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ABSTRACT

Leadership to reverse rigid tracking practices can make a difference for student success. Through transformational leadership, administrators, teachers, and counselors can serve as catalysts for change from restrictive to inclusive advanced high school classes. Steps are underway by some states and districts to change past grouping practices that have served as restrictive factors for student motivation and success. Interviews were conducted with administrators of six Texas high schools that had been successful in detracking efforts and encouraging greater student participation and success in advanced high school courses. Results indicate that the practices and processes in educational leadership for detracking are vision, clear communication of the policy change, implementation over time, proactive leadership, and celebration of student accomplishments. The primary benefits relative to increasing high school student participation in advanced level courses are that all teachers teach all levels, and more students are preparing for college. Challenges include: helping students recognize their potential; changing educators' past ideas concerning ability grouping; keeping people talking; and helping students with the cost of advanced placement tests. Effective professional development practices in this area are training all faculty in gifted and talented strategies, offering principals professional development opportunities, and making professional development an ongoing process. Contains 64 references. (Author/TD)

Leadership for Increasing the Participation and Success of Students in High School Advanced Courses: Implications for Rural Educational Settings

by

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Abstract

Leadership to reverse rigid tracking practices can make a difference for student success. Through transformational leadership, administrators, teachers, and counselors can and must serve as catalysts for change from restrictive to inclusive advanced high school classes. Steps are underway by some states and districts to change past grouping practices which have served as restrictive factors for student motivation and success. Recognition is needed by educators of inequitable practices and the needed changes in high school grouping practices to open access to advanced level courses and help all students attain the prerequisite skills to be successful. Changing practices and policies to encourage more students to participate in advanced level courses are other important steps that can be taken immediately to improve secondary schools. Providing information for leaders in rural education of research pertinent to school leadership for increased student participation and success in advanced level high school courses, such as advanced placement courses, will be a primary aim of this report.

Leadership for Increasing the Participation and Success of Students in Advanced Courses: Implications for Rural Educational Settings

To achieve equity and excellence in schools and eliminate tracking, leadership is needed. While much of the research on tracking focuses on the need to eliminate this practice, many schools continue to enforce rigid grouping policies. In addition, in schools that are eliminating the multiple tracks leaving a regular and advanced level of advanced courses, many schools are not eliminating the rigid admission policies for enrollment in advanced courses. Students suffer from this rigidity. In other districts, barriers to entrance to the advanced courses are removed, but this new policy is not publicized. Students are not encouraged to participate and support systems are not established to assist in student success. It is important to remove the gap between research and practice concerning high school advanced classes. Consideration of factors involved in providing leadership in rural schools for greater student participation and success in advanced courses will be provided.

This research report will address the need to open access to advanced high school courses and encourage greater student participation and success in the courses. To assist a school in assessing the school's current system of course assignment, information on the common problems associated with school tracking systems will also be provided. Examples will be discussed which demonstrate that removing the enforcement of rigid admission criteria which prevent students from enrolling in advanced level classes and, instead, encouraging greater student participation in these courses produce benefits for students and the school. Finally, the role of administrators and teachers as catalysts for change in opening advanced level courses to more students will be proposed with recommendations for actions for leaders in rural education.

Analysis of the Problem

In considering the problems of tracking, an analogy can be proposed. In medicine, it is common to refer to a case that exemplifies all the symptoms of a disease as a "textbook case". In education, some schools are operating as "textbook cases" of tracking; that is, they are exemplifying all the problems normally associated in educational research as problems of tracking. These problems on the high school level include problems such as track placement is influenced by race and socioeconomic factors with the advanced track primarily white (Braddock & McPartland, 1990; Oakes, 1986; Darling-Hammond, 1994). In analysis of the problems traditionally associated with school tracking, as early as 1978, Pareluis and Pareluis reported that the problems of tracking include disparity in race, ethnicity and social class in assignment to levels of classes. In 1995, Furr reported that minorities disproportionately continue to be placed in noncollegiate tracks" (p. 36). Other researchers, (Oakes, 1985; Persell & Cookson, 1985), have pointed out that structural impediments are established by tracking systems that can affect equality, occupations, and income achievement. Harklau (1995) added, "Linguistic minority students are disproportionately and adversely affected by this system" (p. 347). Guiton and Oakes (1995) further reported that as a group in three school systems, African American and Latino students with the same test scores were less likely than White or Asian students to be placed in high-level courses.

Affluent parents push their children to be in advanced classes and challenge closed systems when their children are placed in lower tracks (Useem, 1992; George & Rubin, 1992) while less-affluent parents generally accept the level assigned without question (if they even know the level exists), when their children are placed in lower levels (Useem, 1992). Other problems in tracking include that counselors may influence students to enter lower level tracks (Gamoran, 1992); track decisions are often set in elementary school (Gamoran, 1992); and participation in the tracks is largely determined by junior high from the choice of middle school courses (Useem, 1992).

