The practice that has come to be known as “tracking” began as a response to the influx of immigrant children into America’s schools during the early 20th century. To educate this newly diverse student population, school officials thought it necessary to sort children into different “tracks” based on their ability or past performance.

In the early days of tracking, junior-high and high-school students were assigned to academic, general, or vocational tracks. Today this extreme form of tracking is relatively rare. With the new emphasis on preparing every student for college, tracking in its modern form has come to mean grouping students by ability within subjects. In each subject, students are assigned to advanced, regular, or basic courses depending on their past performance. For instance, students in the advanced track might take pre-calculus as juniors in high school and calculus as seniors, while students in the basic track might go only as far as algebra II or geometry. The creation and growth of Advanced Placement courses is perhaps the best example of how tracking has become an institutionalized practice (see chart on page 2).

The Backlash
Teachers find that the modern form of tracking facilitates instruction by making it easier to gear lessons to the ability level of the whole class. Parents of high-performing students also favor tracking because research shows that students assigned to high-ability groups make greater gains in achievement. However, in studies published in 1986 and 1999, my colleagues and I found that students assigned to low-ability groups score lower on standardized tests than if they had been placed in mixed-ability or high-ability groups.

That finding lies at the core of a backlash against tracking that began in the 1980s. Critics argued that tracking, especially in practice, created greater learning opportunities for high-performing students at the expense of their lower-performing peers. Tracking’s opponents alleged that students in lower tracks often had the weakest teachers in a school, an unchallenging curriculum, few academic role models, and low social status. Moreover, they argued, tracking enabled educators to claim that courses were academic or college preparatory in nature when, in fact, the content lacked even the semblance of rigor.

The movement picked up considerable momentum with the 1985 publication of Jeannie Oakes’s deeply influential Keeping Should Your School Eliminate Tracking? The history of tracking and detracking in America’s schools

By Maureen Hallinan

Promoting New Standards of Professionalism & Educational Enrichment
Track: How Schools Structure Inequality. Oakes provided empirical evidence of the disadvantages endured by students placed in lower tracks. Overall, Oakes characterized tracking as an elitist practice that perpetuated the status quo by giving students from privileged families greater access to elite colleges and high-income careers.

Perhaps the most notorious episode in the detracking movement occurred in Massachusetts and California in the early 1990s. Officials in both states mandated that middle schools eliminate or reduce tracking. However, in The Tracking Wars: State Reform Meets School Policy, Brookings Institution scholar Tom Loveless demonstrated how schools, possessing a considerable degree of autonomy, were able to implement the new policy in ways that were consistent with local preferences. While neither state withdrew the mandate, the detracking movement could hardly claim victory.

Minor Inroads

The National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 asked a representative sample of teachers whether students were assigned to classes comprising students who were above average, average, below average, or ranging widely in achievement. Their responses suggested that, nationwide, 15 percent of 8th-grade students were heterogeneously grouped for English classes, 14 percent for mathematics, 12 percent for science, and 18 percent for social studies. The remaining large majority of students were in classes with students of roughly the same ability level.

A second study, the Survey of High School Curricular Options, sampled 912 secondary schools in 1993 to obtain information about curriculum differentiation. It reported that 86 percent of high schools offered courses in which students were tracked. The data revealed that 14 percent of 10th graders took math courses in groups in which students’ abilities differed widely; the same was true for 28 percent of 10th graders in English.

What explains the resilience of tracking? For one thing, teaching in a detracked school is far more difficult than tracking? For one thing, teaching in a detracked school is far more difficult than.

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Subtle Influence

Despite widespread opposition to detracking and the failure of many efforts to institutionalize the policy, the detracking movement has had a major impact on school reform. While most schools still assign students to classes based on ability, the movement has heightened public awareness of the often inadequate resources and overwhelming curriculum provided to students in low-track classes.

Furthermore, the detracking movement has challenged widely held beliefs regarding the notion of “ability” and the role it plays in determining the kind of curriculum to which students will be exposed. More educators are now convinced that nearly all students are capable of mastering a challenging curriculum. New academic standards, state tests, and accountability requirements represent an effort to ensure that all students are given access to a rigorous curriculum. Detracking may never become widespread, but changes such as these are expected to improve the achievement of all students, particularly those who are ill served by the negative aspects of tracking as it is currently practiced.

