Literature Review: Ability Grouping

Literacy Committee, Clayton School District, James Lockhart, Co-coordinator
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In education, one adage that researchers agree upon is that for every study there is an equal and opposite study. Because subjects are studied in situations that involve a multitude of variables, the context of a situation is generally the most important lens through which to view this highly polemic research. Ability grouping in instruction has proven to be just this type of complex issue. In the following report we present an overview of the research in this area from the past two decades, and organize it into the themes that emerge. Ultimately, we consider the research within the context of Clayton School District and make recommendations for the use of ability grouping in literacy classes at the secondary level.

Key Terms

Ability grouping - re-grouping students for the purpose of providing curriculum aimed at a common instructional level.

Cluster grouping - a variation of grouping practices whereby small groups of students with similar instructional needs are clustered within a primarily heterogeneous classroom.

Gifted and gifted and talented - can mean the very top 1 or 2 % in a cohort group, or even the top third of the group. Also assumes that students are globally talented, while their giftedness may be specific to a skill or content area. Much of the research included in this report does not clarify the term “gifted students."

Tracking - a means of dealing with individual differences whereby educators decide “to divide students into class-size groups based on a measure of the students' perceived ability or prior achievement” (Fiedler et al. 2002).
Historical Context

Ability tracking, like many educational issues, has supporters and detractors who offer research to back their positions. Since the mid-1980's, detracking (the terms tracking and ability-grouping are often used interchangeably) has been highly supported after a decisive review of research was conducted by Johns Hopkins professor Robert Slavin in 1986. His determinations caused Turning Points, the middle level reform document of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989), to cite permanent tracking, that in which the student spends the entire school day in a homogenous ability group, as one of the most "divisive and damaging school practices in existence."

Beginning in the 1990's many schools followed this research and dismantled the rigid ability tracking that often channeled students into permanent tracks, limiting many students' opportunities for academic achievement and, consequently, professional choice. Because the numbers of minority and low-income students were over represented in the lower academic tracks, the issue of equitable access to an education fueled the initiative to detrack high school programs. Rarely, however, did schools completely blend students heterogeneously. In most cases, schools still grouped students by ability for certain courses, especially math and literacy, often in honors classes, while making heterogeneous grouping more feasible in other curricular areas. As students progressed to higher levels, interest and self-selection often created de facto ability groups.

Detracking Movement: Concerns

Although strongly advocated and even described as a "moral imperative" (Slavin 1988), detracking was questioned by educators of the gifted. Some benefit to tracking was shown. When students are grouped according to skills that are closely related to the curriculum (such as in reading and math), and when curriculum and instruction are tailored to students' capacities, ability grouping may raise achievement. Research at the elementary level supports this claim more so than at the secondary level, where there are few examples of effective instruction in low-ability classes (Gamoran 1995); however, these benefits were perceived as tentative, and, because the practice was deemed more ineffectual than advantageous, possibly even harmful to some groups of students, the response was a call for detracking. Studies showed that students tracked in high ability
groups tended to succeed, though they did not improve in achievement. Their lack of growth was attributed to the limitations of standardized testing in measuring gifted students' abilities. Generally, the fear of educators for the gifted is that gifted students’ achievement will be sacrificed in order to meet the needs of the underserved ability groups. For example, in a study of high school English classes, 73% of questions in honors classes were grounded in literature, while only 31% were in remedial classes (Gamoran 1995). Thus, gifted educators expressed concern that opening classes to heterogeneous grouping might dilute the strong educations that gifted students tend to receive. For these students, the system was perceived to be working, so there was little incentive to change it. Many researchers in gifted education feel the "Gifted learners need some form of grouping by ability to effectively and efficiently accomplish several educational goals, including appropriately broadened, extended, and accelerated curricula" (Rogers, 2002).