In particular, rigid tracking which results in advanced level classes open only to those meeting specific criteria denies the importance of effort to achievement and emphasizes intelligence as a fixed point. Though attribution theory suggests that motivation is increased when students believe that success is due to their own efforts rather than unchangeable features of themselves (Weiner, 1986 and Francis et al., 1993), rigid tracking systems downplay the importance of effort. This downplay of effort occurs, although the single most important personality variable consistently related to high academic performance has been shown to be the degree to which students believe that success depends on their own efforts (Brookover, et al. 1979; Coleman, et al., 1966; & Slavin & Braddock, 1994).

The problems of tracking are not universal in all schools that offer dual or multiple tracks in high school, but many schools reflect these problems and could be referred to as "textbook cases" of tracking. When dual or multiple tracks exist in high schools (e.g., a regular level of the course and an advanced level), rigid entrance requirements are often set to determine who can enroll in the advanced track. This practice often results in inequity (Darling-Hammond, 1994).

Just as in cancer advertisements with publicity given to suggest cancer's warning signs, tracking's warning signs might be noted by problems such as the following:

- The accelerated or honors classes, often the most segregated courses in schools, are composed primarily of Anglo students (Ford & Harris, 1994).
- The high school has open admission or allows waivers for all students to participate in challenging courses, yet the policy is not communicated to parents (Oakes, 1994).
- The eighth grade parent-student meetings concerning registration for ninth grade courses do not address the course sequences that best equip students for college as an option for students (Oakes, 1994).

A site-based team can consider each of these warning signs to determine if these are present within the school.

Fixed Groups

Black (1992) pointed out that "Ideas of fixed ability translate into fixed groups as students almost always stay at the level assigned and almost never move up" (p. 47). A poignant example of the practice of fixed grouping is the following student's account.

> Because of a clerical error, I ended up in a 'basic' English class during the first grading period of my sophomore year. Unaware of the way that students were tracked in the school, I was excited about the opportunity to be in a class where African American students were the majority. In my previous English classes the emphasis was on literature and composition. We read Dickens, Hardy, and Shakespeare. But in this class we were drilled in grammar and spelling. Each week we took a spelling test. Each week I got 100. In fact, I got an A on every assignment given. Nevertheless, on the first report card my grade was a C. When I questioned the teacher about it, she smiled and said, 'Why Gloria, a C is the highest grade possible in this class!'
>
> After a quick trip to my guidance counselor, the placement error was detected. I was returned to my rightful place in the college preparatory English class. The basic English teacher told me she was sorry to see me go and wished me well. I left that class confused and hurt. Why hadn't the teacher recognized that I had the ability to move out of it? And more importantly, why didn't my classmates know that no matter how hard they worked, their efforts would only be rewarded with mediocre grades? (Ladson-Billings, 1994, pp. 59-60)

Though Hallinan (1996) suggested that more movement is occurring within ability groups in some schools, underrepresentation of minority groups in the advanced level courses continues to be reported in this recent study.

Student Segregation

Problems are created by tracking and closed access to advanced courses in secondary school. One of the problems when rigid tracking systems exist is the segregation of students. Gifted education has been termed "one of the most segregated programs in schools" (Ford & Harris, 1994, p. 211), a reality that raises a concern of "lost talent" (Hansen, 1994, p. 162). Many minority students may not be identified through standardized test scores which have tended to be "lower for minority students" (Hansen, 1994). In addition, minority status can "negatively affect advanced class assignment" (Gamoran, 1992a, p. 201). The National Commission of the Gifted encouraged use of a range of identifiers in selecting students for this program; however, overall ethnic minorities and the economically disadvantaged students are "consistently under-represented in programs for the gifted and talented" (National Commission, 1985, p. 129) and "over-represented in low track and basic classes" (Rogers, 1993, p. 11).

Just as there is concern about the small number of minority students in gifted programs, there is also concern about the number of minority students represented in honors programs in high schools. A recent publication of College Board entitled Access to Knowledge (1994) addressed this issue, discussing reasons for concern and ways that some districts are providing encouragement, access, and support to all students who want to commit to a more rigorous program of study. Some districts are responding to the concern that students should have open access to a more rigorous program of study, but many schools continue to limit access to more challenging courses.

Sorting Function in School

Why do arguments for rigid criteria for advanced classes persist, particularly in English and social studies, if students have prerequisite skills and desire to self-select these courses? To consider the closed access to advanced high school courses is to

consider what some have called the "sorting" function of schools. Darling-Hammond (1994) suggested,

> Testing proved enormously useful as a means of determining how to slot students for more and less rigorous and costly curriculum when public funding of education and compulsory attendance vastly increased access to schools in the early twentieth century. IQ tests were widely used as a measure of educational input (with intelligence viewed as the raw material for schooling to sort pupils so they could be efficiently educated according to their future roles in society. (p. 10)

Darling-Hammond further stated that "frequently, tests were used to exclude students from schooling opportunities altogether. Though many proponents argued that the use of tests as a tool for tracking students would enhance social justice, the rationale for tracking was often motivated by racial and ethnic politics" (p. 10). In other words, concerns exist that tracking was originally designed to sort people--a practice some argue still exists.

