



On the Same Track: How Schools Can Join the Twenty-First-Century Struggle against Resegregation

Carol Corbett Burris

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A public school principal's account of the courageous leaders who have dismantled the tracking systems in their schools in order to desegregate classrooms

What would happen if a school eliminated the “tracks” that rank students based on their perceived intellectual abilities? Would low-achieving students fall behind and become frustrated? Would their higher-achieving peers suffer from a “watered-down” curriculum? Or is tracking itself the problem? A growing body of research shows that tracking doesn’t increase learning for the minority and low-income students who are overrepresented in low-track classrooms. This *de facto* segregation has led many civil rights advocates to argue that tracking is turning back the clock on equal education.

As a principal at a New York high school, Carol Corbett Burris believed that the curriculum for the best students was the best curriculum for all. She helped lead a bold plan to eliminate tracking from her school, and the results couldn’t have been further from the doom-and-gloom scenarios of tracking proponents. Instead, there was a dramatic improvement in the achievement of *all* students, across racial and socioeconomic divisions, and a near elimination of the achievement gap. Today, due to those efforts, International Baccalaureate English is the twelfth-grade curriculum for South Side students, and all students take the same challenging courses, together, to prepare them for college.

In *On the Same Track*, Burris draws on her own experience, on the experiences of other schools, and on the latest research to make an impassioned case for detracking. Not only does the practice of tracking fail to benefit lower-tracked students, as Burris shows, but it also results in the resegregation of classrooms. Furthermore, she argues that many of today’s popular reforms emanate from the same “sort and select” mentality that reinforces social stratification based on race and class.

On the Same Track is a rousing, controversial, and yet optimistic account of how we need to change our assumptions and policies if we are to live up to the promise of democratic public education. Only by holding all students to the same high standards can we ensure that all have the same opportunity to live up to their full potential.

On the Same Track: How Schools Can Join the Twenty-First-Century Struggle against Resegregation Details

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From Reader Review On the Same Track: How Schools Can Join the Twenty-First-Century Struggle against Resegregation for online ebook

James Swenson says

[I received a free copy of this book through the LibraryThing Early Reviewers program.]

As a math professor, I approach *On the Same Track* with a mixture of biases, and you might as well know what they are.

I suppose every specialist thinks of his/her subject as unique. If so, I am no exception: I think mathematics, whose various distinct strands are the fibers of an intricate, eternal tapestry, stands alone as the subject in which future success most depends on past performance. Like author Carol Corbett Burris, I am committed to the ideal of closing achievement gaps for minorities in our schools and ensuring justice in our school systems. On the other hand, I am keenly aware that when a student fails precalculus, it is not a kindness to allow him or her to register for calculus.

So, like Burris, I am horrified to observe that academic tracking has the effect of resegregating our schools and perpetuating differences in social class -- and that this often happens by design. Something must be done -- but what?

Burris proposes that we move all students into the advanced track, and offers anecdotes strongly suggesting that this is not so impossible as it sounds to me. I would like to be convinced. The fact that I don't yet believe, to Burris, is evidence that I'm (probably unconsciously) trying to protect the advantage that my (well-off white) kids receive when others are abused by the system. I hope not -- but I acknowledge the temptation: an educational system with winners and losers isn't as threatening if my kids are among the winners.

So let's turn to a part of the system in which my kids are not currently involved: It is clear to me, at least, that in mathematics at the college level, at this time, we cannot just admit everyone to the "advanced track." Much though we might prefer it, the "sink-or-swim" model has been found intolerable; we have discovered a genuine need for remedial courses. These should be made as productive and stimulating as possible, but they cannot be eliminated.

If everyone is to do advanced work, the change will have to happen earlier. Something of the sort is implicit in the Common Core State Standards in Mathematics, and it's that part of that project that's most appealing to me. If everyone settles down a bit and these standards become reality in American classrooms (and if enough teachers can learn enough math to be qualified to teach these standards), we will have come a long way toward moving everyone to the advanced track.

Burris, though, is not willing to wait for the decade or more that this will require. How can the transition be made more quickly? Though she does not go into a lot of details, I think she is saying that the answer is "differentiated instruction," which I understand to be a sort of "one-track-per-student" model. If that's what it means, I agree -- it is certainly the best strategy, and maybe the only possible one, to achieve this goal -- but I'm glad it's not expected of me as a college instructor. She adds that teachers might require more successful students to teach their less successful classmates: a strategy to which I am thoroughly opposed. Slow

students already hate fast ones -- why make it worse?

