideration should be given to the options school's need to start up a successful program? What consideration should be given to the fact that the neighborhood school typically serves a much higher percentage of students at risk?

17) Over-the-Counter Admissions. The "open door" policy of the non-selective high schools creates a constant process of student enrollment and withdrawal, or "over-the-counter" admissions, causing instability in the school's scheduling and educational process. The options schools and programs, with a set student body and staff, were protected from these difficulties; the neighborhood school became a buffer that protected the options.

Q: Do you view this situation as inequitable? Why or why not:? If you view it as inequitable, what steps might be taken to address this inequity?

18) Focus on High-Achievers. Neighborhood high schools feel a competitive pressure to focus resources and services on their own high-achieving students to the detriment of average and below-average students, because they don't wish to lose high-achievers to options at other schools. The neighborhood high school's reputation depends significantly on its ability to attract and retain higher-achieving students.

Q: Is this competition among various schools to enroll and retain high achievers good or bad?

19) Demoralization. The competitive advantage that selective schools have over non-selective schools leaves both students and teachers who have tried and failed to enter the options programs and schools with feelings of failure and low morale. At its worst, the growth of high school options has created a prevalent feeling among educators and students who don't make it to options programs that neighborhood schools, especially low-income

neighborhood schools, are essentially helpless to educate their students given larger social forces that shape their students' lives.

Q: How serious a problem is this demoralization in your experience? Does it really affect what happens in neighborhood schools significantly? What realistically can a neighborhood high school accomplish that has a high percentage of students at risk?

Quality of Selective Schools

20) Options Vary Widely in Quality. Options varied widely in quality. Some options, including both selective and non-selective ones, have developed programs and highly-committed staff. Others offer a very ordinary educational program; at the extreme, they have merely renamed existing programs within their school. School systems offer many side-benefits for setting up options, such as additional funding or staff, prerogatives to choose staff and students, or improved facilities and equipment. Sometimes, these become the primary motivation for setting up an option.

Q: How should such variations in quality be analyzed and what should be done once such an analysis is completed?

Findings: Tracking and Grouping within High Schools

Track and Ability Group Labels

21) Options as New Tracks. While the four urban systems have down-played formal high school tracks (e.g., college prep, vocational, business or general) in the past fifteen years, the options schools and programs operate as new forms of tracking that have many of the same features as the original tracks.

Q: How concerned should educators and parents be if students are placed in tracks that determine all their courses?

22) Raising the Standards. In keeping with the national movement to raise standards, these four school systems have raised high school graduation requirements and testing requirements. Yet, they have created few systematic approaches to aid students performing below grade levels to catch up and meet the new requirements, except for separate remedial classes that emphasize drill.

Q: What are the pros and cons of requiring students to take more high school courses and to pass achievement tests as a prerequisite for moving from one grade to another?

23) Fragmented Responses to the Dropout Problem. Neighborhood high schools have created small-scale remedial and alternative programs to prevent and aid dropouts, some quite successful. However, the small scale and separateness of these programs leaves the mainstream life of the non-selective schools untouched.

Q: Why do educators typically prefer to add new programs to deal with a problem, rather than to rethink the basic program that they already have?

24) Common Ability Group Labels. The most common ability grouping labels for academic courses in the four school systems fall into the five categories shown in Table 3: Advanced College, Regular College, Regular Non-college, Remedial, and Bilingual, and within these general categories the four school systems employ a number of specific "ability group" labels, shown also in Table 3.

Q: To what extent do you believe it is necessary to group students in this way, rather than to create more diverse classes with wider ranges of ability? What ability group labels are employed in your school system?

25) Variations in Course Content. Wide school-to-school discretion in the use of the ability group labels creates great diversity, for example, in courses with the same ability group labels offered in different schools. Regular First Year Algebra, for instance, can vary from a traditional college prep algebra course to a course in remedial math in different schools. In many instances, the press for higher standards has caused schools to relabel courses without changing their teaching strategies or course content.

Q: How does a school raise expectations for students and teach more rigorous courses, avoiding the problems of merely renaming courses?

Assigning Students to Tracks and Groups

26) Administrative Concerns Predominate. Administrative considerations (class size, space, teachers' preferences) often take precedence over student needs and interests in programming students for their courses. An administratively efficient schedule becomes a goal in itself, taking on a life of its own and discouraging any flexibility or innovation that might disrupt the programming. With the advent of computer technology, the staff position of "programmer" has become a little understood, but very powerful position within the modern high school. Computer expertise, rather than educational philosophy or guidance counseling experience, was the common determining factor in who became a programmer.

