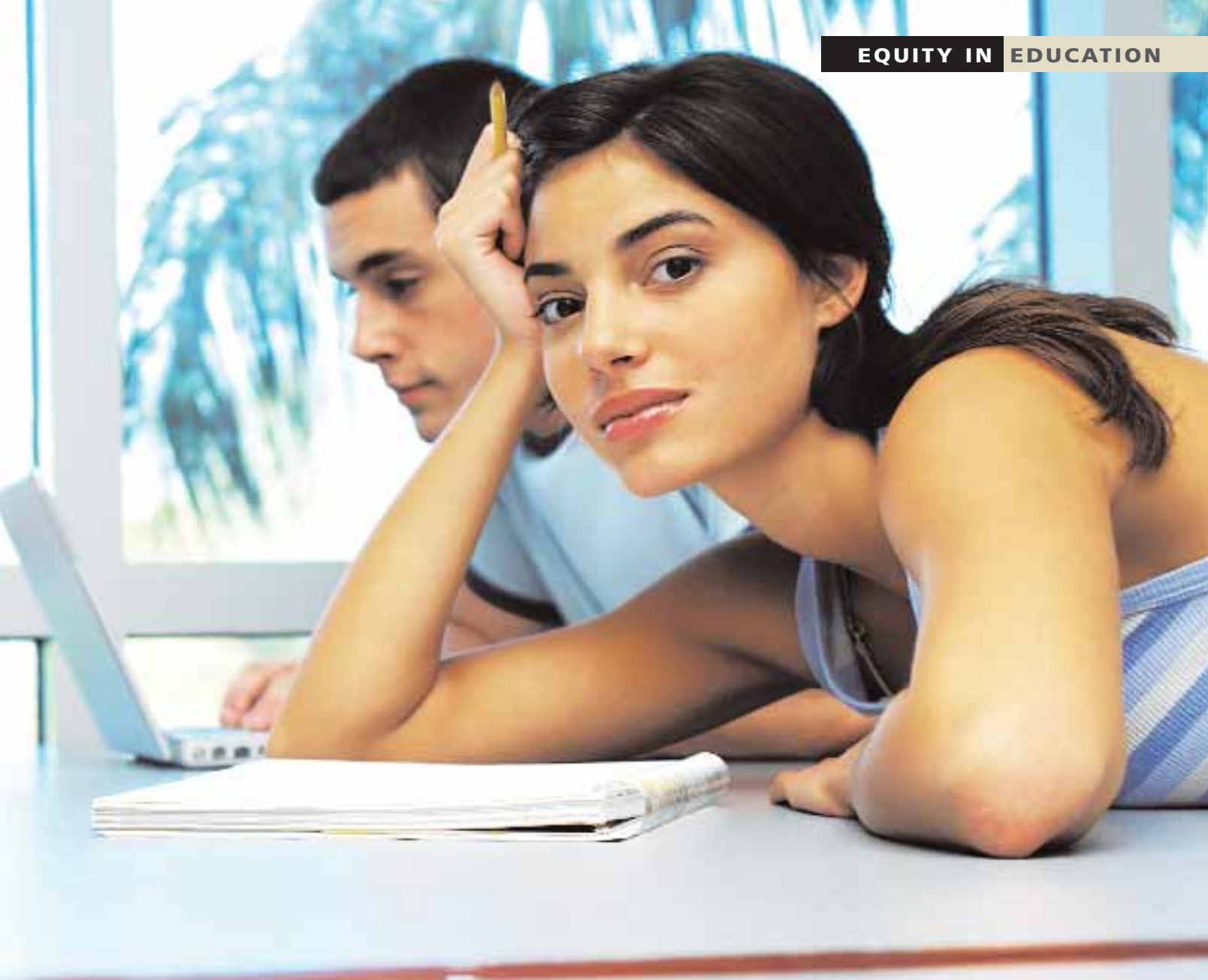# Equity in the
Classroom

BY JOSEPH DIMARTINO AND SHERRI MILES

Joseph DiMartino *(joseph_dimartino@brown.edu) is the director of Secondary School Redesign at the Education Alliance at Brown University.* *Sherri Miles* *is a senior writer/editor at the Education Alliance.*

A t the Education Alliance's second annual Secondary School Showcase in Providence, RI, in January 2004, schools from across the country demonstrated that educational equity can be achieved through the heterogeneous grouping of students and through differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all learners. Schools at the showcase presented their reform strategies, many of which aligned with the seven cornerstone strategies in *Breaking Ranks II* (NASSP, 2004). The fourth cornerstone strategy focuses on ensuring that teachers use a variety of instructional strategies and assessments—such as differentiated instruction, experiential learning, and integrated assessment—to accommodate individual learning styles. To promote equity, instructional strategies should take place in heterogeneously grouped classrooms.

