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Tracking, Endorsements and Differentiated Diplomas – When "Different" Really is Less – A Post Session Update

What is Tracking?

Tracking is the practice of grouping students into particular courses of curriculum that lead to different paths when students graduate from high school. Historically, tracking has sometimes resulted from placing students in different courses based on what was commonly called *ability grouping*. Ability group designations varied among schools but generally included "high," "moderate" and "low" scholastic ability designations or tracks. Student assignments into these tracks tended to begin at the third grade (Sadker & Zittleman, 2006) but could happen as early as a student's entry into school.

Once tracked into a group, it was difficult for a student to change tracks – that is, for example, to be re-assigned from a low ability track to a moderate or high ability alternative. This lack of movement across tracks was reinforced by the fact that students in the different tracks were provided different curriculum. Students placed in the high ability group received more challenging college-bound content, while those placed in the low ability track received minimum and often vocational-oriented curriculum.

The practice lost support in the 1960s when it was revealed that tracking disproportionately impacted low-income and minority students, who were assigned to low tracks (Oakes, et al., 2012; Wheelock,1992).

What Has Been Learned About the Negative Effects of Tracking?

Due to its widespread use in U.S. schools over several decades, studies were conducted to assess the effects of tracking on school operations and on students subjected to the practice. Some early studies concluded that tracking of students was beneficial in that it was supposed to allow for more efficient grouping of students of similar "ability" levels and thus allow teachers who were assigned whole classes of like students to more effectively teach and reach all their charges – as opposed to trying to group students of varying levels and splitting time and focus on different groupings over the course of a school day (Hallinan, 2004).

Later research however strongly disputed tracking practices, noting that ability grouping did not produce improved instruction and that it tended to permanently and disproportionately force some sub-groups of students (especially low-income and minority pupils) into low ability tracks that resulted in diminished post-secondary options (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Education Rights Center, 2013).

Researchers also found that, too often, tracking of students began in the early elementary grades even before most students had an opportunity to demonstrate academic potential. These early tracking trends were sustained at the middle school and high school level, permanently relegating students to whatever track they were initially assigned.

Additional research found that the criteria used to justify the assigned ability group tracks (intelligence tests, nationally-normed assessments, or teacher judgment, for example) were often flawed or misapplied or racist. The tracks also did not reflect the actual capacity of students' future performance. (Valenzuela, 1999; Oakes, et al., 2012)

As workforce requirements changed, there was a simultaneous push to increase the rigor of school instruction to a level that would increase the number of U.S. students who would be prepared to enroll and succeed in college. Having recognized that global competiveness required a better educated populace, states and schools began to ramp up curriculum and student expectations over the last three decades.

What Does Tracking Look Like in Texas Today?

Since 1984, state leaders stressed the need for all Texas students to have high quality curriculum. Since 2006, the legislature directed high schools to provide a 4-by-4 (16 required high quality core curriculum courses – four years in English, math, science and social studies). But just as demographics shifted making Texas schools a majority-minority system, the legislature back-tracked on its commitment to Texas families.

During the 2010-11 school year, new Texas graduation guidelines went into effect with incoming ninth grade students. The Texas Legislature established three tracks: a *minimum* high school program, a *recommended* high school program and a *distinguished achievement* program. A fourth path, "career and technology," was interwoven within the recommended program.

Then in 2011, the legislature further diluted the 4-by-4 by allowing one of the required math and one of the required science courses to be taught in what was referred to as an "applied manner." This means that the content of the class could be delivered in a modified approach that, for example, incorporated the math material in building trades class or science material in "career" focused class. The curriculum change was a step away from rigor and likely would have the effect of denying some students the opportunity to go to and graduate from college.

Rigor was weakened even more during this year's legislative session. Rather than providing the 4-by-4 required high quality core curriculum courses, the new default "Foundation Plan" requires four years of English, but only three years each of mathematics, science and social studies – three fewer advanced core content courses than was required under the old 4-by-4 plan.

In addition, policymakers adopted **new tracking schemes called "endorsements."** Beginning in the 2014-15 school year, each student, in consultation with counselors and parents, will be required to select one or more endorsements – each requiring different additional courses in math, science or social studies. Completed endorsements will be posted on students' high school transcripts and diplomas.

