

Response to the editorial "Don't Backtrack on School Reform"

To the Editor:

I am one of the concerned parents at whom your paper took aim regarding middle school reform in the Advocate Editorial of 11/13/2009. Those of us with children in the school system who want to stay do not want to "backtrack" or stop reform of middle school. That is an incredibly unfair characterization of the legitimate questions and concerns of a large segment of this community. The "us vs. them" approach pursued by the editorial and by many supporters of heterogeneous grouping does not unite us; it divides our community on this very important issue. The people you criticize in your editorial unanimously support the middle school reform's enhancement of curriculum, increased expectations for all students, decoupling subjects so that children can be placed in a higher group in one subject and a lower group in another subject depending on ability, and elimination of tracking (the rigid, inflexible permanent placement of students). The only point of contention where hundreds of parents disagree with the administration is on the issue of heterogeneous grouping. Under the current model, approximately the top 25% of the children are in the honors group. The remaining 75% of the children are grouped together in what amounts to a heterogeneous group of children who range in ability from grade level to years below grade level—all in the same classroom for either math or reading or both.

Parents disagree with this ONE element of the new program for two basic, common-sense reasons: First, placing children of such dramatic ability differences in the same class room at the same time cannot serve the needs of all of these children. The child who does not know how to multiply simply cannot learn simultaneously with the child who is learning pre-algebra. It cannot work. Second, the protocol for placing children into either the honors (top 25%) or college prep (next 75%) is based solely on standardized testing without qualitative input from teachers or parents. These points summarize the very serious concerns that we have about this program. The rest of the reform efforts we salute.

Rather than criticize concerned parents as "emotional" and reactionaries, we hope your paper will evaluate the administration's efforts on the detailed merits and be sensitive to valid and legitimate questions. One final note before we throw the baby out with the bathwater, neither the administration nor your paper have explained why middle school test scores went up very nicely last year—before implementation of the new radical program.

Alan Stockman