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Teachers have a new resource to use with their students in class. StudentNewsDaily.com is a website promoting media literacy for high school students. “The goal is to build students’ knowledge of current events and strengthen their critical thinking skills,” says the site’s creator, Kathy Privrat.

It provides teachers with simple, concise activities corresponding to the day’s top news story and weekly opinion pieces. StudentNewsDaily.com other features include: a student poll, the opportunity for students to interpret editorial cartoons, lessons on identifying bias in the media, as well as human interest items and links. The site aims to provide the media resources necessary for students to have a balanced view of the news.

Kathy Privrat, a former New York City public high school teacher, created the news site to meet the need for providing students with multiple news sources. “In public schools, students are taught about current events using CNN, the New York Times, and the Washington Post,” says Privrat. “Millions of American adults use many other new media sources, but these sites do not currently provide education pages with lesson plans. StudentNewsDaily.com provides resources for teachers who recognize the importance of obtaining news from other perspectives.”

StudentNewsDaily.com is the first news site for high school students to use multiple news sources to teach current events.


StudentNewsDaily.com Site Features

- **Daily Featured Article**: The top news story of the day is posted here. A link to comprehension and critical thinking questions.
- **Tuesday’s News Issue**: An in-depth look at a top news story of the week with a link asking students’ opinions.
- **Wednesday’s Biased Item**: A weekly example of biased reporting and questions about it, along with definitions of the types of media bias.
- **Thursday’s Commentary**: A commentary on the week’s top news story with a link to comprehension and critical thinking questions.
- **Friday’s News Quiz**: A multiple choice quiz on the week’s Daily Featured Articles.
- **‘World’s Quick Takes’**: Amusing and sometimes thought-provoking human interest news briefs.
- **Quote of the Week**: Thought-provoking and amusing quote.
- **The StudentNewsDaily Poll**: Student opinion poll.
African-American (+164 significant increases in students earning a 3 or higher.

between 18 and 20 percent of this level of achievement, with setts, and Utah are close to Florida, Maryland, Massachu-
a grade of 3 or higher on an percent of its students achieve nation to see more than 20

AP Scores Higher Last Year

According to the College Board’s first-ever “Advanced Placement Report to the Nation,” 13.2 percent of the graduating class of 2004 demonstrated mastery (at least a 3 on a 5-point scale) of one or more Advanced Placement (AP) exams, up from 10.2 percent from the 2000 class. Moreover, over the past five years, all fifty states and the District of Columbia reported an increase in the percentage of students succeeding on AP exams. For example, New York is the first state in the nation to see more than 20 percent of its students achieve a grade of 3 or higher on an AP exam, and California, Florida, Maryland, Massachu-
sets, and Utah are close to this level of achievement, with between 18 and 20 percent of students earning a 3 or higher.

Since 1996, there have been significant increases in African-American (+164 percent), Hispanic (+197 percent), and American Indian (+115 percent) students scoring 3 or higher on AP exams, and the proportion of Hispanic students taking AP exams (13.1 percent) is today about the same as the propor-
tion of Hispanic students in public schools (12.8 percent). However, African-American students remain significantly underrepresented in AP: African-American students make up 13.2 percent of the student population but only 6.0 percent of AP test takers. Research shows that students who succeed on one or more AP exams are more likely than their peers to complete a bachelor’s degree in four years. President Bush has proposed a 73 percent increase in the Department’s AP initiatives.

The CNA Corporation (which operates the Institute for Public Research) re-

National Certification Study Unwittingly Exposes Salary Scale Flaws

The report is available at http://www.cna.org/documents/CavaluzzoStudy.pdf

Quote of Note

"High self-esteem in schoolchil-
dren does not produce better grades. (Actually, kids with high self-esteem do have slightly better grades in most studies, but that’s because getting good grades leads to higher self-esteem, not the other way around.) In fact, according to a study by Donald Fosyth at Virginia Commonwealth University, college students with mediocre grades who got regular self-esteem strokes from their professors ended up doing worse on final exams than students who were told to suck it up and try harder…. After all these years, I’m sorry to say my recommendation is this: Forget about self-esteem and concen-
trate more on self-control and self-discipline."

Roy F. Baumeister, professor in the Department of Psychology at Florida State University. (January 25, 2005 Los Angeles Times)
"Most states aren’t acknowledging the fallout from having demanded so little from teacher preparation over the years."

