

From: Gary Klein
Re: Cindy Grafstein's letter about Middle School Transformation
Date October 14, 2009

To the Editor:

As a fellow member of the Middle School Advisory Council, I am compelled to respond to Cindy Grafstein's letter for October 14, 2009 to correct some of the mistakes in her letter. First, Dr. Starr formed the Middle School Advisory Council in February 2009, when it had its first meeting. The administration implemented the reform program in September 2009, just six months later, and only four "school months" later. The committee that apparently existed for some two years was not the Middle School Advisory Council, but an informal think tank that did not have public meetings to my knowledge. Dr. Starr announced the actual specific reform plan in May 2009, just two school months before its implementation. While there was some training, the plan was unknown until May 2009 and implemented in September 2009. Common sense dictates that a few continuing education courses is not the kind of training our teachers and kids deserve. Second, the Middle Advisory Council has never concluded that "heterogeneous grouping is the most beneficial way of implementing curriculum for all students." While I am sure this is Ms. Grafstein's personal view, it is not a conclusion that the council ever reached. In fact, the New England League of Middle Schools has taken the clear position that "flexible grouping practices, based on skills, interests or themes encourage each student to learn to higher levels." It is surprising that Ms. Grafstein, just 30 days into the reform process and with real results unknown, is already calling for elimination of grouping after the current flexible grouping plan was supposedly studied and implemented after a two year process and careful planning.

Many aspects of the current middle school transformation program are positive important changes that will no doubt better educate our children. These aspects include flexible grouping based upon students' strengths and weaknesses in different subject areas and consistency across the district in grouping methodology. In addition, and perhaps most important, the administration has implemented significant curriculum enhancements that will help challenge all students. A move to heterogeneous grouping, which is inconsistent with the flexible grouping program recommended by the New England League of Middle Schools, not supported by many studies, and not supported by a substantial portion of the community and many members of the professional staff, would fail to challenge all of our children and would not give all the children the learning spectrum, top to bottom, the support they need to prosper in high school. Using phrases like "segregation of the worst kind", as Ms. Grafstein does, to describe ability grouping, certainly stirs emotions. However, our task is to educate all children. Local results matter. At schools like Westover in Stamford, they use flexible ability grouping and constant re-grouping and re-evaluation (a concept like the one the New England League of Middle Schools supports) to insure that all students are challenged at the appropriate level. Low and behold Westover is the only elementary school in Stamford to never have been on the No Child Left Behind watch list or failing list and has never exhibited an "achievement gap." Certainly the methodology used at Westover, a success by any objective measure, is not "segregation of the worst kind" as Ms. Grafstein suggests. Rather, this successful school, which should be a model for every other school in Stamford, uses grouping as a way to serve the needs of every student.

Gary S. Klein