Support for Detracking

The rationale that made tracking the norm, ease of instruction, was shown to be invalid by lack of achievement gains in most groups, negligible achievement gains in the gifted track, and actual detriment to some students, especially those in the low ability tracks. In further studies of tracked classes, the content of courses and the ability of teachers were found to be different in different tracks. In most cases, low skilled groups tended to have inexperienced teachers and a "starvation diet of worksheets and skill and drills" (Gamoran 1995). Thus, issues other than tracking many be influencing the success of gifted students in homogenous groups.

Tracking was also perceived as creating "class and race-linked differences in access to learning" and was seen to be “a major contributor to the continuing gaps in achievement between disadvantaged and affluent students and between minorities and whites" (Oakes 1992, 1985). Although no proof has been found that racial or socio-economic criteria have been overtly used to group students, minority and low-income students are underrepresented in high achievement groups; the practice has been indicted as "an oblique method of school segregation" (Losen 1999).
Ethnographic studies revealed six crucial issues in successful detracking (Wheelock 1992):

1. Commitment to inclusion—a value for equity and dedication to academic and social growth
2. Parental involvement—communication and assurance that curricula would not be watered down and that "the competitive, individualistic way in which they have come to view schooling" could be improved "when students listen to others from different backgrounds, share knowledge, and teach their peers."
3. Professional development and support—training in whole school change, differentiation and new curricula
4. Phase-in changes—slow and careful progress in order to make wise changes that include everyone
5. Rethinking routines—all procedures that separated students should be examined.
6. District and state support

**Ability Grouping**

As a response to the elimination of wholesale tracking, ability grouping has been the most common form of instructional delivery mode. In ability grouping, students are grouped in a variety of more flexible ways so that they spend some portion of a school day in heterogeneous groups and some portion in homogeneous groups.

In elementary schools, ability grouping often takes the form of leveled reading or math groups which are organized within a heterogeneous classroom. Another form of organization is the cluster group, which can apply to grouping of any same level of students within a heterogeneous class, but often refers to the grouping and placement in one class of the very top gifted students in a grade level. They are placed with a teacher who has been trained to challenge gifted children. Although proof of improved achievement is difficult to determine by standardized tests, because many gifted students already score at the highest levels, the perception that gifted students are best served in homogenous groups is pervasive among gifted education literature (Fiedler et al. 2002, Holloway 2003, Kulik and Kulik 1992, Rogers 2002, Tieso 2003). One longitudinal study
of kindergarten students indicates that reading improvement in early literacy may be facilitated by the use of ability groups in reading (McCoach et al. 2006).

Students taught in low ability groups, however, score lower on standardized tests than if placed in mixed or high ability groups (Rubin 2006). Little research is available on the effect of grouping on achievement for students who are deemed neither high nor low ability, a group often labeled, "students in the middle."

In post-elementary school, where instruction is delivered in content area classes, students can be grouped heterogeneously or homogeneously, with higher achieving students being grouped into honors or advanced sections. On the secondary level, AP or IB courses often are considered the challenge classes for this group of students. In a similar way, low achieving students often are grouped to meet their instructional needs. Although not intended as such, ability grouping often forms de facto tracks because of the demands of course scheduling.

Consistent criteria for placement in these ability groups do not seem to exist from district to district (Hallinen 1991). Methods of placement often include standardized test scores, earned grades, teacher recommendations and parental requests. These methods have been found to be imperfect in placing students, especially students from ethnic minority groups and low socio-economic groups (Bonshek 2002). Opening enrollment, a method sometimes used to end the segregation of high track courses, does not work to unlock once restricted courses because students deemed "lower track" persist in holding the school's identity of them and do not envision themselves as capable or even interested in these courses (Yonezawa et al. 2002). Personal perceptions about the nature of ability and achievement held by teachers also influence identification of students for these programs (Persson 1998). Parents in the United States, especially those in affluent public schools, have been found to have significant influence on their children's educational placement as compared to parents in other cultures (Bracey 2003). Thus, it seems that placement decisions for grouping are imprecise and may be inappropriately limiting access or granting access to courses for certain students.

The recent focus on the achievement gap, and low enrollment of students of color and low socio-economic status in high achieving groups, has called ability grouping into question. Advocates for gifted students feel this focus, placing at the forefront the
minority who have been chronically underserved academically, may have diverted needed attention from students who traditionally have been well served by tracking.