"While it is true that all students, no matter what our expectations, may achieve unequally, they deserve to go to school in a system that does not guarantee it," said Pam Fisher, a staff member at the Center for Inquiry on Secondary Education for the Maine Department of Education. "They deserve schools that are intelligent and equitable by design, schools which assure access to knowledge and which have the creativity and flexibility to give students the additional resources they need to attain that knowledge."

PREVIEW

Educational equity creates a culture of fairness for all students regarding opportunity, access, and respect for diverse learning styles.

Detracking, differentiating instruction, and using integrated assessments are required to meet the goal of educating all students to high standards.

Detracking and Heterogeneous Grouping

"Faced with a dizzying array of differences among the students they attempt to teach, educators have struggled with ways to reduce these differences and make teaching more effective," said Paul George, a professor of education at the University of Florida. "One very common, and common-sense, way of dealing with these differences has been to divide students into class-size groups based on a measure of the students' perceived ability or prior achievement, and then to design and deliver differentiated learning experiences to each group of students." Commonly known as tracking, this practice has appeared "in virtually every school district in the nation sometime during the last 120 years."

Fisher explained, "We've grown up in a system that urges us to believe that some kids are smarter than others and that somehow we can accurately sort this out. Further, we place less emphasis on effort and the value of long-term persistence than we do on one's perceived native ability. Thus, when students have difficulty in school, our tendency has been to place that student in an 'easier' class with less challenging work."

Although tracking is a widespread practice, it is a highly controversial approach to educating students. More than 700 studies have been done in the past 50 years on tracking and ability grouping, and the majority of the research says not to do it. Even so, some estimates indicate that as many

STOCK PHOTO IMAGE

Grouping students of varying abilities requires a shift toward nontraditional instructional strategies.

learn better and feel more positive about themselves; and third, it lessens the sense of failure for slower students (George).

But an examination of the research shows that tracking doesn't benefit the great majority of students it was expected to. Studies have shown that it is impossible to place students into ability-grouped tracks equitably and accurately when sorting on the basis of test results; that students don't do better academically when tracked with others like themselves; that students grouped in lower tracks have lower self-esteem; and that tracking produces no positive results. On the contrary, tracking polarizes students into pro- and anti-school camps, creates a "caste system" of elite and struggling students, sets expectations lower for the lowest track teachers, wastes time on management issues, and encourages segregation and stereotyping. Yet, despite the research and real-life effects on students, tracking persists (George, 1996).

Knowing this, *Breaking Ranks II* calls for schools to present alternatives to tracking and to ability grouping to create a culture of high expectations for all students (NASSP, 2004). And many high schools are beginning to consider the alternatives. For example, Manual High School in Denver, CO, moved first to block scheduling, then put students into 9th- and 10th-grade small learning communities with full-inclusion classrooms. Noble High School in North Berwick, ME, created seven teams for 9th- and 10th-grade students. Teams of 80–90 heterogeneously grouped students complete a common curriculum to graduate. After 20 years of small learning communities, Boston's Fenway High School is now heterogeneously grouping math classes, and Bullard Havens, in Bridgeport, CT, has heterogeneously grouped cohorts of students who are together for all classes. Souhegan High School in Amherst, NH, implemented heterogeneous grouping when the school first opened in 1992. When six students complained about the new structure, they became an advisory group that launched an Honors Challenge for students who wanted to do more advanced work. Fourteen years later, the school is still heterogeneously grouped.

Heterogeneous grouping is popular with some educators because they

as 85% of today's schools still group students for instruction this way (George, 1996). So why track? Three main reasons perpetuate the "sensible idea" of tracking: First, it creates greater efficiency and ease for teachers; second, students

think that it establishes fairness among teachers. It also puts every student in a challenging class. "When you put a stupid kid in a stupid class, you get stupid results," said one teacher. Some teachers also believe that students from the

lower tracks excel when grouped with higher achievers. "Whenever possible, students should spend significant parts of their school day in heterogeneous groups so that they learn to see themselves as important members of this diverse group," said George.

Differentiating Instruction

Just as heterogeneous grouping engages all levels of students, differentiated instruction engages all types of learners. "All students can learn, they just learn in different ways," said Nicole Missere, a social studies teacher at the Academic Improvement Magnet (AIM), an alternative academy in Roosevelt High School in Yonkers, NY. "Introduce material through their perceptual strengths and they will retain more information."

The teachers also recognize that their students have different learning styles—some focus better with background music on, some without bright lights. "We accommodate those differences," said Missere. "Most importantly, students know in this program that they are not going to see the same routine all day, they're not going to sit still for 45 minutes each class and listen to a teacher talk."