Reasons for Rigid Ability Grouping in High School

A reason for rigid ability grouping has been a concern that gifted students may be bored in a regular homogeneous classroom, and their needs may not be met. This concept has prompted some districts to create pull-out programs for gifted students. However, the report, "National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent," reported that motivation can be a factor in learning and discouraged rigid interpretation of student scores as the only method of identification of gifted students. The report (National Excellence, 1994) suggested identification procedures must "take into account the drive and passion that play a key role in accomplishment" (p. 26). The National

Science Association for Women in Science quoted in the Virginia Study (1992) stated that "no person can predict the perseverance and effort to become a scientist" (p. 47).

There are other reasons that rigid ability grouping in high school may exist. Fear may pose an element. Proponents of closed access to courses may resort to arguments of extreme. For example, in a conversation whether an A-B student can take an advanced freshman history, advanced English, or science course, a teacher may shift to a discussion of the difficulties of teaching a severely learning-disabled student in an honors class though this is not the topic of discussion. In the midst of a discussion of whether an A-B student can enroll in *one* honors class, a school official may tell of a student in tears every morning taking four advanced classes and working every night until one a.m. on homework. The shift to arguments of extreme and fear may have been reasons for closed access to rigorous high school courses (Darling-Hammond, 1994).

These are some of the reasons tracking and particularly closed access to advanced courses persist; beliefs about a "sorting" function of schools, rigid criteria for gifted programs, and fear. Problems also result from the closed access to more rigorous courses in that students learn more in the advanced level courses, and some students are denied this opportunity.

Benefits of Advanced High School Courses

Current research on tracking reported by Gamoran and Nystrand (1990) included the statement, "Consensus exists that students in higher groups and tracks learn more and the evidence seems clear that these students benefit from better teaching" (p. 218). In a study of the difference between students in tracked and untracked schools, "the tracked schools exhibited substantial achievement gaps among high-, regular-, and low-track classes with 25 to 35 percent of these gaps attributable to measured

differences in what students experienced in the different types of classes" (p. 227). Furthermore, Gamoran and Nystrand (1990) reported, "The combination of higher-quality instructional discourse and better student participation helped high-track students learn more; in contrast, less engaging discourse and lower levels of participation are part of the reason that low-track students learned less" (p. 227). Oakes, (1994), suggested that nearly all educators are well aware that low-track students consistently have lower-quality opportunities to learn than do their peers in higher tracks.

Gamoran's research suggested that students benefit from participation in advanced courses. However, reports to the contrary are available. One report often cited to suggest that there are no benefits to grouping on the secondary level is Slavin's (1990) "Achievement Effects of Ability Grouping in Secondary Schools: Best Evidence Synthesis of Secondary Schools." There are, however, problems with Slavin's findings when interpreted for grades 10 to 12, key grades where benefits of advanced courses have been noted by other researchers. Slavin (1990) stated,

> Ability grouping is equally ineffective in all subjects, except that there may be a negative effect of ability grouping in social studies. Assigning students to different levels of the same course has no consistent positive or negative effects on students of high, average, or low ability. (p. 109)

However, Slavin (1990) suggested that limitations of his meta-analysis of grouping studies of 60 years were that it included no studies after 1968, included no studies of grades 10 to 12, included no studies of gifted students, and included no analysis of what occurred in the grouped classes concerning content or methods stemming from systematic observation of teaching and learning. These restrictions in the review make its findings subject to question for the secondary level. Is XYZ grouping being

compared with grouping with different instruction and content? We do not know from the study. Hoffer (1992) suggested that if Slavin is correct, "then the considerable body of sociological research on the effects of tracking on cognitive achievement is simply wrong" (p. 205). Slavin's ultimate conclusion was that, "If content and instruction is not altered, then grouping alone has little effect" (Gamoran, 1992c, p. 13). This is a point supported in the literature. Gamoran (1992c) stated, "Slavin's ultimate conclusion echos a finding more than a half century ago; ability grouping has no effect on achievement unless teacher's use it to provide different instruction to different groups" (p. 13). This again seems to support the position that it is not whether students have been carefully screened before taking a more challenging course that is a key factor influencing achievement but, instead, whether instruction is different in these classes. In contrast to Slavin's research, Kulik (1992) reported gains in student achievement in advanced classes up to a year compared with students with similar prior ability as measured by standardized achievement tests.