**Self-Esteem and Modeling**

A common perception of tracking or ability grouping has been that self-esteem of the student would be damaged or enhanced by his placement in the grouping hierarchy. Most studies have shown that grouping has a transitory effect on self-perception (Gamoran 1987). Like-grouping supposedly engenders the best self-esteem. In fact, however, the lowest self-esteem was shown among high ability students who felt challenged by students in a like ability group who were perceived as more capable than they were (Gamoran 1995), one reason often cited as a negative effect of grouping on gifted students.

Another common perception, that high achieving students model positive academic achievement and behaviors for students with lower achievement, seems to be a myth. Students have been found to typically model their behavior on students of similar ability to themselves in their group who are coping well (Saleh 2005, Gamoran 1995, Kulick and Kulick 1982). Only one unpublished study of elementary students (Kennedy 1989, qtd. in Gentry 1996), conversely, found that pulling out the highest group positively impacts the lower groups by allowing the low and average ability students to flourish when gifted students are not present and leading the competition in the regular classroom. Grouping, it seems, can affect self-esteem, though not in predictable or easily generalized ways.

**Equity and Excellence**

The conflict between advocates and critics of tracking and ability grouping lies in their differing emphases on excellence and equity. Those who believe that high-ability students will be unchallenged and bored in heterogeneous classes feel that tracking and ability grouping are necessary to meet the needs of these students. Proponents of academic equity for all students believe that homogeneous tracking practices deny students, especially students from minority and lower socio-economic groups, full access to opportunity. Both sides cite studies that support their contentions.
Current research on the academic achievement gap indicates that awareness of the disparity of opportunity coupled with high standards, rich curriculum and effective teaching for all students can make a difference in achievement of excellence and equitable access to it for all students. Going back to the definition of tracking as described by Fiedler et al., "perception of ability and previous achievement" seem to be the strongest influences on how students are grouped. A shift in research focus from perceived levels of ability to student access to the resources that foster ability has revealed that cultural competence, high expectations, traditional policies, and extra benefits such as independent tutoring available because of economic status may be more responsible for achievement than innate ability (Noguera and Wing 2006). The one consistently mentioned benefit of homogenous grouping, ease of planning instruction, does not seem to be worth the negative influence on achievement that separating students by ability for instructional purposes—especially in their early years—has on encouraging and expecting high achievement in all students.

Conclusion

Because of the "developmental aspect of ability and the role of intervention in turning aptitude into achievement" (Bonshek 2002), current best practice seems to favor grouping students with as much heterogeneity as possible. Accepting that the identification of ability is often a "perceived" notion, and ability tracking a practice that creates inequalities, leads to endorsing heterogeneity as a primary grouping practice. In a longitudinal study that compared several schools using tracking, variability among schools was shown in their consistency in fostering student achievement at all levels, thus revealing that homogeneity in instruction may not be as influential in instruction as perceived (Hallinan 1994). A rigorous study at the racially and economically diverse Rockville district on Long Island showed that eliminating grouping and offering the same rigorous IB curriculum program to all students with appropriate support increased the Regents Diploma rate to 96% in 2005, from rates of 58% for the district and 38% for the state in 1996 (Burris and Welner 2005, Garrity 2004). The entire January 2006 issue of the journal Theory into Practice (TIP) was devoted to research supporting best practice of detracking and heterogeneous grouping based on the key belief that students who had in
the past been assigned to classes based on low ability will be "more not less successful if given great challenges" (Rubin 2006). The issue is divided into three forms of practice: illuminating the beliefs held by teachers, students and the community; reshaping instructional practice; and reshaping school structures.

Joseph Renzulli, the Director of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut, recognizes that just as low ability students can achieve in challenging settings, gifted students need not feel shortchanged in heterogeneous groupings if teacher preparation and available resources are available. He believes that the "practices that have been a mainstay of many special programs for the gifted are being absorbed into general education by reform models designed to upgrade the performance of all students" (2005). He proposes a Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) including such practices as co-teaching, curricular compacting and training for teachers in enrichment strategies that help differentiate instruction for students at all levels (Renzulli 1998).