Searching the Attic: How states are determining “Quality Teachers”

M ost states are unlikely to make genuine strides in addressing teacher quality problems, insofar as veteran teachers are concerned, so concluded the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ).

It released the second in a series of reports that highlights states’ progress towards meeting NCLB’s goal of putting a highly qualified teacher in every classroom in the nation.

Key recommendations:

1. At reauthorization, NCLB should be amended to grant middle school teachers highly qualified status, even if they only possess a college minor in their subject area. The law currently requires these teachers to have a major.
2. Subject matter tests for elementary teachers should also include a test in scientifically-based early reading instruction.
3. The federal government needs to take a more active role in bringing more public transparency to states’ subject matter licensing exams, with an independent review body noting which tests are the most rigorous and recommending minimum passing scores on the most widely used tests.

For the full report, visit www.nctq.org.

For example, one teacher complained her district considered laying off twenty teachers but no administrators. Another report comes from several teachers blowing the whistle on their district spending $4 million for a discipline management training program, only to see it quickly terminated by many schools.

While major losses result from bureaucratic inefficiency and incompetence, individual fraud is common.

For example, in September 2004, a kickback scheme in Fort Worth, Texas, resulted in a district director of maintenance and a contractor each being sentenced to eight years in prison for reportedly defrauding the district of nearly $16 million.

Source: David W. Kirkpatrick, Prosperity Foundation, www.freedomfoundation.us

Smaller Classes: Achievement and Class Size Reduction

Researchers at the University of London found no evidence that children in smaller classes made more progress in math, English, or science.

The study covered students aged 7 to 11.

The researchers additionally found no evidence that teacher characteristics, such as age, level of experience, or length of time in their current school, “had any influence upon pupil attainment in any [academic] discipline.”

Textbook Bias

Critical Thinking Needed in Evaluating Textbook on Islam

By Ginger Tinney

S

ince the September 11th terrorist attacks, teachers have tried to ans-
swer students’ questions pertaining to the Middle East and the Muslim religion. As
our American presence continues in Iraq, and as American politics continue to focus
on foreign relations with the Middle East, our schools are hungry for ways to educate
both teachers and students on the culture, politics, sociology, religion, and, of course,
geography of the Arab World.

With growing Arab and Middle Eastern populations in our own country — as well as
the growth of Islam in the United States — the need to pursue this type of
multicultural curriculum has become a pressing one.

Unfortunately, in the search for curriculum to serve this pur-
pose, Audrey Shabbas’ Arab World Studies Notebook
(AWSN) has found its way into schools nationwide. While an
academic, factual, and insight-
ful presentation of Islam and
the Arab World would be a
welcome addition to a
curriculum that should not be
allowed to continue in public schools. William Bennetta, president of The Textbook
League, defined the AWSN as:

“A vehicle for disseminating
disinformation, including a multitude of
false, distorted, or utterly absurd claims that
is presented as historical facts. I infer that
the “Notebook” has three principal pur-
poses: inducing teachers to embrace Islamic
beliefs; inducing teachers to embrace po-

itical views that are favored by the MEPC
and AWAIR; and impelling teachers to dis-
seminate those religious beliefs and politi-
cal views in schools. The promotion of Is-
lam in the Notebook is unrestrained….In a
public school setting, the religious-indoc-
trination work which Shabbas wants teach-
ers to perform would clearly be illegal.”

The Association of Professional Okla-
oma Educators (APOE) is unwilling to
stand by as falsehoods are
taught to our children as facts. In response to Shabbas’
AWSN, we at APOE have
joined with former Shi’ite
Muslim Reza Safa who is an
international speaker and
Christian pastor at
Fisherman’s House Church in
Tulsa, Oklahoma. Unlike Ms.
Shabbas, who grew up in
America and married a Mus-
lim, Safa experienced first-
hand the Muslim beliefs and
the way America is viewed by
Muslims. Pastor Safa is a best-
selling author and expert who
has written several books on
Islam and the Arab culture. In
the future, Pastor Safa will work with APOE
Foundation not only to provide educational
workshops to Oklahoma students, teachers, and
school administrators, but also to de-
velop a factual and informative alternative
to Shabbas’ propagandist curriculum.