Impact of Advanced Courses

Instructional issues affecting the benefits of participation in advanced classes include differences such as the level of courses and the level of discourse. Gamoran (1987) found that about half of the estimated track effect on math achievement could be accounted for in that academic track students complete more courses in math. Gamoran also (1992a) reported that high ability English classes place more importance on open-ended questions and discussion about literature than average or low track classes. These differences in courses influence student achievement gains. The National Education Association (NEA) in 1990 indicated there was a distinct correlation between a student's level of achievement in the subject and the student's exposure to the subject. A variety of factors affected the exposure:

a. Extent and kinds of courses

b. Content and rigor of the course

c. The extent entering students had taken advantage of advanced courses. (Virginia, 1992, p. 13)

This assessment is supported by research demonstrating that students in college preparatory programs take more academic courses, particularly in math and science (Gamoran, 1987; Vanfossen, Jones, & Spade, 1987). Teachers in high track classes present more complex materials at a faster pace (Metz 1978; Oakes, 1985).

When access to the more rigorous courses is denied, students have little choice in their exposure to the subject. The student cannot "take advantage of advanced courses" if the door is closed to them. Yet, Gamoran (1992b) stated from his national survey (1987) that followed more than 20,000 students from grades 10 to 12, "Advanced track students gained significantly more on tests of math, science, reading, vocabulary, writing, and civics compared to similar students in general and vocational tracks" (p. 12). Again, the difference seems to be in the work required by the class. Gamoran (1992b) studied 108 English classes over a two-year period with 40 in 8th and 50 in 9th grade with ability groups assigned on the basis of previous performance. His results showed that high track students read more language works and standard works of literature than do the low track students (p. 6). Also, low track spent less time on homework and completed fewer written assignments. Fill in the blank was "more common for the low track and essays for the high track" (Gamoran, 1992b, p. 6). Gamoran (1992a) reported, "Students in different levels of a given English class are exposed to different sorts of knowledge with those in the higher student groups reading more classic literature, writing more, and engaging in more criticism than those in other classes" (p. 188). Black (1993) reported that in high ability classes, teachers more

often hold discussions with students "to pursue reason and unlock meaning" (p. 28). Also, in Oakes (1985) national study of junior and senior high school classes, differences in curriculum content, instructional activities, and classroom climate were found. In English, high track students read standard works of literature while low track students read young adult fiction. Oakes (1992) reported that in junior and senior high school, in English, the high track required more time spent on homework outside of class and gave more time to instructional activities in class.

Kulik's (1992) meta-analysis covered 23 studies of accelerated groups compared to equivalent students in accelerated classes and nonaccelerated control classes, and all of the studies examined acceleration of a whole class. In each of the comparisons of student equivalent in age and intelligence, average support for acceleration was nearly 1 year. The reasons given for the gains were "resources available, trained teachers, parents of these children bond in formal or informal networks, special foundations often available--any of these resources could add to the success" (p. xiii). Kulik's (1992) meta-analytic reviews have shown that the effects of group programs depend on their features:

> Programs that entail only minimum adjustment of course content for ability groups usually have little or no effect on student achievement. In some grouping programs, students are grouped by test scores and school records, then it is expected that all will follow the same basic curriculum. When this occurs, the medium and low learn about the same as in a mixed situation, and students in top classes out-perform equal students by only about 1 month on a grade equivalent scale. However, in grouping programs that entail more subsequent adjustment of curriculum, pupils out-performed equivalent control studies by 2 to 23 months on a grade equivalent scale. (p. xiii)

Again, the difference in results attained is in the difference in the adjustment of curriculum, not whether strict grouping criteria identify the students in the group. In these studies, the students grouped for instruction did not change. It was only when the subsequent adjustment of curriculum was made that increased learning occurred.

Researchers have noted some additional variables other than just a difference of in-class methodology that may influence greater achievement in the advanced track. Meyer and Rowan (1978) reported that students in different tracks develop beliefs that they are different and act accordingly. Gamoran (1992d) reported that students tend to form friendships with others in the same track. Gamoran concluded, "Social relationships within friendship groups promote differential attitudes and behavior" (p. 814). Other factors in the benefits attributed to advanced classes may be in the teachers assigned to these classes. Gamoran and Nystrand (1990) reported that teachers in high tracks are more enthusiastic, spend more time in preparation, and are considered more successful, a conclusion substantiated by previous researchers (Lacey, 1970; Rosenbaum, 1976; Finley, 1984; and Vanfossen, Jones, & Spade, 1987). Another key factor in the benefit of the advanced classes may result from the amount of homework done. McAdams (1994) stated the virtual absence of out-of-class assignments for many of our students means that classroom instruction takes on the passive characteristic of watching a game or a talk program" (p. 35). Advanced classes include more homework than regular or basic classes.

