



We must change how we teach

By Eric J. Cooper (Reprinted from Greenwich Time, http://www.greenwichtime.com/ci_12514130, 6/4/2009)

The gentle, rhythmic ringing of a bell by the local schoolmarm once symbolized our educational system. But a raucous, attention-getting alarm better expresses the current state of the Stamford Public Schools. While progress is being made, Superintendent Joshua Starr and others in Stamford struggle to engage leaders inside and outside the classroom and to find the common ground necessary to keep more children in school and on the track to college and preparation for life in the 21st century.

But does academic tracking, the controversial placement of students in a sequence of classes based largely on test results and teacher recommendations, have a rightful place along that path? It is a central question in Stamford today.

To many people, educating the academically gifted is the key to America's future. They believe student achievement is based in natural talent and supplemented with preparation. In their view, students placed in categories 0 or 1 in our middle schools in Stamford should be our focus; preparing them to learn at the high standards demanded by the colleges and universities to which they will apply should be the goal. These people are not alone. Author Charles Murray, writing in his new book, "Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality," even goes so far as to imply that "No more than 20 percent of students have [the] level of academic ability, and 10 percent is a more realistic estimate [to succeed]..." at a four-year college or university.

Change in thinking

Yet the closer some researchers and scientists look at the careers of the "gifted" -- the upper 10 percent of American students -- the more they see that preparation plays a much bigger role than once thought. Current research clearly implies that intelligence as we usually think of it -- a high IQ -- is not a prerequisite to extraordinary achievement. This is seen in recent works from Geoff Colvin ("Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else") and Daniel Coyle ("The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born. It's Grown. Here's How") to Richard Nisbett ("Intelligence and How You Get It...").

In the genes?

The view that intelligence is all in the genes has a rich history, dating back to the 19th century, when a cousin of Charles Darwin promoted the theory that the ability to reach greatness depends on what a child inherits from his parents. But after 70 years of research in the cognitive and neurosciences, we now know that cognitive and academic development continues to happen for every child, even while we blanket children with content knowledge and specific skills.

Schools "cover" content and assess student outcomes, making assumptions about who can and cannot learn based on outdated beliefs about intelligence. We are making the same mistake over and over. We constantly underestimate the brain's ability. Even the "normal" brain appears capable of great success -- if we introduce concepts and subject matter in a way that enables students to learn, think and perform at the highest levels. As an historical example, both Colvin and Nisbett have traced the "gifts" of Mozart to the teaching and guidance provided by his father, rather than his widely believed inherited talents. It turns out that continual, sustained and deliberative practice over many years produced the musical works we marvel at and cherish today.

Teach greatness

Sadly, educators rarely teach the processes of higher-order thinking -- the fundamentals of learning -- and school districts almost never look at how learning processes work together in unison as a foundation for content knowledge

and skills. Instead, districts standardize the mind as content -- and place schoolchildren in boxes depending on their place along the academic track.

If we are to succeed in Stamford, it must be more widely understood that deliberate and sustained practice by students, guided by well-trained teachers, enables greatness to emerge in more of our students, no matter where they are performing today. This occurs when the educators who guide and mentor our children gain the tools necessary to enable students to master and synthesize knowledge in the fields they ultimately will pursue.

Three steps

How can we in Stamford accelerate high intellectual performance and high operational practice in our children? Three steps are critical.

First, we must enable Dr. Starr and his administrative staff to nourish and guide all of our teachers, not criticize them, as is so often the case in public education. This is especially important for the success of children I call "school and community dependent," or those who rely so profoundly on teachers for sustained academic achievement because of financial challenges at home. This is accomplished by coherent and coordinated professional development, not merely through published material and insufficient early-release days for staff development. True professional development happens when highly skilled educators model and coach teachers and go into classrooms to demonstrate good practice with schoolchildren, observed by the teachers as well as their principals.

Second, flexible grouping, which pairs high-achieving students with those who underachieve, must overcome the norm. This helps the lower achiever as well as the so-called "gifted" child because it provides exposure to the social-cultural-educational skills all children need to frame their success in the competitive workplace of the 21st century. Students who learn in homogenous isolation, separated by artificial tracks, may ultimately fail in a diverse global market. Businesses look less and less today at the grades, test scores, university attended and past academic tracks of prospective employees. They want passionate, deliberative, creative and innovative employees with strong interpersonal, communicative and collaborative teaming skills.

These businesses have learned that IQ predicts little or nothing about the long-term success of an employee.

Third, our school communities themselves must reflect this cultural diversity. At the very least, schools should reflect the demographics of the greater community. As William G. Bowen and Derek Bok of Harvard University have written in their seminal book, "The Shape of the River," students from highly diverse schools and classroom experiences ultimately out-achieve, in higher education and life performance, students taught primarily in homogenous K-16 classrooms.

It is in the self-interest of parents to understand that eliminating academic tracking is not only good for other people's children, but invaluable for their children, as well. How can we as a community expect education to establish itself as an instrument for cultural, economic and social change if we find it necessary to fundamentally imprison students in artificial and dysfunctional academic tracks? By continuing to embrace an academic tracking policy as a compass for achievement, we imperil our effectiveness as a community and jeopardize our children's ability to meet the challenges of an increasingly complex world.

Eric J. Cooper, of Stamford, is a parent of a middle and high school student, and president of the National Urban Alliance, www.nuatc.org.