APOE’s first presentation with Pastor
Safa was conducted in Weatherford, Okla-
ahoma, for the Weatherford Public Schools
teacher-in-service day on January 3, 2005. As
a part of this seminar, Pastor Safa dis-
cussid his personal background as an Ira-
nian Shi’ite Muslim, the Culture of the

Middle East (including
people groups, family structure, religion,
economics, and politics), modern history
of the Middle East (including Mohammad
and the birth of Islam, Islamic dominance
in the Middle East, major events of the 20th
century, U.S. policy and the Middle East,
growth of radical Islam, and growth of
Christianity), and Middle Eastern Muslims
in America (increased immigration and
growth, areas of influence, and under stand-
ing Middle Eastern Muslim students).

One APOE local leader reported that,
since hosting the seminar at her school,
“many teachers have come up to me to tell
me how informative and timely the Middle
East/Islam presentation was. They have
said that it was one of the most useful and
interesting presentations we’ve had in a
long time.” The APOE Foundation has
played the primary role in funding and co-
ordinating this workshop to provide truth-
ful and appropriate education on Islam and
the Middle East to Oklahoma teachers.

Ginger Tinney is the
Executive Director of the
Associated Professional
Oklahoma Educators, a
partner with the Association
of American Educators.

Every year, Washington Post’s Style Invitational asks readers to take any word from the dictionary, alter it by adding, subtracting, or changing one letter, and supply a new definition. Here are this year’s winners.

**Bozone (n.):** The substance surrounding stupid people that stops bright ideas from penetrating. The bozone layer unfortunately shows little sign of breaking down in the near future.

**Intoxication:** Euphoria at getting a tax refund, which lasts until you realize it was your money to start with.

**Karmageddon:** It’s like, when everybody is sending off all these really bad vibes, right? And then, like, the Earth explodes and it’s like, a serious bummer, dude.

**Hipatitis:** Terminal coolness.

**Decafalon (n.):** The grueling event of getting through the day consuming only things that are good for you.

**Dopeler effect:** The tendency of stupid ideas to seem smarter when they come at you rapidly.

**Glibido:** All talk and no action.

Across the country, over 250,000 teachers have decided to leave or forego the teachers’ unions and join the Association of American Educators or our sister organizations at the state level.

**Teachers by calling, professionals by choice.**

The Association of American Educators

www.aateachers.org
L ast fall the House of Representatives voted to increase education funding by $2 billion. The Department of Education will receive a total of $57.7 billion to administer K-12 and postsecondary programs in 2005. Programs serving poor and disabled students will receive the largest boost. Funding for education programs administered by other agencies, such as Head Start, also will increase. The bill passed with the support of Democrats and all but a few Republicans.

While the bill brings education spending to an all-time high, the National Education Association continues to claim that it “falls far short of what schools need to fully meet the mandates of the so-called ‘No Child Left Behind’ law.” Another advocacy group, the Committee for Education Funding, calls the bill a “fiscal starvation strategy.” While it may be too much to expect them to say “this is sufficient” or “this is too much,” or even “thank you,” these special-interest groups, at least, shouldn’t mislead people. NCLB is not an unfunded mandate. The act is both funded and voluntary. Besides this, there were no promises. Congress sets funding levels for all programs in annual appropriations bills. Several studies suggest that these funding levels are adequate.

Special-interest groups are not the only ones guilty of disingenuous rhetoric. Congress routinely claims that it is doing all it can to maximize funding for poor and disabled children. Yet, the annual appropriations bills are invariably chock full of pork-barrel spending and funding for special-interest programs such as the Historic Whaling and Trading Partners Exchange Program, Ready-to-Learn Television, and the Women’s Educational Equity Act, to name only three.

Rhetoric aside, the question remains: Is the level of federal funding for education sufficient? To answer this question, one must first put federal spending in perspective. Of the half a trillion dollars the nation spends on its schools, federal funding accounts for less than 10 percent—a small slice of a very large pie.

Internationally, the United States is the big spender. The U.S. is second only to Switzerland in K-12 spending, relative to per-capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and it rises to first place when post-secondary spending is added. However, in terms of achievement, American students are not at the head of the class. In fact, by the 12th grade, they drop to near the bottom in math and science on both international and national assessments. On one international science and math test for 12th graders, the U.S. ranked 18th out of 21 countries. On our own tests—the National Assessment of Educational Progress—less than a quarter of 12th grade students are proficient in either subject.

If big spending has left us near the bottom of the pile academically, is the funding question really the most important one to be asking? There will likely never be consensus on what constitutes adequate spending at either the state or the national level. But to make progress in education policy, it would be a good start to admit that money should not be the only question up for debate.