On the secondary school level, the issue in detracking seems not to be whether the courses should be eliminated unless the same rigor is to be required for all with support for success, but rather who is allowed to participate in the courses. Research results clearly point to the benefits of the advanced or accelerated classes on the secondary school level, but they do not point to the need for rigid entrance criteria.

These tracking problems illustrate inequities that occur in rigid tracking systems. They suggest the need for recruitment of students of all ethnic groups for advanced level high school courses and the need for communication of the merits of inclusive advanced programs to students and parents. Although a philosophy that all student will be challenged is fostered in many school goal statements such as, "All students will be encouraged to learn to their maximum potential," schools often create obstacles to student self-determination by rigid tracking policies in schools which restrict student admission to advanced classes. In particular, schools often set policies closing classes to students in high school not on the basis of whether the students have completed the prerequisites for the courses, but rather by arbitrary scores on criteria such as achievement tests and grade point averages. Some districts cite closed access policies to advanced courses as justified because the policies were site-based committee decisions, never considering whether the decisions meet the mission and beliefs of the particular school. In reality, schools may enforce policies of tracking that suggest the opposite of their stated beliefs.

Recommendations for a Plan of Action

Instead of continuing the practice of restricting enrollment in advanced level courses, educators can recognize the importance of student motivation to success in advanced level high school courses. In addition, schools can form vertical teams of subject specific teachers who would meet regularly to ensure that prerequisite skills are attained by students in preparing for the challenging high school classes. In detracking efforts, schools can remove barriers to student participation in rigorous classes and encourage participation by students of all ethnic groups and social classes. Schools can develop a plan of action to change restrictive policies to open challenging opportunities to all students who accede to the challenge, to communicate the benefits of advanced level courses, and to provide support structures to help ensure student success. To assist in making the plan, they can ask questions, such as, "Are the admission criteria for advanced classes used as a guide to help the student in decision-making or as a gate to restrict enrollment? Are the criteria

measures, if used, set at a level to be inclusive, simply ensuring prerequisite skills, or at a level to exclude many students who could meet the challenge? Have the advantages of participation in advanced level high school courses, such as calculus, been communicated fully since middle school? Have elementary school students experienced heterogeneously grouped classes with only flexible within-class grouping to ensure that all students attain prerequisite skills? Do students recognize benefits of the advanced level high school courses? Are there rewards and celebrations for outstanding accomplishments? Do vertical teams of teachers of the same subject meet regularly to plan and ensure that prerequisite skills are attained by students which will be needed in advanced level classes?"

The Role of Leaders as Catalysts for Change

Welner and Oakes (1996) suggest, "Tracking systems are extraordinarily resilient and resistant to change" (p. 466). As other schools plan ways to increase student participation and success in advanced courses, leadership is needed to foster the dialogue of site-based committees and vertical curriculum teams in discussing current admission criteria for advanced classes and current efforts at student recruitment for those programs of study and ways to help more students attain the prerequisite skills. Educators also collaboratively can provide problem analysis concerning whether the inequities associated with "textbook cases of tracking" are evident in the school. For this, knowledge concerning the research on tracking is needed. Furthermore, although there are no recipes for successful detracking of schools, consideration of possible actions to open opportunities for more students is an important role of educators. While not seeking to provide one blueprint for successful recruitment and retention of students to advanced level high school courses such as advanced placement courses, this research report will identify leadership factors in schools that have contributed to greater student participation and success in advanced level courses.

METHODOLOGY

Yin (1989) stressed that data analysis is not a cookbook approach with a step-by step method. The ultimate goal was to "treat the evidence fairly, producing compelling analytic solutions and to rule out alternative interpretations" (p. 106). The researchers, as Patton (1990) suggested, "identified and extrapolated lessons learned" (p. 435). The following research questions served as the framework for the study:

1. What practices and processes in educational leadership for equity and excellence for detracking are important?
2. What are the primary benefits and challenges relative to opening opportunities for greater high school student participation and success in advanced level courses?
3. What practices in professional development programs are effective in promoting knowledge and skills for educational leadership in equity and excellence?

For this qualitative study, the State Director of the Texas Mentor Schools Network, a network of selected high schools which are identified as lighthouse schools in terms of effectiveness, recommended mentor schools which had been most successful in detracking efforts of encouraging greater student participation and success in advanced high school courses. Six sites were identified through consultation with the State Director of the Texas Mentor Schools Network and through analysis of the Texas High School Mentor Network Resource Guide which identified key features of the mentor schools in Texas. Interviews were conducted with key administrators of the six sites. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed to discern themes or patterns in the data. Triangulation of the data occurred through member-checks and through peer-debriefing. Categories were formulated from responses to each of the research questions to discern practices and processes in educational leadership for achieving equity and excellence in advanced high school programs, benefits and challenges of inclusive programs, and considerations for professional development to support this reform effort. The research findings are presented as follows.

