

First Year Results for Middle School Reform Reveal Major Setbacks and Concerns **[By Alan Stockman]**

Middle School Reform (MSR) was introduced last year with important goals, like raising the bar for all students, closing the achievement gap and eliminating tracking. Many promising tactics were employed including additional staff development, improving science curriculum and increasing accountability.

However, one tactic has been highly controversial, namely grouping children into only two very broad categories: honors (roughly the upper 25-30%) and college prep (the rest). This was positioned as a means of eliminating tracking and providing role models for lower performing students. The administration referenced systems like Rockville Centre, NY as models of the 2-group approach.

Many said Rockville Centre had little in common with Stamford in terms of either demographics or available budgets and was therefore a weak point of comparison. Additionally, Rockville Centre had put critically important conditions in place to make a two group system succeed which were not/are not present in Stamford's effort. These included very small (6-10 student) academic support groups to help students keep up, and *beginning the process in kindergarten* which resulted in much tighter skill ranges among the students entering sixth grade to begin with.

An alternative means of eliminating tracking, which was supported by many advocates, was the use of *flexible grouping* in four or five levels in certain subjects (most notably math and language arts) – a practice used with great success in Stamford already.

This perspective argued that, although MSR as a whole was important and necessary, the two-group approach was so off target that it could undermine the entire reform. These concerns were dismissed.

Recent CMT results indicate that, unfortunately, the concerns were well founded. *Rather than raising achievement for all and closing the gap, the first year of MSR resulted in exactly the opposite:*

- Our Class of 2016 lost ground versus the total state and within every subgroup with respect to reaching goal in math: Blacks -8 point relative decline, Hispanics -7 points, Whites -4 points and Asians -4 points.
- Stamford overall, and every subgroup, lost ground in reading as well.
- Despite efforts to close the gap, Stamford's achievement gap actually grew in every subject: math by 4 points, reading by 3 points, and writing by 14 points.
- Stamford and statewide 6th graders both entered 6th grade last year with precisely the same average Vertical Scale Score of 528 in math, indicating that Stamford and statewide elementary schools prepared their Classes of 2016 to an equal level in math on average. However, in 6th grade, statewide middle school students had a 60% greater jump in math than Stamford middle school students (24 vs. 15 points), with students ending the year at 551 vs. 542 respectively.
- For Black students, the difference was a whopping 144% deficit in Stamford (9 vs. 22 points).
- A full analysis, conducted with guidance from state department of education experts, is available at <http://www.stamfordree.org/>.

The bottom line is that rather than raising outcomes, results declined across the board under MSR. And rather than closing the gap, MSR has increased the gap, *and* it's doing so at an accelerating rate.

The reasons are simple: *By teaching to the middle, in largely heterogeneous groups, we're allowing children who need more attention to fall behind and enabling fewer students who are ready to soar to do so.*

This is not an argument against MSR overall. The old inflexibly tracked system was broken and going back to it is not an option. However, the results do show that jumping into a two-group model without a pilot effort and

without conditions for success being in place has been sufficiently negative to undermine all of the positives of the reform and actually cause results to go down.

What's most striking about the administration's stubborn adherence to Rockville Centre's poorly fitting two-group model is that the solution to the final puzzle piece of successful MSR is already here and working in Stamford.

Specifically, one of the most successful and sought-after programs in the city, Westover, uses flexible grouping and regrouping for math and reading. It is not a tracking system, as even Dr. Starr has publicly acknowledged. Students are heterogeneously grouped most of the day, but then split up into many math groups and a different set of many reading groups. They move up and down flexibly, with little fanfare based on their progress and needs.

Struggling students do not get written off with ditto sheets and poor teachers, as complaints about tracking go – *they get extra focus and resources with smaller class sizes, more instruction hours from the same pool of teachers, and more attention per student.* The students in the accelerated groups have larger class sizes, but need less individualized attention, and move more quickly.

What sort of outcomes does this create?

Using the Vertical Scale Scores referenced previously, Westover's 5th graders started math with an average score of 516, eight points behind both the city and state 6th graders (as you would expect for being a grade behind). After a year of being flexibly grouped, they grew a whopping 37 points, to pass both the city *and state* 6th graders by year-end. To be perfectly clear, this is not just a measure of relative progress. It means that on an absolute basis, Westover's 5th graders started behind and finished well ahead of Stamford's 6th graders in math ability. For those who would say it's just a self-selecting magnet school effect, note that Westover's 5th graders also passed the 6th graders at Scofield, a magnet that has been a model of heterogeneous grouping.

When teachers can give a full period of attention to students at similar levels, they can make significant progress. It works here in Stamford today. We may wish to have Rockville Centre's budgets, and we may wish that there weren't a massive disparity in skill-levels going into sixth grade. However, in the words of GE's legendary chairman, Jack Welch, we need to face reality as it is, not as we wish it to be.

The two-group strategy is failing. Flexible grouping works and it does not represent a step backward and it does not unwind MSR as some would claim. It is a way to make MSR successful under current conditions and budget constraints.

The Class of 2016 is slated to move through middle school as the MSR "guinea pigs" for two more years (and the Class of 2017 is to follow right behind under the same broken model). One year of being subjected to an arguably unsuccessful experiment might be a recoverable dip. Inflicting three straight years of this on the same group of students (while also rolling it out further) is unconscionable.

Unfortunately, admitting a misstep is particularly difficult in government - even when something as important as the future of our children is on the line. We sadly expect this call for refinement to be met with stalling, inaction and more of the outrageous countercharges that were present in the initial debate.

As a result, change will likely have to come through the election process, with at least one more pro-change candidate being added to the Board of Education. For that reason, this November's election will be critically important. www.StamfordREE.org will track candidates' positions on this matter for reference. The website also contains additional backup and information about all the data cited in this article for those who wish to explore the methodology and details.