To differentiate instruction, the teachers use a wide range of approaches, including role play, activities, Web quests, and radio programs. "I use a lot of theatrical techniques," said English teacher Janice Young. "These are tough kids, angry kids. I can turn the room into a stage and have the kids move, be physical. When I teach Shakespeare, the kid who won't take his Walkman off may be interested in researching the music of the time; the kid who is drawing all

Although tracking is a widespread practice, it is a highly controversial approach to educating students. More than 700 studies have been done in the past 50 years on tracking and ability grouping, and the majority of the research says not to do it.

Teachers in the AIM program want their students to do more than retain material. They want them to show up at school, look forward to classes, and catch up to their cohorts in credits. Their students are ninth-grade repeaters, often described as tough, hardened kids who have all the problems associated with an inner-city environment. The program is structured into two teams, each with four teachers and 100 students, and is housed on the third floor of the school. "The image of our AIM program has changed," said Bill Moore, the principal of Roosevelt. "At first, the impression was that it was a punitive program. But after the first year, the students sold the program."

"We asked ourselves, how do we get them to want to come to class? They already failed once. We didn't want to do the same, conventional teaching styles. We wanted to make a huge change so we could really capture our students," said Missere. "We started to differentiate instruction—at any given time, many different activities are going on at the same time in a classroom. Students say they come to school now because they are afraid they're going to miss what their teachers do."

"If you just stand in front of the class and lecture, you set yourself up for failure," said Oscar Letona, a math teacher at Roosevelt. "I use motivation strategies like games, riddles, and logic to help students remember formulas. There are also socioecological accommodations we have to consider: Not all students learn in cooperative groups; we learned that we need to be flexible."

the time may be interested in researching the art. Ultimately, we want to prioritize them learning; if we can capture their imagination and give them the skills and show them how, then they will walk out and be able to learn."

AIM science teacher Frank Magrino agrees. "We want them to succeed, to catch up to their cohorts and start 11th grade as if nothing ever happened. What we're doing is lowering our stereotypical teacher attitude. Teaching what they have to learn doesn't get lowered. We're teaching to a Regents exam, so we can't lower that. It's *how* we teach that changes."

Some of the teachers at Roosevelt don't like what these teachers are doing. "There are dissenters in the school, and they are vocal," said Moore. "One of my roles is to protect these teachers. You've got to allow your faculty to design and make choices, and you have to be prepared that what you try isn't always going to work. Support the fact that they tried what they tried."

Survey data and Regents statistics show that their efforts are valid in helping many students achieve the necessary credits to go directly into the 11th grade after a year in AIM. Their success demonstrates that differentiating instruction can help promote equity in achievement for all students.

Integrated Assessment

Another aspect of the fourth cornerstone strategy is using a variety of methods to assess student performance. Two schools using innovative assessment strategies include Feinstein High School in Providence, RI, and Champion

Charter School in Brocton, MA. These schools have not lowered their standards; they allow students to demonstrate that they have met high standards through the use of assessments that are more accurate than the typical multiple-choice exam.

Three years ago, Feinstein was closed due to poor academic performance. The school reopened in 2001 as a new high school, one where all students are held to high academically rigorous standards and each student is given the opportunity to learn at his or her own pace and in a manner suited to his or her own unique abilities. Feinstein students receive no letter grades; they have to meet the standards by earning at least a 4 on a scale of 1–6 (1 = no work to be assessed, 6 = excel) per standard.

Champion is designed to provide an alternative route to a high school diploma for formerly out-of-school youth ages 16–21. Students don't receive credit hours or a GPA; they work at their own pace and move forward by defending portfolios of their best work.

Conclusion

"A lot of kids are dropping out, sliding through school, doing whatever they can knowledge wise to get by because they are not engaged," said Chris Unger, program planning specialist and *Breaking Ranks* coach at the Education Alliance. "Roosevelt is working with kids who do not come to school, who don't want to come to school, who are not engaged. They are working with a particular group of students and can be considered an alternative program, but all students would enjoy being in their program. We can find the opportunity to work in this way with all students."

Strategies that promote equity, promote achievement student by student. Strategies that perpetuate inequity promote disillusionment, distrust, and disengagement. Heterogeneous grouping and differentiated instruction create an atmosphere of equality and caring in the classroom, and both offer students a better opportunity for success. With each student's success comes greater success for the teacher, the classroom, and the school. **PL**

References

❏ Fisher, P. (n.d.). Fulfilling Maine's promise. Introduction to seven reasons to avoid weighting student grades and courses. Center for Inquiry on Secondary Education, Maine Department of Education and the Southern Maine Partnership at the University of Southern Maine.

❏ George, P. S. (1996). *What's the truth about tracking and ability grouping really??? An explanation for teachers and parents.* Gainesville, FL: Teacher Education Resources.

❏ National Association of Secondary School Principals. (2004). *Breaking ranks II: Strategies for leading high school reform.* Reston, VA: Author.