Research Question 1

1. What practices and processes in educational leadership for equity and excellence for detracking are important?

Mentor Administrator Responses

Vision

The importance of a belief that what is most important is what is best for students was emphasized by mentor principals. As administrators stressed:

- What we do must be what's best for kids. That's the key. You must sell the faculty on this. What will it take to make kids successful is the guiding philosophy.
- It's a campus vision, truly a vision that all buy into. We are very student centered. We ask with every decision, 'Is this the right thing for kids?'
- We had a leader who was inclusive and didn't like tracking. You need leaders with vision and the backing to try to do something. Vision and support is important. Our school board and superintendent provide support.

Creating a strong academic focus is also important in the vision for the school. As administrators stressed:

- Our focus is academic . . .It's an attitude. Attitude is everything. For two years in a row, our [faculty] T-shirts said, 'Attitude is everything'. That's the bottom line. No matter what, first are the students...We have to break the cycle of setting up hurdles.
- We are very academically oriented. It is ok to be super-smart and take a full load of honors. We have a critical mass of kids who have chosen to take harder courses. They help establish that it's ok to stay home and study instead

of doing this or that. We have created a culture of academic excellence.

Adopting the new philosophy is vitally important, and this influences actions. For example, as a principal commented:

> We used to remove students from advanced classes if they weren't making a certain grade. We've moved from all that. Even if the student is making C's, the student is better off in a harder course....If we never challenge them, we'll never know how far they can go.

For many schools, entrance criteria still exists. The difference in these schools that are successfully detracking is that these administrators do not use the criteria to control enrollment. As administrators commented:

> • We still have the requirement that a student must have a 3.5 grade average, no grade below a B in the subject, and pass all sections of TAAS, but kids pretty much self-select. It they don't make the grade, they may move down. Students can select an advanced level for interest or ability. There's much more flexibility now.
>
> •We try not to make decisions on a minimum score. We have criteria that the student must have a mid-80's grade in the previous course, reasonably high standardized test scores, teacher recommendations, desire to take the course, and the parent wants the student to take the course. But, I am happy to bend the rules if a student really wants in...Our District has a long list of rules of how to get students out of the classes. I operate on the philosophy that we are trying to get kids in, not get kids out.

Policy and Practices

Having a firm vision and philosophy that guides actions naturally leads to detracking. But to overcome past practices, leadership is needed to adopt policy and to change old ways of doing things. As an administrator commented:

> Twelve years ago, we had five tracks. You'd go in the honors classes and see all these blonde students with blue eyes. I said, "All teachers will teach low-level classes including AP (advanced placement) teachers and department heads. After this experience, the teachers said that we need to break this up. We did away with the low-level classes before the State did. Our policy is, 'Any youngster can sign up for AP or IB (International Baccalaureate) courses. If the student is floundering, then we'll notice and try to help. If we never see the load they can carry, they'll never know'.

It is important to note that the policy of the school is clear and is communicated by the principal. Changing the policy and communicating this change to the community can be very important in impacting change. For example, one high school began detracking efforts by communicating the change in policy to eighth grade classes:

> We've changed the curriculum to give more guidance. Instead, of the eighth grade teachers selecting courses for students, we send a team of administrators and students. We work at noon and visit with the eighth grade. We want them in those classes...We started with eighth grade. We wanted all to try hard subjects. We were not lowering our standards. Instead, of two freshmen English honors, we now have nine...We have three sections of regular and one honors in every team...We also identify students between 8th and 9th

grades who are reading on the college level. We really encourage them in and if they are in Honors English, they also take Honors World Geography. If they are high in math, they take algebra and also biology honors.

An administrator from another high school commented:

> We advertise that the Pre-AP and AP courses are for the students who want to work. . . .In communicating about the classes, we stress that the student may not have to take the classes in college, and this saves money. We also talk extensively to them about the rewards of accomplishment.

In communicating about the program, an administrator reported:

> •We begin in the 8th grade and continue in 9th grade with alot of communication with parents. We do mailings about the advanced courses and have meetings for the department chairs to share with parents how important these courses are. From this, we have a large number of 9th and 10th grade students that funnel into the junior and senior AP classes. . . .Our objective ought to be to teach who want to learn and not be exclusive. It's almost evangelism. I try to share the benefits of the advanced classes with any group interested. It's the people who aren't even questioning the past practices that I worry about.

A part of another school's efforts to match philosophy and actions included renaming all honors courses as Pre-AP and increasing requirements. As administrators commented:

> • Changing the title was a piece of cake. We didn't sell AP as college credit. We sold it that the student needs to do this to be ready for college. It's an expectation... We make rules: English four years, algebra II must be taken to

graduate...Any kid who wants in [an advanced level class], we'll let them in.

• Our district is doing away with the honors courses. Instead, we will have only regular, pre-AP, and AP. Pre-AP is open to any student willing to put forth effort. Next year, we will have Pre-AP courses in English, science, and math.

