



Rockville Centre Union Free School District
SOUTH SIDE HIGH SCHOOL



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Chancellor Meryl Tisch
89 Washington Ave
Albany, NY 12234

December 18, 2012

Dear Chancellor Tisch:

When I was an assistant principal, I was lucky enough to have a great principal, Robin Calitri, as my boss and my mentor. Robin, who was a New York State Principal of the Year, did extraordinary work opening the doors of opportunity to students at South Side High School. He raised standards and eliminated the school's low-track classes. As a result, student achievement rose, especially for the school's minority students.

I was inexperienced, idealistic, and always ready to try a new idea. I told Robin that we needed a "special class" for the kids who were really struggling in algebra. Robin told me I was wrong. He said that it would not accomplish its goal, no matter the resources or lofty ambition. He told me that it would expand—for all the wrong reasons—because experience had taught him that if you "create a low-track class, it will fill." And he knew which kids would be directed toward those lowered expectations: it would fill, he predicted, with special education students, minority students, and low-SES students. And this tracking would, in all likelihood, do those students a great disservice.

I continued to press, sure that I was right. In the end, Robin relented despite his better judgment. I created two double-period sections, with two teachers (special education and math) and a teaching assistant. I wanted it to be a success, so I put in the best teachers we had. We created a "hands-on," relevant math curriculum. The original class size was low—15 students in each.

The course was a disaster. The sections slowly filled to 25, the dean was in and out of the class to help maintain order, and students did not learn algebra (then called Sequential Math I).

In desperation, I asked the teachers to give me the names of the worst-behaved students, and I put those students in one of our regular, untracked classrooms. Every time I did so, the removed student would do better, and another student in the low-track class would become the new leader of disruptive class behavior.

Robin was right. I was wrong. If I had studied the literature on tracking, I would have better understood why my attempt at 'remediation' would not be successful. After that experience, I never looked to tracking again as a solution. In fact, for the past thirteen years, since Robin's retirement, I have further detracked our school—leveling up and providing support. All students in our

diverse high school, with the exception of Life Skills students, take the same rigorous curriculum in Grades 9 and 10, and all these students also take IB English in grade 11. Last year, 99% of our students graduated with a Regents diploma—only one student dropped out. Getting rid of tracks has made an incredible difference. Tracking is not a good solution to close the achievement gap, nor will it ever be.

I share this now because you are considering a proposal that would institutionalize tracking, with a three-track diploma (CTE, Regular and STEM), as described by Senator Schumer in his letter to Chancellor Tisch and Commissioner King. If you do this, you will do the students of New York State a terrible disservice.

“Pathways” is the updated term for tracking. We have come up with several such terms because tracking earned, during the last century, a well-deserved bad reputation. No matter the name, the effect will be the same. We only have to look to history to understand why.

At the start of the 20th century, schools were asked to address new social and economic concerns due to the influx of immigrants. These immigrants needed to learn language, and factories wanted workers with basic skills but not with any real potential for advancement. At the same time, the children of the upwardly mobile native born, as well as the upper class, wanted their children to have a challenging, college preparatory education and to not have that education affected by the presence of immigrant students in their children’s classes. Social Darwinism, industrial efficiency and the scientific measurement of intelligence by IQ tests were popular beliefs and theories of the time.

These sort-and-select policies were embraced by often well-meaning “administrative progressives” as an efficient and scientific way to school students according to their future class and life station. Leonard Ayers, who authored a book called, *Laggards in our Schools*, argued that schools were designed for ‘intelligent’ students. He believed that schools needed special programs for the majority of students who were making slower progress. Psychologist Stanley Hall used the term, the “great army of incapables” to describe the new students entering the public school system.

It is within that context that tracking and vocational education began. During the 1930s throughout the 1950s, girls, minorities, immigrants and students from low-income households were routinely placed into non-academic, vocational tracks. When desegregation efforts forced segregated “White” schools to include African American students, racial tracking was used to separate those new students into low-track classes, resulting in de-facto segregation in classrooms. When PL 94-146 (now called IDEA) forced “regular” schools to include students with special needs, tracking was again used to segregate within schools.

Tracking was not seriously challenged until the middle of the 20th century, when researchers began questioning how tracking replicates the hierarchical social order. But various forms of tracking remain prevalent. This is not just because of discriminatory or hard-hearted reasons; it’s also in part because of common-sense educators like my former

self who act benevolently but without a good understanding of our past and of the research evidence.

After three decades of research, the preponderance of research on the effects of tracking tells us that:

- No matter what means are used to make enrollment decisions (whether by rigid placements or by student choice), tracking resulted in racial and socio-economic stratification, with minority students and students from low-SES homes overrepresented in low-track classes.
- Tracking harms the academic outcomes of these low-track students, yet high-track students generally show no academic benefit (as compared to results in untracked environments).
- Any achievement gains that are made by high-track students are at the expense of students in the low-track, whose achievement falls further and further behind.
- If students are 'misplaced' in a high-track class, their learning far outpaces their counterparts in low-track classes.

