



## **LEGISLATION POLICY BRIEF**

### **Universal Access to a Quality Education: Research and Recommendations for the Elimination of Curricular Stratification**

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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# **Universal Access to a Quality Education: Research and Recommendations for the Elimination of Curricular Stratification**

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## **Executive Summary**

*Ronnie and Tyrone are both former students at South Side High School in Long Island New York. They both were raised in public housing, they are both African American, and they both entered high school having struggled with academics. Then the school took over.*

*Ronnie entered 9<sup>th</sup> grade in 1991, when the school pushed struggling students into low-track classes, separate and apart from more successful students. Due to tracking, classes in the school were stratified by race and socio-economic status. Ronnie was assigned to low-track skills classes, and he dropped out at the end of his junior year.*

*Tyrone entered the school in 2002, after it had adopted a policy of heterogeneous grouping. The school placed him in the same academically demanding classes as his wealthy and middle-class schoolmates. The school responded to his needs with support classes. Tyrone also responded, passing multiple International Baccalaureate courses and then going on the college.*

The beneficial effects of heterogeneous grouping at South Side High School went well beyond Tyrone. This can be seen in how much the school has narrowed the achievement gap between white and minority students. Of the students entering South Side High School in 1996, 32% of all African American or Hispanic and 88% of all White or Asian American graduates earned New York State Regents diplomas. Of those entering South Side in 2001, just five years later, 92% of all African American or Hispanic and 98% of all White or Asian American graduates earned Regents diplomas. In June of 2009, 95% of the school's minority students graduated with Regents diploma, far surpassing the rate for white students in New York State.

This sort of progress has been a long time in coming. For well over twenty-five years, education commissions and prominent researchers have documented the negative effects of curricular stratification—the practice of grouping students into different academic classes by perceived ability, commonly known as

‘tracking.’ With little scientific debate remaining on the harmful effects of this curricular stratification, for individuals as well as society, the primary focus has finally shifted to questions about how best to reform. What does a high-quality, heterogeneously grouped academic program look like, and how can it be most successful?

This brief presents three case studies: of a school (a San Diego charter), a district (the home of South Side High School), and a nation (Finland) that have abolished curricular stratification and promoted outstanding student achievement. Based on those successes we highlight lessons and offer recommendations for changing policy and practice.

In the past, potential reformers were wary of heterogeneous grouping because there were few well-documented, successful alternatives to stratified systems. In short, the excuse for low-expectations classes was simply that there was no alternative. But today’s successful heterogeneously grouped classrooms and schools—where all students are taught a challenging, common curriculum—offer convincing proof that this reform can produce increased achievement and far more equitable outcomes, and they illustrate the path to such success.

The educational leaders in the three systems described in this brief rejected curricular stratification because it has been shown to exacerbate the societal or natural disadvantages suffered by many children. These leaders realized that when students who experience difficulty are provided with an inferior curriculum, they are certain to fall farther behind. In contrast, the high-quality heterogeneously grouped schools they created give all students access to the best curriculum and an academic support system that helps ensure that they take advantage of it. These schools hold clear lessons for leaders of other schools, where students are still stratified into tracks. Detracking provides a realistic and proven pathway to academic excellence grounded in true equity.

Accordingly, the principal recommendation made here is that policy makers and educators follow the path supported by the research evidence: the elimination of curricular tracks that separate students by race, socio-economic status, or assumptions about their learning potential. That is, we recommend the elimination of curricular stratification.

We acknowledge the complexity of this reform, and we therefore also provide recommendations to guide policymakers and school districts in their attempts to move forward with the reform and at the same time provide optimal learning environments and challenging curricula for all students during the period of transition.

Among other things, we recommend that states require schools and districts to identify all curricular tracks, describe their composition by racial and socio-economic groups, and communicate student placement policies. Policymakers should communicate clearly with the public, explaining what the data demonstrate about tracking and the reasons for reform. Detracking—the phasing out of curricular stratification—should begin with the lowest track, and meaningful access to Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses should be available to all students throughout the reform process.

Finally, schools need support as the reform proceeds, with a corresponding need for an organized network that connects educators with each other and with researchers, in order to promulgate best practices and strategies. Students need supports as well, as do teachers in the form of sustained professional development so that they are prepared to successfully instruct all learners in heterogeneously grouped classrooms.

The final section of the brief, authored by attorney Jennifer W. Bezoza, presents model statutory code language. These statutory provisions can be used by state legislators seeking to implement the recommendations set forth in the brief.