Looking at these divergent studies shows that both ability grouping and heterogeneous grouping can work for students. To quote the late Albert Shanker, the former president of the AFL, "The question is not, 'Should we track or reject tracking?' It is, 'How do we organize schools and classrooms, given the fact that kids learn differently and at different rates?" (1993). Because issues like preparation, self-perception, cultural influence, parental pressure, teacher preparation, ethnicity, even time of day can influence the development and perception of ability, we must consider the context as we plan for the most effective way to structure our schools and classes to best meet the needs of all students.

**Suggestions for Grouping That Benefits All Students**

1. Use heterogeneous grouping as the preference.
2. Reduce class sizes to facilitate the differentiation of instruction that heterogeneous grouping entails.
3. Use specialists such as special education teachers, reading specialists and enrichment teachers effectively to meet the individual student needs within
heterogeneous settings (such as the co-teaching structure currently being used at CHS).

4. When ability grouping is used:
   • avoid locking students into a permanent placement
   • rotate teaching assignments so that all students have access to effective teachers
   • develop all teachers to be aware of the needs of all students
   • make the entrance criteria to high level classes explicit and fair
   • use strategies like cluster grouping, which maintains heterogeneity while addressing special needs and interests of students who need challenge and support.
Bibliography

Books and Articles


Ansalone, George and Bifora Frank 2004. Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions and attitudes to the Educational Structure of Tracking. *Education.* 125(2) 249-258.


Renzulli, Joseph S. 2005 Applying Gifted Education Pedagogy to Total Talent Development for All Students. *Theory Into Practice.* 44(2) 80-89.


Rubin, Beth C., Guest Editor 2006, January 2006 *Theory into Practice (TIP): Detracking*. 45 (1).


Videos/Films

Off Track: Classroom Privilege for All, Michelle Fine, et al., 1998 -- tells the story of a non-tracked class in world literature.
THE CURRENT MODEL AT CHS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>9th Grade</th>
<th>10th Grade</th>
<th>11th Grade</th>
<th>12th Grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Prep</td>
<td>College Prep English II</td>
<td>American Literature</td>
<td>Electives</td>
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<tr>
<td>English I</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honors English I</td>
<td>Honors English II</td>
<td>Electives</td>
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<td>Honors American</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Literature (recommended)</td>
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Assumptions:
- Because students develop mentally and physically at different stages, possess distinct talents, and come to school from various backgrounds, groupings in high school must be flexible in order to meet students where they are.

Student Support:
- Low-achieving/ELL students: Students at this stage receive support through the Learning Center, English I/II, Reading Improvement, Study Center, SSD services, co-taught courses (previously referred to as class within a class, or CWC), Conference English (summer school), and ELL English or ELL Reading. With the exception of the summer school course, the other support courses and services are usually offered in tandem with a College Prep English I class.

- Middle-achieving students: The majority of students are supported and challenged in College Prep English I. Some degree of differentiation occurs. Highly talented students of English have further opportunities to move into honors classes during their sophomore, junior, and senior years.

- High-achieving students: A minority of students needing higher academic challenge can find it in Honors English I. Opportunities to deepen knowledge beyond the already high level of expectations of the course are also available.

9th Grade Core Curriculum:
College Prep English I
- Ten conferenced writing assignments
- Two independent reading assignments (IRAs)
- Core texts: The Odyssey, Romeo & Juliet, Lord of the Flies, A Raisin in the Sun, Ellen Foster, Greek mythology, poetry, short fiction
- Additional shared class texts
- Two formal speeches
Honors English I  --Additionally, this course includes
- Greek drama
- three more IRAs
- even higher expectations for writing assignments
- more self-directed reading.