Table 3. ABILITY GROUP LABELS IN THE FOUR SCHOOL SYSTEMS

	New York	Chicago	Philadelphia	Boston
Advanced College Prep	Advanced Placement	Advanced Placement	Advanced Placement	Advanced Placement
	Honors	Honors	Honors	Honors
	Others: International Baccalaureate, College course collaboration, etc.	Others: International Baccalaureate College course collaboration, etc.	Others: International Baccalaureate, College course collaboration,	Others: College course collaboration, etc.
			Star	
			Rapid	
Regular or Grade College Prep	Academic Regents and Academic Non-Regents Classes	Regular	Regular	Grade Level
Regular Non-College	Academic Regents and Academic Non-Regents Classes	Regular	Regular	Grade Level
Remedial	Modified	Essential	Modified or Slow	General
				Basic
Federally funded	Chapter 1	Chapter 1	Chapter 1	Chapter 1
State funded	PSEN	Chapter 1	TELLS	Chapter 188
	Special Education	Special Education	Special Education	Special Education
Bilingual	Bilingual Education, English as a Second Language (ESL)	Bilingual Education, English as a Second Language (ESL)	English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Bilingual Education	Bilingual Education, English as a Second Language (ESL)

Q: What educational concerns should be of top priority for the administrator who has the responsibility to solve the major logistical problems of assigning students and teachers to classes in a large urban high school.

27) Scheduling Disruptions in Non-Selective Schools. Non-selective schools, faced with "over the counter" admissions throughout the opening weeks of schools and with tight budgets and teacher shortages, often lose four weeks of class time before scheduling is completed.

Q: What steps can be taken to lessen the loss of learning time caused by scheduling at the beginning of the year?

28) Information about Entering Students. When it was possible to consider individual student information in making up course programs, non-selective schools often had less complete and reliable information to use, especially about entering students. High schools distrusted the test scores that students brought with them from junior high schools enough that many high school departments gave their own placement tests. Other schools considered the ninth grade a "trial" year to find out what ability level and kinds of courses a student belonged in.

Q: How can coordination between junior highs and high schools be improved to smooth this critical transition?

29) Informality of Grouping Practices. Students and their families received little information from the schools about ability grouping and tracking choices and the likely consequences of decisions made in the course selection process. Grouping and tracking policies were rarely written down and distributed even to staff within the system.

Q: What are the consequences of the practice of keeping ability grouping practices informal, for students and for staff? Does your own school system spell out these practices any more formally?

30) Composition of Low-Ability Groups. The low-ability classes in Non-Selective Low Income schools were almost entirely composed of low-income students, black and Hispanic students, students with serious basic skills deficiencies, students with poor attendance records, students who had previously been held back, and students who had failed or would fail several academic subjects early in high school.

Q: What are the consequences of concentrating so many students at risk in the same classrooms? Are there alternatives?

The Impact of Ability Grouping on Students at Risk

31) Sink or Swim. The extra resources, special staff, planning time, and administrative assistance in cutting red tape given to options programs and schools contrasted starkly with the lack of assistance given to teachers attempting to respond to calls for higher standards in working with students at risk. Instead, teachers and other school staff in non-selective high schools were usually left on their own to cope with the academic deficits of their students in frequently outdated facilities with scarce materials.

Q: What factors lead to this lack of support for classroom teachers dealing with students at risk? Is this similar or different from your school system?

32) Response to Higher Requirements. Responding to the higher graduation requirements, the four systems have moved away from offering remedial subject matter courses and toward expecting all students to master common material, such as algebra. Yet, without provision for retraining teachers and opportunities for reworking the curriculum, teachers persist in old practices and many students fail. In Philadelphia, ninth grade course failure rates in Non-Selective Low-Income Schools exceed 50%.

33) Course Content for Low-Ability Group Classes. Low-ability group classes in the four cities were characterized by extensive use of workbooks, drills, and materials that presented skills in isolation and that had failed to assist these students in the past.

Q: What other instructional approaches are possible for the high school student who is functioning significantly below grade level?

34) Instruction in Options Schools. Frequently, classes in selective options schools and programs linked mastery of skills with a curriculum designed to appeal to students' interests. Teachers in these classes tended to be more experienced and have more positive expectations; to offer more challenging work at a faster pace; to collect and grade homework regularly; and to require more creative work.

Q: What features of this successful instruction can be adapted to other students and schools?

35) Triage. The allocation of greater resources to higher group ability levels and to selective programs and schools reflected a policy of educational triage, i.e. allocating resources to those students judged most capable of benefiting from them. The triage policy was accompanied by a mindset that the best urban high schools can do was to "save a

few," and an expectation that poorer students would frequently drop out at the legally permissible school leaving age.

Q: What are the pros and cons of this approach? Is it a realistic one, and are educators who expect more being unrealistic?

