

Response to Martin Levine's 11/5/09 Op Ed

I find myself, a parent of three children in Stamford public schools, agreeing with nearly every premise of Martin Levine's November 5 letter "We must stop setting our kids up to fail" but reaching a very different conclusion. Eliminating ability grouping from schools will not improve education for our students, as Mr. Levine proposes, but will result in a decline for all but those students at the mean.

Mr. Levine argues that our schools' tracking system is too rigid and relies solely on CMT scores - correct; that we should be preparing our students for life, not for this one test - absolutely correct; that our nation's needs changed as we moved from an agricultural to a manufacturing to a service economy - indisputable.

Sadly, Dr. Starr seems not to value our teachers' experience as educators, as he does not weigh their input in student placement. Middle school grouping this year was far more rigid and numbers-based than ever before. But test scores alone are not sufficient to assess a child. Certainly grades and teacher input should be considered when assessing a student's past and future achievement.

Furthermore, our schools should recognize that a child's talents vary across subject matters, allowing him to have different peer groups for math or English according to his ability. Assuming that a single child has uniform talents is no more absurd than assuming that all children learn at the same pace and comprehend at the same level. Believing that the CMT is a perfect test of achievement is no more erroneous than thinking that one type of instruction is a perfect style for all students. The best teachers I've seen in Stamford recognize that children learn in different ways – some through repetition, others visually, some orally, others kinetically. If our school system adopts that philosophy, how can it reject the notion that children learn at different speeds and depths? And how can we expect any teacher to accommodate all of this variation plus different academic levels in one lesson?

While Mr. Levine seems to accuse the parents of "advanced group" children of not wanting to sacrifice for the benefit of others, has he considered our children who need more time to grasp a concept? While condemning the existence of "low classes," has Mr. Levine or Dr. Starr contemplated the effect on our children who will have to sit in a "middle class" alone and confused? Or that using some students as academic guides tells our struggling children that the teachers' time should be spent on the "bright kids" while they must accept scraps of instruction from their classmates? We have begun heterogeneous grouping already in elementary schools, and I have seen first hand the anxiety of a child who simply doesn't understand the topic matter because the teacher can't stop and explain; I have heard the frustration of a child who cannot bear to study the same topic for another day when he is ready to move on to the next challenge. And

I cannot help asking: is ability grouping failing our children, or has our school system somehow failed to execute it properly? Before we abandon it, should we not try to get it right?

The incoming members of the Board of Education - Pia, Olson and Rauh - supported ability grouping during their campaigns. It would be a shame for our schools to get in the way of our children's education.

Claudia Kraut Rimerman