• All students take four years of math. All go through algebra II, four years of science, social studies, and English. We want students to pick hard courses. We want them in those courses.

A Change Over Time

The change in attitude to open advanced classes to all students has taken some time though some steps were automatic. There was also no one magic bullet to success. Many practices contributed to the effort to get more students involved in advanced courses. The process is not instant, nor always easy. As one principal suggested, "Sometimes it was like pulling eye teeth [to get the different departments talking together about instruction]. As administrators stated:

•It's happened over time. It's not any one thing. It's a million little things we do to recognize academics...It's not a specific strategy. It's a combination of all kinds of things and an attitude that our kids can do. They really can...We work on attitudes about the kids. We're all minority. We have smart kids. With teachers, we ask why kids fail. Some have no running water or electricity. We work on attitudes about these kids. They can do.

•It was not overnight. We are a magnet school. We started in 1978 to

build a culture of academic excellence. Every year, we work at preventing setting up a program of the academic haves and have nots. Our advanced placement and honors teachers teach regular classes as well. We also unite the kids through special interest courses.. . .We have tried to break the elitist ideas for six or seven years. We have made alot of strides in the last six or seven years. We still sometimes fight some of the more traditional views. The student makes 79.4 and the teacher wants him out. Sometimes the student with a 77 or lower needs to stay in the advanced classes.

Other administrators commented:

•It took us five years to get out of the traditional [mode of operation]. We have an interdisciplinary English and history in 11th grade. Math and science are now talking as well as physics and calculus teachers.

•Because we had a semi-open door to honors to start with helped. Our criteria included the student passing TAAS, parent recommendation, and or a screening test. Two out of the three criteria were needed. However, if the parent insisted, the student could have a year in the program. If they could make it, they could stay. It took us awhile for all to accept an open system. It seems to have helped that we send a letter home at the beginning of the courses explaining that the student is in a more rigorous program. The student also can exit the course if failing.

Proactive Efforts

In terms of practices and processes that aided the detracking effort and getting more students involved in advanced courses, practices that influenced the change effort included other change efforts the school faculty was involved in. For instance, one of

the principals stated, "Going to modified block schedules was one of the best things we did in the teaming and interdisciplinary approach." However, some of the practices that influenced this reform were more specific to this reform effort such as offering algebra in summer school to assist in getting more students ready for advanced math classes, establishing vertical teams for curriculum alignment, establishing an academic booster club, and engaging in extensive professional development. Concerning staff development, one principal commented," If anyone's worth hearing, we've brought them for teachers to hear. Our faculty also travels. They go places and lots of people come here." Continually engaging in learning is a mindset of both schools. That the change to more inclusive programs requires proactive leadership efforts was reinforced strongly by administrators comments:

- It is not a natural course of events {to get more students participating in advanced level courses}. It takes intervention. We need to do more earlier. If we can identify students with potential and look and try to find them and switch them to more challenging programs of study, we need to. Our success came because we didn't let the natural course of events just happen. We started in the mid 80's to intervene, and because of this, we are in better shape than some of the schools in our district.
- We don't exclude. We want AP to serve the GT, but we are going with the theory of inclusion. We're not excluding any kids by saying you didn't meet the criteria. We still have the honors criteria from when the application for honors courses were required by the Texas Education Agency, but if a student wants to try the harder classes for six weeks, they can try. If they can make the grades,

we won't boot them out. We are also going to pre-AP for 7th and 8th grades. We want to get more and more to enroll in the AP classes.

Rewards and Celebrations

Other practices that influenced success were the multiple rewards and celebrations established by the schools to celebrate accomplishments of students in academics. One school principal stated:

> We have an academic booster club, like for sports. We have a very lavish banquet to honor academics. We also have a wall in the hall with pictures of the senior class and individual pictures of the valedictorian, salutatorian, and National Merit Scholars. As part of the Renaissance Program of Jostens, rewards for academics are given.

Another principal reported:

> Students have a red and a gold card. Academic letter jackets are given if the student is on the honor roll all year. It the student goes up on his or her average five points a six weeks, prizes are given. The prizes are for all, if improvement.

Research Question 2

2. What are the primary benefits and challenges relative to opening opportunities for greater high school student participation and success in advanced level courses?

Mentor Administrator Responses

Helping students recognize all they are capable of and helping them gain the prerequisite skills are primary challenges, yet detracking also has led to benefits. For example, one principal reported:

> Six years ago, we began to see, especially African American males who had the

ability, but had not taken the necessary math in 8th grade to get to pre-cal and calculus. The last four years, we've sponsored a summer school for algebra. We went from one section of BC and two of AB calculus to three sections of each one. Also we're working on getting all youngsters as a freshman to declare a major and better guide them in preparation for the major.