Although we should be concerned about the existence of all low-track classes, worries about the restoration of a vocational track, leading to a separate CTE diploma, should be especially strong. A few months ago, a team of German psychologists published an article on the effects of enrolling in a vocational track on the development of student intelligence. That article, which appeared in *The Journal of Educational Psychology* is titled, "The Differential Effects of School Tracking on Psychometric Intelligence: Do Academic-Track Schools Make Students Smarter?" The researchers found that students in the academic track experienced substantial intelligence (IQ) gains as compared to students in the non-academic, vocational tracks of Germany.

We have long known that *achievement* accelerates in the academic track as compared with the vocational track; this study shows that intelligence itself grows at an accelerated rate in academic programs as opposed to vocational programs. And this phenomenon is not limited to this single study or to Germany. It was first observed in studies in Sweden in 1968, 1982 and 1991. In addition, two researchers in Israel in 1988 found similar findings regarding tracking's effect on the growth of intelligence between the academic and vocational track, even after controlling for prior testing and for family background.

Many of the proponents of 'pathway' education are well-meaning members of both the education and business communities who believe that CTE education will make schools more engaging to disaffected students. This is understandable. The emphases on high-stakes tests and the increase in test-prep curriculum have sucked the joy of learning out of our classrooms. However, we need to be careful about what 'cure' for student disengagement we choose. We have long offered CTE courses as electives and even sequences for graduation. Rather than institutionalizing tracking in our state, via diplomas and pathways, why not continue your present course, established this year, which allows students to meet the three-credit math and science requirement with one technology course? We are also now asked to recognize mastery in math and science on

the diploma. Those changes provide choice and recognition without creating pathway divisions from which thirteen- and fourteen-year olds must choose.

It is also equally important that we rigorously examine the outcomes of New York State's present CTE programs. For example, what is the success rate of students who have attended BOCES programs over time, looking perhaps several years (not six months) after they graduate? What are the success rates of students passing Regents exams for courses taken in BOCES programs, rather than in the sending school? In presentations to the Regents, comparative graduation rates have been presented as evidence of the success of CTE schools in educating students better than some sending districts. One presentation compares the Barry Tech graduation rate with the rate for Nassau County. Barry Tech, however, cannot have a graduation rate because it does not issue a diploma. The sending district issues the diploma, and, in almost all cases, it is the sending district that provides the academic instruction that results in the passing of Regents exams and the awarding of most credit. The majority of sending districts refuse to send credit-deficient students to the CTE school, nor does Barry Tech always accept all students--BOCES programs screen applicants. Recently, one student with good academic standing from my school was denied entrance to Barry Tech because she had a five-day suspension for fighting.

In short, the comparative 'graduation' data is highly misleading. It represents a screened subgroup of students who are in Grades 11 and 12 and attend selected programs for part of the day, with most instruction given by the sending district. There are at least two questions here, the answers to both of which should be in hand before embarking on another statewide change: (1) What do we know about the strengths and weaknesses, success and failures, of the CTE programs that already exist? (2) What do we know about the strengths and weaknesses, success and failures, of programs that institutionalize separate vocational or CTE pathways or tracks through high school?

Again, this is not an argument against CTE education, alternative education nor is it an argument against rigorous courses of study in STEM courses. The P-Tech six-year program is a wonderful experiment in connecting high school and community. Hopefully in the coming years, we will see success. Given that P-Tech has been in operation for one school year, we cannot yet draw conclusions. There is nothing in our present diploma program that disallows the existence of P-Tech, BOCES programs or the Bronx High School of Science, for that matter. When, however, you start creating diploma pathways and creating distinctive diplomas, the re-emergence of harmful and inequitable sorting, beginning in Grade 9, will surely begin.

It was my understanding the Common Core State Standards were established to recognize that the skills needed for college were the same as the skills needed for the 21st century workplace. Not every student will choose to go to college or post-secondary educational programs, but every student should be well prepared to make that choice.

In closing, I would ask you to consider the words of artist Chuck Close in his "advice to his younger self":

I WAS in the eighth grade and was told not to even think about going to college. I couldn't add or subtract, never could memorize the multiplication tables, was advised against taking algebra, geometry, physics or chemistry and therefore would not get into any regular college. Since I was good with my hands, I was advised to aim for trade school, perhaps "body and fender" work.

NEVER let anyone define what you are capable of by using parameters that don't apply to you.

Chuck Close resisted the advice of those who thought he should go the path of CTE after high school. Instead he applied to a junior college with "open enrollment" and embarked on a career in the visual arts. However, if he had followed a CTE pathway in high school, being persuaded or placed at the more impressionable age of 14, how different his life may have been. Perhaps he may have had a good life repairing fenders, but the world would have been deprived of one of our greatest artists.

There have been overwhelming changes in the name of reform during these past few years. I implore the Regents to slow down and carefully think over this latest proposal in light of the research on tracking. Approval of the three-tier diploma will put our state and many of our students, on the wrong track.

Sincerely,



Carol Burris, Ed. D.

Principal

South Side High School