The five possible endorsements (that likely will not be available in all districts) include:

- **Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Endorsement,** which requires students to earn additional credits related to science, including environmental science, technology, computer science, engineering and advanced math.
- **Business and Industry Endorsement,** which includes courses related to database management, information technology, communications, accounting, finance, marketing, graphic design, architecture, *construction, welding, logistics, automotive technology, agricultural science,* and *heating, ventilation, and air conditioning* [emphasis added].
- **Public Service Endorsement,** which includes courses related to health sciences and occupations, education and training, law enforcement, and culinary arts and hospitality.
- **Arts and Humanities Endorsement,** which includes courses related to political science, world languages, cultural studies, English literature, history and fine arts.
- **Multidisciplinary Studies Endorsement,** which allows a student to: (a) select courses from the curriculum of each of the other endorsement areas; and (b) earn credits in a variety of advanced courses from multiple content areas sufficient to complete the "distinguished level of achievement" under the foundation high school program.

Graduation requirements also include two years of a foreign language, one credit in fine arts, one credit in physical education and five electives, bringing the total graduation requirement to 26 credits. The legislature authorized the State Board of Education to determine the details, such as which courses are considered advanced, what courses qualify for the endorsements and what new courses need to be created.

While the structure of the various new graduation paths will undoubtedly be confusing to families (and frankly to school personnel for a time), an even deeper concern is the **lack of clarity about which paths and which courses within those paths will prepare students for college.** And this will vary across schools and school districts.

Students enrolled in the foundation-plus-endorsement plan will be required to earn 26 credits, though the substance and rigor of those credits may differ from one endorsement option to another. Students will be able to opt out of the foundation-plus-endorsement (initially requiring parent approval) and will thereby graduate with a **minimum program diploma, which will make them ineligible for college.** The Texas Higher Education Commissioner Raymund Paredes expressed his concern on several occasions, stating "There is no assurance that the foundation curriculum will provide all students a solid academic foundation… We expect a decline in college readiness" (McKenzie, 2013).

And incredibly, the Texas Education Agency has told schools that they no longer need to provide accelerated instruction for students who did not pass end-of-course exams in Algebra I, English I, English II, biology and U.S. history this year. (TEA, 2013)

Among the most questionable of the changes is the fact that **Algebra II – considered a gateway course for success in college – was excluded from Texas' revised graduation requirements** for every track except the distinguished achievement recognition. Though all districts will be required to "make available" Algebra II classes, making it a non-required class for graduation assures that many students will likely be disinclined to take it. To be considered for the Top 10 Percent Plan, students must pass Algebra II. But the fact that Texas will now only assess Algebra I for graduation and accountability purposes, in turn, provides even less incentive for schools to encourage students to enroll in and succeed in this important subject.

> Working together, certain interests succeeded in convincing the majority of Texas policymakers that schools should not be required to provide a high quality education to all students.

Though some consider the newly-adopted student tracking policies as innocuous or even a move forward, many people are understandably concerned about the implications for students and communities. Despite assurances that the new foundation curriculum and subsequent endorsements will continue to emphasize academic rigor, the state's higher education leaders predict that reducing the 4-by-4 requirements will result in students not being prepared for college and many more students will need remediation when they enroll in college after experiencing the new weaker requirements. Remediation is already a sizable problem in Texas where 51 percent of students entering a two-year college were enrolled in remediation as were 22.5 percent of those entering a four-year college (Complete College America, 2012). And very few college students in remediation courses end up graduating.

The head of the Texas Association of Business recently noted that tracked curriculum will reduce the academic rigor currently present in the recommended program despite arguments to the contrary by tracking proponents (Kronberg Report, 2013).

Ironically this push in Texas for *reduced* academic requirements comes on the heels of studies finding, for example, that between 2010 and 2020, new jobs in Texas requiring post-secondary education and training will grow by 3 million, while jobs for high school graduates and dropouts will grow by 1.8 million (Carnevale, et al., 2013).

Why Has Tracking Returned to Texas?

The movement to reinstate student tracking is coming from two different directions. One group of proponents includes school leaders who feel challenged or even threatened by the idea that they must prepare all students to be college ready. Part of the resistance is based on a misperception that not all students are "college material." Relatedly, some school leaders feel threatened by accountability requirements that measure how many students graduate and how many are college ready. In recent developments, the Texas Education Agency announced plans to move forward on creating applied math and other classes that will deviate from the regular courses taken by students in the college-ready curriculum. The state's drift toward connect-the-dot, diluted science and mathematics instead of rigorous courses moves us even further away from ensuring economic competitiveness and universally high expectations for all students.

The assumption is that certain students will not be able to pass more rigorous or college prep courses and thus will not be able to graduate. In fact, this prophecy comes true when school leaders are unwilling to change their expectations and practices to ensure all students are educated to high standards. As a result, schools face poor school ratings.

