



Policy Statement

STUDENT ASSIGNMENT IN THE MIDDLE GRADES TOWARDS ACADEMIC SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

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Schools across the country are struggling with how to group students for instruction. Ability grouping is a divisive issue among parents, teachers, and policymakers. Members of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform have struggled with the many nuances of ability grouping and have come to consensus on this statement of policy, which is the first in a series of education reform issues we will address.

High-performing middle-grades schools are academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable. Such schools demonstrate a non-negotiable commitment to the intellectual growth, academic success, and healthy development of every student.

They work deliberately to diminish disparities in students' learning and achievement, and to provide opportunities for students to develop the knowledge and skills needed for democratic participation in their schools and communities.

In high-performing schools, heterogeneous assignment of students is the norm. The student assignment practices in such schools ensure that every student:

- is in classrooms characterized by high expectations, challenging content, and appropriate materials
- has teachers who are well qualified to teach their subjects at the middle level and are effective in engaging early adolescent learners in those subjects
- learns from a curriculum that is based on high standards for what all students should know and be able to do
- is taught in ways that encourage active, inquiry-based learning, that are relevant to real-world problems, and that are adapted to students' different cultures, skills, and ways of learning
- gets the tailored, personal support necessary to participate and succeed in reaching high-level expectations
- demonstrates learning and understanding in a variety of ways.

High-performing middle-grades schools deliberately work to reduce disparities in educational attainment by adopting open and fair student assignment practices.

When students are grouped and regrouped for purposes of instruction, the assignment is temporary and based on diagnosed needs, interests, and talents of students, not on a single achievement test. Teachers constantly assess student progress through rigorous and varied methods and make reassignments as appropriate. Schools disaggregate assessment data to identify and eliminate gaps in educational attainment among non-native-English speakers, special-needs students, and racial, ethnic, gender, and socio-economic groups.

To support their commitment to social equity, high-performing middle-grades schools make sure families and the community understand their student assignment principles and practices. The schools provide extensive professional development for teachers, and establish a climate that welcomes every student and every family.

To read more:

National Institute for Urban School Improvement. (2000). *Improving education: The promise of inclusive schooling*. Newton, MA: Author.

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Oakes, J. (1998). Detracking for high student achievement. *Educational Leadership*, 55(6).

Rosenbaum, J. (Winter 1999-2000). If tracking is bad, is detracking better? *American Educator*, 22 – 29.

Slavin, R., Braddock, J., Gallagher, J. (1993). Ability grouping in question: Two experts debate the fairness and effectiveness of a pervasive practice. *The College Board Review*, 168, 10 – 35.

Welner, K. & Oakes, J. (2000). *Navigating the politics of detracking: Leadership Strategies*. Arlington Heights, IL: SkyLight Professional Development.

Wheelock, A. (1994). *Alternatives to tracking and ability grouping*. Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators.

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THE NATIONAL FORUM TO ACCELERATE MIDDLE-GRADES REFORM

is an alliance of educators, researchers, national associations, and officers of professional organizations and foundations, dedicated to improving education in the middle grades. The Forum seeks to improve student learning dramatically by advocating that schools provide strong academics, respond to students’ needs and interests, and ensure equal access to high-quality classes.

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