**The Funnel Approach:**
In addition to two sections of freshman honors out of the typical 11 to 12 total sections of freshman English, the following trend has been observable over the last several years:
- Three sections of sophomore honors
- Three sections of junior honors (four sections 2007-08 school year)
- Three sections of AP English Lit (plus the addition of one section of AP English Language this year).

This approach is by design. The goal of English teachers is to monitor, cultivate, and encourage students to seek academic challenge in honors when and if they are capable of it. The result, resembling a funnel opening upward, shows fewer students in Honors English I, more in Honors English II, still more in Honors American Lit., and even more in AP. Similarly, English teachers monitor students who need greater support, differentiate as needed, and take advantage of the numerous support classes and services in the building.

**Pros and Cons:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited enrollment in honors benefits gifted students while enriching College Prep English I classes with strong students.</td>
<td>The system reduces diversity, often segregating students by race and, to a lesser degree, by gender.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The &quot;funnel approach&quot; (see above) offers flexibility of placement over time and motivates higher-achieving students to seek honors admission.</td>
<td>Students find it difficult to make an informed decision about honors enrollment before entering 9th grade.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The system benefits high-achieving students.</td>
<td>The placement process is complicated not only by students' unfamiliarity with it but also by the pressures exerted on middle-school faculty.</td>
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<td>The system places a higher burden of differentiation on College Prep teachers.</td>
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<td>GRADE 9</td>
<td>GRADE 10</td>
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<tr>
<td>College Prep English I*</td>
<td>College Prep English II*</td>
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<td>Honors English I*</td>
<td>Collaborative English II/World/U.S. History II*</td>
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<td>Reading Improvement I and II**</td>
<td>Honors English II*</td>
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<td>Newspaper Writing**</td>
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<td>Adventure Literature</td>
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<td>Creative Writing</td>
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<td>College Prep English I/II-Credit Recovery</td>
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<tr>
<td>**</td>
<td>Plays: Researching, Writing, and Reviewing***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* One of these must be taken
** Non-Conferenced Courses
*** 1/4 credit, cross-listed with performing arts

[For an even more comprehensive description of course offerings, access the Program of Studies online by going to www.clayton.k12.mo.us and choosing Clayton High School from the menu.]
SCENARIO: HETEROGENEOUS COLLEGE PREP ENGLISH I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>11th Grade</th>
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<td>College Prep English I</td>
<td>College Prep English II</td>
<td>American Literature</td>
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Assumptions:

- Honors classes in English cover the same core texts that the regular courses do, though honors classes add additional texts and investigate the material more deeply; in other words, they are comparable to courses for college majors. Most students do not declare a major in college until at least their second year, and many colleges and universities require a foundational course to establish their standards of reading and writing and core curriculum. This model follows that pattern.

- The placement process from 8th to 9th grade is difficult and unreliable. It intrudes upon the 8th grade year and creates as many frustrations as it does benefits. Honors 9th grade teachers often report that many students in the class do not show more aptitude for the subject than many students in the regular college prep classes. Social pressures, lack of maturity, and developmental issues often privilege some students' placement and prevent others. These issues often affect underrepresented groups in higher-level English courses, namely males and minority students. Since most of the research indicates that placement decisions are based on perception as much as ability, allowing students to make the transition to the high school before choosing a "major" would allow them to determine if they want to devote their intense study to English. If so, their 9th grade teacher would encourage them and prepare them for the honors level in 10th grade. This process also would relieve the phenomenon of the overburdened student.

- Grouping students in a heterogeneous setting allows students to gain the benefits of diversity, model and/or witness an achievement dynamic in the class, and strive for achievement to gain honors placement in 10th grade, if desired. Teachers who consciously plan for a variety of student needs are better teachers for every student. Allowing all students to have a consistent beginning in their English studies in high school makes achievement for all students an equitable possibility.

- This placement decision for grouping into honors or college prep sections on the 10th grade level would be made in January of 9th grade, and would be based on course work, standardized test scores in grades 7 and 8 (possibly an ERB in the fall of 9th grade?), and teacher recommendation. The same override policy would be available to parents and students who disagree with the teacher recommendation. The ability to move into the honors sections is open to students every year, through the application process.
**Student support:**
On all levels, English conferences allow for individual support. Since all students will be taking the same course, scheduling will be easier, allowing several sections to be scheduled simultaneously. This will allow teachers to support team planning, and blending of classes for some activities to assist in meeting all student needs.