One challenge is that when a school opens advanced placement classes to more students, all students may not make the 4's and 5's. One principal commented:

> We used to have mostly 4's and 5's [on AP exams when only a select few were allowed into the courses]. Now, we also have 2's and 3's, but we sold our community. We celebrate the 4's and 5's, but we also celebrate those who tried. It's tough for some of the more traditional [to accept this].

A benefit is clearly the increased numbers preparing for college. One principal reported, "We have 73 percent of our students taking the ACT or SAT." Another principal stated the challenge bluntly and emphatically, "With the tools, kids need today, we don't have a choice, we must do more." Another principal commented, "It's an expectation. We have 2,740 students. 300 are in one level or another of calculus. This is a primary benefit of the academic focus."

However, in spite of the benefits of more inclusive programs, some educators continue to hold on to past ideas of setting up hurdles for students to academic success. This is a challenge One principal stressed, "You must have the courage to say to some, 'That's wrong...Your job is to find a way for students to be successful'". As another principal added:

> For example [with the vertical team of department heads meeting with a representative from the three middle schools and a representative from each elementary school] we began discussion in math that we study fractions in 2nd grade, and it is taught every year, but it's our lowest math area. We got people talking about, 'It's not what you teach, it's what students learn.'

The benefits of the vertical team were discussed by another administrator, "I think aligning the courses and having a plan to have Pre-AP work into AP is beneficial."

One challenge may be to keep people talking. As one principal commented, "With 270 teachers on campus, we must formalize it [through vertical teams] to be able to get people talking". Another principal added, "We formed a cadre of 25 teachers of the school and ran. The fast runners set the pace and the others caught up. You have to get a core group of teachers. We are very site-based."

To keep from the challenge of having all the best teachers teach only advanced classes, administrators reinforced the importance of having teachers teach all levels. As one administrator commented, "All teachers teach honors and regular English. In math, we have 28 math teachers, only 2 teach only advanced classes".

One challenge for students in taking advanced placement tests is the cost of the test. One school solved this by paying for the test, if needed, then students repay the cost at $5.00 a week." Another school administrator commented, "Our district pays for the first AP exam for any student."

3. What practices in professional development are effective in promoting knowledge and skills for educational leadership in equity and excellence?

Mentor Administrator Responses

Training all the faculty in gifted and talented (GT) strategies and sending teachers and administrators to AP and Pre-AP training has been very beneficial in promoting detracking. As an administrator stated:

> We sent all teachers to the GT training, all who teach AP to the week-long training, and Pre-AP teachers to the two day institutes. What I hear from the teachers is that it's the best thing we've done. Once they go to this five day training, they want to go again.

Another administrator summarized the need for networking and professional development opportunities to effectiveness by stating:

> We also need to give principals the opportunities for professional development. I've had tremendous opportunities in professional development as a mentor principal. Some don't have this. We need to provide more Principals' Centers around the state. You don't get better by being a principal. You must talk to others and network.

Another key theme concerning professional development was recognition that effective staff development is not simply a presentation by an outside consultant or a one-time event. Quality staff development is on ongoing process with follow-up. It includes the provision of time for teachers to meet together to discuss the improvement of practice. Vertical team meetings by teachers of the various subject areas can be a critical component in improving the academic performance of all students to ensure that students acquire important prerequisite skills for later success in advanced coursework.

CONCLUSION

Sergiovanni stressed in his book, Value-Added Leadership (1990) that principals must demonstrate the moral conviction to "take a stand". From the preliminary findings of this exploratory research study, the importance of administrators' leadership in stressing the need to

make all decisions based on what is best for the student emerged as a strong way that detracking for equity and excellence was being achieved. In addition, as Glickman (1993) suggested, decisions of the school should be based on the school's core values. The administrator guides the school in the recognition of core beliefs which influence actions, such as "Attitude is Everything" and "We can't know how far a student can go, unless we let them to as far as we can and get rid of the hurdles." Proactive leadership efforts include establishing an inclusive, academic vision for the school, changing or not enforcing restrictive policies, and communicating the open policy and the benefits of advanced courses to students and parents. Raising academic expectations to create an inclusive environment takes time and is not an automatic process. Even over time, all faculty may not "buy in" to inclusive practices and policies for advanced high school courses; however, proactive efforts of educational leaders can increase the number of students participating successfully in advanced courses and counteract opposition to inclusive programs. Rewards and celebrations can reinforce the school's academic focus. Challenges may persist, yet benefits are attained when educators proactively seek to increase participation in advanced level courses. As one administrator stressed, "The results then excite other people."

This was an emerging, exploratory study. Preliminary findings were presented here. The study will continue with additional schools in Texas. The practices and processes for detracking a high school have implications for all educators who champion equity and excellence. Above all, educators must question whether school practices and policies are based on what is best for students, providing leadership for enhanced student participation and success in advanced level courses with support systems for student success.

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