

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

To the editor:

The Advocate mis-characterizes the arguments of concerned parents who support most of the middle school reforms but who disagree with the extreme move toward heterogeneous grouping that the administration is imposing on our schools without public support, training, or proof that this move will help all students. Mischaracterizing the views of hundreds of concerned parents, as your editorial did, continues the recent trend of school officials, including soon to be former Board of Education members, classifying the parents' position as "arguing to put this reform genie back in the bottle". This mischaracterization is factually incorrect and nothing short of propaganda used to support the recent changes by making the argument a stark "old vs. new" choice. The Advocate has not accurately portrayed the position of Stamford Residents for Excellence in Education (SREE) which hundreds of concerned parents formed with the mission of "helping to ensure that all children in Stamford receive an excellent education, and are challenged to reach their full potential."

SREE endorse many of the changes that the administration has imposed, including—most important—the elimination of rigid tracking. Parents are not advocating going backward at all. Our group wants to move forward to a workable model that everyone in the community can embrace. Parents are advocating eliminating tracking by replacing it with a system of flexible ability grouping instead of the near heterogeneous model the school administration implemented (two groups per subject area). Citizens in this group are not made up of exclusively of parents of high performing students. Many have children who would benefit from extra remedial education in order to catch their kids up and move them forward. Parents are more concerned about their kids getting lost without the benefit of extra help that better staff-to-student ratios provide (in the lower achievement groups) and getting frustrated with being with higher achievers and feeling "lost". There are parents who are concerned about their kids in the "middle". Under the administration's current model, if these "middle kids" make "the cut" (artificial cutoff for honors), they will be with kids who are progressing at a rate much faster than appropriate for them. If these same children do not "make the cut" even by one point, the administration's current model groups them with the lowest achievers. This cannot be good for any child.

SREE calls for the elimination of rigid and/or permanent tracking and replacement with Flexible Ability Grouping, meaning that students can and should move up or down levels over time based on their growth and changing needs. Students should not be placed for years based on 4th or 5th grade test scores. There should be frequent re-evaluation for movement. SREE believes that Flexible Ability Grouping should not be based solely on standardized test scores, but should also be derived from past performance in the classroom and input from teachers and parents. This is not what the school administration is doing presently. Everything is now based on standardized testing. If your child has issues with standardized tests, you are in trouble. SREE wants to give children of every ability, in each subject, the focus and attention they need to grow. We want to push every child to work to his highest level in each subject and not pre-ordain

children to a particular level, like tracking does.

On election day, there was a mandate to change the details of the of the changes that the administration imposed on our sixth graders with great fanfare, but with little parental support or understanding. This groundswell has grown since early November and will continue to grow. Continuing to move forward without having at least 4 flexible ability groups in core subjects (Math and Language Arts) will be unacceptable. The new Board of Education and the school administration should modify the current middle school program to adopt a program of a 4 group flexible ability grouping program in core subjects as a path forward - uniting everyone together for the benefit of all children. I encourage all citizens to go to <http://www.keepgrouping.org/position.html> in order to read the clear objectives of the SREE.

Taxpayers and parents are the ultimate stakeholders in our public schools and deserve the respect and support of the board and administration.

Geoff Alswanger
117 Hardesty Road
Stamford, CT 06903