- **Low-achieving/ELL Students**  Co-taught classes, special district support, learning center tutoring, study center, reading strategy courses
- **Middle-achieving students**  Co-taught classes, special district support, learning center tutoring, study center
- **High-achieving students**  Possible cluster grouping, contracting for grades, other services as needed

**Core Curriculum:**
Teachers and the literacy committee agree on core texts for each level, and all will follow the state and district learning objectives in determining the skills taught at each level. All students will participate in the conferenced writing program and produce five processed pieces per semester. Teachers may differentiate complexity of assignments to address students' needs, abilities and interests.

**Pro and Cons:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Students not labeled and pigeon-holed</td>
<td>• Effective differentiation is challenging</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Ease of scheduling</td>
<td>• Risk of slighting gifted and/or remedial students</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Acknowledgement of the personal and developmental nature of academic achievement</td>
<td>• Placement decision must be made early in the student's high school career</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Diversity of race, gender, and socio-economic status</td>
<td>• Need for extensive professional development, and high expectations for actual implementation</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Reduction of anxiety for placement at the time of transition</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Flexibility of placement for grades 10, 11 and 12</td>
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<td>• Students included in the placement process</td>
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SCENARIO: THREE ACHIEVEMENT GROUPS
HONORS, COLLEGE PREP & REMEDIAL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>9th Grade</th>
<th>10th Grade</th>
<th>11th Grade</th>
<th>12th Grade</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Remedial English II</td>
<td>Remedial American Literature</td>
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<td>College Prep Electives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honors English I</td>
<td>Honors English II</td>
<td>Honors American Lit</td>
<td>AP Literature or AP Language</td>
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Assumptions:
• There are three reasonably distinct and distinguishable groups of students who are best served by working in classes of mostly alike students. In this way, teachers can target instruction towards particular texts, skills, and products that are most appropriate for the class’s level of achievement. Teachers can determine the area of greatest need within each grouping of students and target instruction in order to provide appropriate challenge and encourage appropriate growth. This way the educational expectations for each grouping can be high, respective to that group, while still being attainable.

• In a standards-based curriculum, an appropriate rationale for grouping can made based on data that certain students have already demonstrated the attainment of certain specific learning objectives, while others have not demonstrated attainment of the prerequisite learning objectives. The EPAS tests (Explore, Plan, and ACT) that the district already administers to all are sufficiently standards based for use in grouping students. Until teachers develop criterion referenced assessments that indicate attainment of certain learning objectives, a combination of grades, standardized tests, student work samples, and teacher recommendations can be used to determine placement.

• At some point at either semester or year-end, students have the opportunity to demonstrate their academic achievement in terms of grades, test scores, and level of independent work, and move up or down a track.

Potential categories for grouping:
Honors students show high academic achievement as measured by prior grades and standardized test scores, and earn teacher recommendations affirming ability to work independently. The placement committee determines appropriate criteria that balance test scores, grades, and teacher recommendations in order assure that honors selection and designation is made based on advanced attainment of learning objectives and capacity for self-directed work—not caps, quotas, or parental lobbying.
College Prep students demonstrated success in the preceding curriculum, demonstrated the appropriate attainment of learning objectives, and earned standardized test scores that indicate a reasonable expectation of success in college.

Remedial students did not demonstrate success in the prior curriculum, did not demonstrate attainment of learning objectives, and earned standardized test scores that indicate a low expectation for success in college.

**Support for low-achieving students**: In this model, low-achieving students are supported by challenges and learning objectives appropriate to their grouping. Staffing of support personnel is easy to schedule and organize because the students who need support are all in the same classes. There is some SSD support in the college prep courses for students whose IEP recommends placement in the regular curriculum.