Finding: Student Promotion and Retention

Retention Policies

35) Introducing Stricter Promotion Policies. Each of the four systems introduced stricter student promotion policies within the past ten years as an integral part of a new superintendent's reform plan. These plans also featured system-wide standardized curricula and a broadened use of standardized testing programs. Now "merit promotion" policies, often based partly or entirely on student's scores on criterion-referenced and norm-referenced tests, were designed to improve student achievement by eliminating "social promotion."

Q: What do you see as the pros and cons of strict promotion? Regardless of your views, why is stricter promotion such a politically popular reform?

36) Advocates Unsuccessful Objections. In each city, some advocate, parent, and citizen groups, as well as a few educators argued that higher promotion standards would create even more dropouts rather than successful graduates and presented research evidence in support of this point of view.

Q: Why were advocates unsuccessful in winning this argument?

37) Resources Were Not Tied to Retention. Only in the New York City schools did the system commit substantial resources and staff to a school-year remediation component to follow up student retention. However, even in New York, the school system's own researchers concluded that retention failed to improve reading achievement and increased the dropout rate.

Q: Why do school districts initiate retention and then not provide significant resources for student remediation? Why does retention fail even when extra resources are provided?

38) Major Variations in Retention Among Schools. A substantial amount of retention took place in these school systems before the strict promotion policy was introduced. Large variations in rates of retention among individual schools existed both

before and after the new policies were introduced, which cannot be explained by the differences in composition of their student bodies.

Q: Why would major variations in school retention rates persist, even in schools serving similar student bodies, after strict retention policies were instituted?

Promotion and Retention: Policy Impact

39) Grade-Level Variations in Retention. Retention rates varied markedly from grade to grade. In both Boston and Philadelphia the peak grades for retention included first, seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth grades.

Q: Why would retention rates be particularly high at these grade levels?

40) Escape Clauses. Retention policies almost always had an "escape clause" or waiver process by which principals could promote students not meeting standards. These waiver procedures were widely used as the retention policy caused more and more students to be held back, sometimes two or more times.

Q: What process do you see taking place that would motivate principals to make widespread use of these waivers?

41) Highest Retention Rates. Student retention rates were highest in non-selective high schools, particularly low-income schools. All of the categories of selective schools had significantly lower student retention rates.

Q: What are the retention rates in various types of schools in your school system? If the evidence shows that retention puts students even more at risk of dropping out, what are the alternatives?

42) Course Failure Rates. Course failure rates, closely linked to retention in high school, were substantially higher in non-selective high schools than in selective high schools. However, failure rates varied widely among schools serving similar student bodies.

Q: Why do course failure rates continue to vary widely in similar schools, even when the school system adopts a system-wide curriculum?

43) Lack of Response to Continuing Failure. No system had a policy or consistent set of practices in which multiple course failure, for example, in the 9th grade, triggered a systematic response from the school to aid the bulk of students. Despite high

rates of course failure, schools in low-income neighborhoods persisted in failing up to 50% of students year after year.

Q: What set of circumstances allows a school to persist in a set of practices that is obviously not working?

44) Overage Students Were Concentrated in Low-Income Schools. Retention in elementary and junior high schools produced high percentages of overage students entering high school. The burden of dealing with overage students fell disproportionately on Non-Selective Low-Income and Low- to Moderate-Income Schools. Overage students were at greatly increased risk of dropping out, even when their reading scores were considerably higher than those of classmates who had not been retained. The retention policy directly increased the high school dropout rate.

Q: Why would being overage put some students at greater risk of dropping out than poor reading abilities?

45) The Power of Testing. In low-income high schools in school systems with strict retention policies, the test increasingly came to shape the curriculum, and to be used for evaluating teachers and schools, as well.

Q: Have tests been put to these uses in your school system? Is teaching to the test a bad thing, if it is a good test?

46) Sticking with Retention. The feared consequences of strict retention for students at risk have come to pass, based even on the data from the school systems themselves. Yet school superintendents who have initiated these policies continue to officially stand by them. However, in response to internal system pressures to modify these policies, superintendents have permitted substantial school-level discretion in implementing them.

Q: Why do school superintendents continue to support strict retention policies, while allowing substantial deviation from them in practice?

Major Recommendations

The overall impact of the high school admissions, tracking and grouping, and student promotion practices we've just summarized has a major impact on the educational opportunities available for students, especially minority, low-income, handicapped, and limited English proficient students. An educator named Jim Cummins provided some helpful ideas for thinking about the impact of the schools on children when he said that various school practices can be considered either "empowering" or "disabling" for

students, and that the effect of a set of disabling practices is to make it increasingly unlikely that students will succeed in school. The educational practices that we've just summarized, based on this investigation in four big cities, fits well, in our opinion, with Cummins picture of schools that progressively disable students.

