

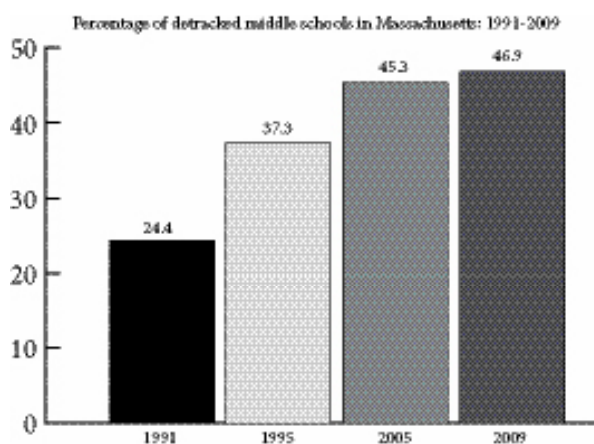


Tracking and Detracking: High Achievers in Massachusetts Middle Schools

What are the implications of “tracking,” or grouping students into separate classes based on their achievement? Many schools have moved away from this practice and reduced the number of subject-area courses offered in a given grade. In this Thomas B. Fordham Institute report, Brookings scholar Tom Loveless examines tracking and detracking in Massachusetts middle schools, with particular focus on changes that have occurred over time and their implications for high-achieving students.

KEY FINDINGS

- Tremendous change has occurred in tracking since the 1990s. The eighth-grade student of twenty years ago attended tracked classes for most of the day. Today’s eighth grader is primarily in detracked classes where students of all achievement levels are grouped together.
- Middle schools with more tracks have significantly more math pupils performing at the *advanced* and *proficient* levels on state tests and fewer pupils at the *needs improvement* and *failing* levels. Conversely, detracked schools have more *failing* and *needs improvement* math students than schools with two or three tracks. And when socioeconomic status is held constant, each additional track in eighth-grade math is associated with a 3 percentage-point rise in students scoring at the *advanced* level. In other words, a school with 200 eighth graders that offers at least three levels of math is typically attended by twelve more students scoring at the *advanced* level than a detracked school of similar size and socioeconomic status.
- Detracking is popular in high-poverty schools. Urban schools serving mostly poor children are more likely to have diminished or abolished tracking while suburban schools serving children from more prosperous backgrounds are more apt to have retained it.



Schools were categorized as “detracked” if they had no more than one level in ELA, history and science and no more than two levels in math.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS FROM FORDHAM

- As tracking has faded, American education has picked up various alternatives to it, including school choice, individualized learning and differentiated instruction.
- In the name of equity, gap closing, political correctness and leaving no child behind, U.S. schools have been too willing to neglect their higher-performing students and the educational arrangements that best meet their needs.

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