**Core curriculum**: Teachers and the literacy committee come to consensus about what texts, skills, and products are common to all classes at a particular grade level. The core texts are taught in all levels, but the level of teacher support and the complexity of learning objectives are variable. Conferencing program continues at all levels, but the standards for length, complexity, and independence research are variable.

**Honors designation**: Honors credit is easy to distinguish on student transcripts because Honors is included in the title and the course description.

**Pro and Cons:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Appropriate challenge for students of differing levels&lt;br&gt;• Ease of teacher planning</td>
<td>• Difficulty and high stakes of making appropriate placements&lt;br&gt;• Difficulty of scheduling, possibility of creating de facto, grade level tracking in all courses.&lt;br&gt;• Rigidity of track&lt;br&gt;• Motivation and behavior issues are compounded in remedial classes&lt;br&gt;• Risk of creating de facto segregation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SCENARIO: TOTALLY HETEROGENEOUS GROUPING
WITH DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>9th Grade</th>
<th>10th Grade</th>
<th>11th Grade</th>
<th>12th Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Prep English I</td>
<td>College Prep English II</td>
<td>American Literature</td>
<td>Electives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AP Literature or AP Language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assumptions:
- Humans are infinitely variable and the educational process is infinitely complex. However a school groups its students, any teacher is faced with a group of students with a complex disparity of skills, interests, learning styles, and background knowledge. Heterogeneous grouping acknowledges this reality in the structure of the curriculum. Students are scheduled into classes specifically to assure a balanced mix of academic achievement.

- With the framework of differentiated instruction, it is the task of the teachers to clearly define the learning targets, usefully assess the students’ relative levels of achievement, and then use strategies like flexible grouping, student choice, tiered lessons, and curriculum compacting to address the inherent differences among students.

Support for low-achieving students, including SSD: Support for low-achieving students comes in the form of CWC or collaborative teaching arrangements, Learning Center and double blocking with reading support.

Core curriculum: The core curriculum is maintained by a common set of texts, concepts, and learning objectives held steady while teachers determine the appropriate ways to acknowledge and adjust to the range of differing interests, learning styles, and levels of readiness in their students. Teacher may chose to vary the content, the process, or the products as long as the defined learning objects for the course are being met.

Honors designation: Students in heterogeneous classes can contract for honors attainment. Advanced learning objectives, more complex texts, and more independently produced products characterize honors. Students who can establish in a pretest that they have mastered the learning objectives of the course can be excused from some learning activities in order to have time to work on attainment of honors- designated learning objectives.
Pro and Cons:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Acknowledges student variability,</td>
<td>• Effective differentiation is difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students not labeled and pigeon-holed</td>
<td>• Risk of slighting gifted and/or remedial students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ease of scheduling</td>
<td>• Need for extensive professional development, and high expectations for actual implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Acknowledges the personal and developmental nature of academic achievement</td>
<td>• Need for clear articulation of core learning objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Diversity of race, gender, and socio-economic status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Assumptions:
There are “core learning objectives” that the district has the responsibility to assure that all students demonstrate attainment of before graduation. Students will vary in the amount of time and support required to attain these learning objectives. Greater flexibility of student placement exploits the benefits of heterogeneous grouping without ignoring the vast differences in essential skills that have often accrued by high school.

Course structure:
Teachers and the literacy committee propose, and the school board approves, the “assured curriculum,” a set of texts, concepts, learning objectives, and products that all students will master before graduation. When students transition to high school, they are placed in courses based on the same criteria as in the Three Achievement Groups model; however, the courses students are placed in will also be populated with sophomores and juniors who are working towards the same learning objectives.

- **Accelerated 9th grade placement: College Prep English II**  
  Students can be accelerated with high academic achievement as measured by grades, high standardized test scores, and teacher recommendations affirming the students' ability to work independently. The Literacy Committee determines appropriate criteria that balance scores, grades, and teacher recommendations in order assure that selection is made based on advanced attainment of learning objectives and capacity for self-directed independent work—not caps, quotas, or parental lobbying.