The full study makes many specific recommendations about how to change this situation. Here, we summarize just a few of the most important ones that we have concluded should form the core of a strategy to bring about major changes

Strengthening Groups Who Support Equity

The most important change that will improve the fairness of high school placement and labeling in these school systems is also perhaps the most difficult to make. Unless students at risk are represented when policies are made that determine how they will be placed and labeled and unless their advocates remain active to see that policies are carried out correctly, other changes that we recommend are not likely to improve the day-to-day experiences of students. Active parents of students at risk and advocates for these students must reach some equality of influence with the middle-class parents and school system decision makers who are already highly-organized and well-positioned to shape the student sorting process.

Recommendation: Mechanisms should be established through which active parents of students at risk can participate in decision making about the quality of their children's educational experiences, including placement and labeling practices.

Recommendation: Independent parent and citizen advocacy organizations should make placement and labeling practices a major focus for investigation and advocacy.

Q: Do you agree that these problems will only improve if parents and advocates get actively involved? Do you believe that this is appropriate? Can you think of effective strategies for dealing with these questions that will work even if the problems are left primarily for educators to solve?

Analyzing the Equity and Effectiveness of Placement and Labeling Practices

These four school systems typically have the ability to do large-scale research and evaluation, and they regularly collect data that is vital for analyzing the equity and effectiveness of current sorting practices. Yet during the period that we studied intensively, none of the four school systems has regularly analyzed current selective and non-selective high schools and their associated admissions practices, within-school tracking and

grouping practices, and student promotion practices, made the results public, and used the results for planning and policy-making.

Recommendation: Through analyzing data already available and through inexpensive sampling studies, school systems should provide themselves and the public with information useful in further illuminating such key issues as:

- The characteristics of students attending various types of selective and non-selective high schools and programs, the money and staff allocated to these schools and programs, and their impact in boosting student achievement.
- The characteristics of students placed in various groups and tracks (for example, their race, sex, tested achievement, absence record, previous promotion history) and the educational results for students in these tracks (for example, reading achievement and dropout rates).
- The rates of grade retention over time at various schools and for various grade levels, the characteristics of students who are retained (for example, their race, sex, income level, and previous promotion history), the nature of the services provided to retained students, the costs of retention, and the impact of retention on student achievement and dropout.

Q: Think about your own school system. What other data is potentially useful and should be collected, analyzed, and made public?

Immediate Action by School District Policy Makers

This study indicates that high school admission practices, tracking and grouping practices, and retention practices have usually been carried out with great discretion being granted to school principals and other school staff. Furthermore, such discretion has frequently been used in ways that are harmful to the students with the greatest learning needs. Below, we make recommendations for immediate action concerning high school admissions, tracking and grouping, and retention as first steps in insuring that the benefits of such practices are maximized and the harms minimized.

Recommendation: School districts should call a halt to developing additional options schools and programs, until after a systematic review of data about their operations and their impact on students and until the school system develops comprehensive procedures for monitoring their operation and expansion. These procedures must include strong safeguards to promote equity.

Q: Do you see the problems with options schools and programs in your own school system as serious enough so that a halt should be called to starting new ones until they are fully investigated and there is an overall plan for next steps?

Recommendation: School systems should develop and make public written policies about the rationale and objectives for various ability groups and tracks, the process through which students are to be placed in these groups and tracks, the outcomes that are expected as a result of these grouping practices, and the methods by which the effectiveness of tracking will be evaluated.

Q: How would you like to see the policies for ability grouping and tracking set up in your own situation, if they were spelled out in detail?

Recommendation: Given its documented negative impacts, school districts should adopt the policy that student retention can be used only as an absolute last resort, after other interventions have been tried and have failed, and that school districts should plan for the implementation of alternatives to retention.

Q: Do you agree that retention should be virtually abolished because the evidence is so strong that it doesn't work? What alternatives would you put in its place if it were abolished?

Effective Strategy for Implementing Changes in Current Practices

No reform proposals for changing specific educational practices will have an major effect unless school system leaders make a serious commitment to helping the changes work properly.

Recommendation: Any reforms that are initiated to alter current placement and labeling issues must link new policies with such essential ingredients of effective change as a commitment of extra resources, a commitment of top staff at both the central administration and school levels, continuing central administration leadership and monitoring, sufficient school level planning time, and a willingness to cut red tape. School systems should analyze their experience with establishing successful magnet schools in identifying some ingredients needed for success.

Q: What other elements are essential for a serious effort to change the way people are used to behaving in a big city school system?

Specific High School Practices

For those who are interested in further more specific recommendations, they are contained in the full report of the research study.