Joining the push against preparing all students to be college ready are representatives of some business interests who are less concerned about Texas' economic productivity and more focused on ensuring that their own workers can perform specific tasks required for their

business operations that currently do not depend on college achievement. While many business leaders cry out for a college-educated workforce, a few complain that too many high school graduates are over-prepared or are not sufficiently job skills-ready. In Texas, this has resulted in pressure for alternative curricula or diploma endorsements that essentially track students into five graduation plans. The five plans come with five different curriculum requirements and lead to five different endorsements that are reflected on a student's diploma and high school transcript.

Summary

Despite stated claims that the new endorsements will lead to all students being college ready, the fact that each requires different numbers of math, science or social studies courses to graduate creates major concerns. The rigor of those courses also is at issue. And whether or not colleges will accept some endorsements is not clear and will not be so for a number of years.

Further, how will parents know if enrolling their child in one endorsement plan over another will give their student more or less of a chance to get into a selective college? How will schools ensure that minority and low-income students are not disproportionately placed in lower endorsement tracks? What information will be provided to communities so that they can monitor the number and characteristics of students assigned to the various endorsements? How easy or difficult will it be to change from one endorsement to another in a student's sophomore, junior or even senior year? How will we know if any of the endorsements better prepare students who choose the workforce over college, than the 4-by-4 curriculum it is replacing?

Rather than rushing into a wholesale shift, perhaps a phased-in process that includes piloting some of the endorsement ideas – with rigorous evaluation of intended (and unintended) outcomes – should have been considered.

All of these questions were not addressed by the plans considered and eventually adopted by the Texas legislature in 2013. Whatever direction the new endorsement-based diplomas go, at the very least, the following IDRA principles should apply:

- Students should not be tracked into low-level courses nor into different diploma routes or graduation plans.
- Schools should provide a high quality curriculum that prepares all students to enroll in and complete college, supplemented by optional courses that prepare them to enter the workforce after graduation.

In a survey IDRA conducted among minority and low-income students, 95 percent of high school seniors said they want to go to college (Bojorquez, 2010). **Policymakers and schools should not make pre-college decisions on behalf of students or track them into low-level courses that limit career options.**

Research on 21st century workforce needs indicates that the majority of jobs will require some level of education beyond high school. Employers in turn will need employees who are life-long learners prepared to adapt to the demands of a rapidly changing workplace.

According to a 2010 jobs-related report produced by the Center on Education and the Workforce, out of a projected 4 million vacancies, 2.2 million will require post-secondary credentials between 2008 and 2018 (Carnevale, et al., 2010). The same report ranks Texas 41st in post-secondary intensity (preparedness) for 2018. The Chronicle of Higher Education reports that Texas ranks last among 10 major states in the percentage of the population with a college degree (2010). Future state workforce needs will require people with more, not less, rigorous educational preparation. Rather than succumbing to short-term pressure to water-down its high school curricula, Texas leaders must be stepping up, not stepping back. Our students deserve better and our collective, mutually tied futures demand it.

Resources

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New (Reduced) Core Content Courses and Related New Diploma Endorsements

Curriculum	English	Math	Science	Social Studies	Other
New Curriculum Requirements: Foundation Plan = 22 credits					
New "Foundation Curriculum"	**4 credits**	**3 credits**	**3 credits**	**3 credits**	**9 credits**
	English I *	Algebra I*	Biology*	World Geography **or** World History **or** a combination of the two	Foreign language or a computer programming language (2 credits)
	English II *	Geometry	IPC or Advanced Science (tbd by SBOE)	U.S. History*	Fine Arts
**Includes STAAR end-of-course exam*	English III	Advanced Math (tbd by SBOE)	Advanced Science (tbd by SBOE)	U.S. Government (½ credit) and Economics (½ credit)	Physical Education
	Advanced English (tbd by SBOE)				Electives (5 credits)

New Curriculum Requirements: Endorsements = 4 credits

Students must also choose one or more of five *endorsements*, each requiring additional core content courses depending on the endorsement focus. Not all endorsements will be available at every school district. The state will develop end-of-course score criteria that students will have to meet in each area to earn this endorsement.

- **Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Endorsement**
- **Business and Industry Endorsement**
- **Public Service Endorsement**
- **Arts and Humanities Endorsement**
- **Multidisciplinary Studies Endorsement**

Note 1: With parent approval, students will be able to opt out of the endorsement and will thereby graduate with a **minimum program diploma**, which will make them ineligible for college.

Note 2: Students can earn **"distinguished level of achievement"** designation on their diploma by taking the fourth credits in math (including Algebra II) and science, taking the requirements for at least one endorsement and meeting a certain level of academic performance.

Note 3: Students can earn **"performance acknowledgement"** for outstanding performance in a dual credit course; in bilingualism and biliteracy; on an AP test or IB exam; or on the PSAT, the ACT-Plan, SAT or ACT; or for earning a nationally- or internationally-recognized business or industry certification or license.