- **Regular 9th grade placement: College Prep English I**  
  Students who have demonstrated success in the preceding curriculum, have demonstrated the appropriate
attainment of learning objectives, and for whom standardized test scores indicate a reasonable expectation of success in college.

- **Remedial 9th grade placement: Academic Literacy** Students whose have not demonstrated success in the prior curriculum, who have not demonstrated attainment of learning objectives, and for whom standardized test scores indicate a low expectation for success in college.

**Support for low-achieving students, including SSD:** Support is still provided in CWC and collaborative teaching arrangements. Learning Center and double blocking with reading support may still be appropriate. Students in dire need of academic support can still be held to the standard of college readiness by graduation because they may have two years of intensive remediation with the option of double blocked reading support in the remaining two years.

**Core curriculum:** The core curriculum of learning objectives must undergo a re-examination to assure college readiness by the end of American Lit. The vast majority of student would have three of four years in common.

**Honors designation:** Honors could be noted on high school transcripts for accelerated students. More significant are the additional opportunities for AP study. Some accelerated students would have to option of two full years of AP study, allowing students to prepare for and take both the Lit and Language AP exams. Other accelerated students would have the option of a year of additional study before enrolling in an AP course.

**Pros and Cons:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Multiage classrooms</td>
<td>- Multiage classrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Acknowledges student variability, students not labeled and pigeon-holed</td>
<td>- Difficulty and high stakes of making appropriate placements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Flexibility of placement based on student achievement</td>
<td>- Reduction of core curriculum to two courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- High-achieving students have more elective options</td>
<td>- Low-achieving students have limited exposure to core curriculum, electives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SCENARIO: OPEN ENROLLMENT IN HONORS/AP MODEL AT CHS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>12th Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Prep English I</td>
<td>College Prep English II</td>
<td>American Literature (recommended)</td>
<td>Electives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors English I</td>
<td>World History/English II</td>
<td>Electives</td>
<td>AP Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Honors English II</td>
<td>Honors American Literature (recommended)</td>
<td>AP Language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assumptions:
- Students should have the opportunity to select the level of challenge that they and their parents believe they should pursue.
- The classroom teacher is responsible for maintaining rigor and high standards regardless of class composition.

Student Support:
- Low-achieving/ELL students: Students at this stage receive support through the Learning Center, English I/II, Reading Improvement, Study Center, SSD services, co-taught courses (previously referred to as class within a class, or CWC), Conferenced English (summer school), and ELL English or ELL Reading. With the exception of the summer school course, the other support courses and services are usually offered in tandem with a College Prep English I class.

- Middle-achieving students: The students will be supported and challenged in College Prep English I and in Honors. Some degree of differentiation will occur.

- High-achieving students: Students seeking higher academic challenge find it in Honors English I. Opportunities to deepen knowledge beyond the already high level of expectations of the course are also available.

9th Grade Core Curriculum:
College Prep English I
- Ten conferenced writing assignments
- Two independent reading assignments (IRAs)
- Core texts: The Odyssey, Romeo & Juliet, Lord of the Flies, A Raisin in the Sun, Ellen Foster, Greek mythology, poetry, short fiction
- Additional shared class texts
- Two formal speeches
Honors English I -- Additionally, this course includes
- Greek drama
- three more IRAs
- even higher expectations for writing assignments
- more self-directed reading.

**Pro and Cons:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Students not labeled and pigeon-holed by the institution</td>
<td>- Difficulty maintaining rigor and standards in honors/AP courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Reduction of anxiety for placement at the time of transition</td>
<td>- Students choosing honors/AP courses because of social reasons —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Students and parents make the placement decision</td>
<td>friendships and college admissions — not because of intellectual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- All students have access to the honors curriculum</td>
<td>abilities or interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Students may group themselves into courses by race and economic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>status</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Parents and students may call for weighted grades to compensate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for lower grades (B’s and below) than students might have earned</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in non-honors/AP courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The designation of “honors” is a misnomer if the majority of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>students choose to enroll in honors courses</td>
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</tbody>
</table>