Burris is asking for the right changes, and shows anecdotally that these changes can be made, with enormous effort, in individual schools, at least temporarily. This is impressive, and even moving, but it does not sound scalable. Too much opposition, not enough will. In the alternative, let's support things that can happen: improved teacher training, the Common Core, adequate school funding, and serious attention to justice in tracking.

Rachel says

On the Same Track takes a critical look at tracking in American schools and how these tracking programs perpetuate racial inequality. Although the book covers an interesting topic, the coverage is sub-par.

I suggest using this book to get a broad overview of the racial issues that exist in American schools. In particular, it is useful as an introduction to critical racial thought on education topics.

However, the book overlooks crucial research on tracking. The overview of the literature that is presented is not complete. The author presents only a selection of the literature and (especially in the introduction) gives the impression that tracking research has been conclusive. However, newer research is not included. In particular, randomized experiments in tracking that have been conducted recently are excluded.

Mills College Library says

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Christina Needham says

[I received this book for free as part of LibraryThing.com's Early Reviewer program. All thoughts are my own]

This book was a big eye-opener for me: as someone who grew up in the high-track classrooms, I saw school in a completely different way than my low-track peers. It wasn't until senior year in high school, when I became a teachers aide, that I saw the dramatic difference in the quality of teaching in the low-track classrooms. At the time, I thought it was just the teacher and didn't realize that it was only a symptom of a larger problem. I saw kids who wanted to learn, that were treated like idiots, as nicely as possible, and their questions and requests for more information was quickly dismissed as too much for them to take in at once. It was then that I got interested in learning more about our education system.

This book talks about how that dynamic came to be and continues still today. Using research and real classroom/school/district examples, Burris explains the issue with tracking or ability grouping our students. If I hadn't read this book, I could see myself demanding the advance classes for my future children under the prevalent assumptions of today, that it is the best place for our children to be. I'm glad that I've read this book before crossing that bridge because now I feel completely different about what a school experience can be.

As she says, the topic of detracting our schools is not new, but as someone seeing this topic for the first time, it changed everything I believed about what makes a good school for our children. This book was written in a way that allows an outsider to keep up and feel informed about the different school systems without feeling inept.

I recommend this book to those aspiring to be teachers, current parents, and those planning on families in the near future.

Katelyn Shaver says

I received an advanced copy of this book from the Goodreads first reads program. I want to thank the author for allowing me to read and review this work.

"On the Same Track" is a novel which tackles the topic of tracking and its use in schools. The book takes a veracious look at the reality of tracking and the research that has been conducted regarding its practicality. The novel makes a compelling case and opens the path towards further dialog on this subject. I personally think the book could have been strengthened by including slightly more research and addressing the claims defending tracking more extensively; a bibliography to go along with the end notes would have enriched it more as well.

The novel was readable and professional in tone. The writing style could have been more personable, but what it lacked in excitement it made up for in clarity.

Overall this was a good book and one which I would recommend to other readers.

Megan says

"On the Same Track" by Carol Corbett Burris is an interesting distillation of data collected over the years in regards to the tracking- both official and unofficial that goes on in America's schools. Burris looks at how tracking has harmed all students, but especially those of minority descent and those who are social-economically depressed.

Through looking at multiple large and small scale studies Burris concludes that tracking harms more students than it helps. Her studies found that moving from five to seven tracks (as some schools had) to two (standard and honors tracks) were highly effective with all students (both low-performing and high-performing). She did find that when low-performing students were placed in 'higher' level classes they performed significantly better. There was speculation as to whether this was due to the teaching, the students in the class, the level of material, or other factors. As a means to allay any fears it was also found that high-performing students did the same or even better than previously.

All in all it was determined that placing like abilities students together exclusively is harmful, especially to those who are low performing. Burris also points out that there is much resistance to detracking and that school districts that showed success in detracking went back to their old systems once the champions who pushed for the reforms retired or changed districts. I would have to agree as when I discussed what I learned with other teachers they were very entrenched in their view on the helpfulness of tracking.

This book is easy to read and informative. I would recommend it. The only reason I gave it a low rating is because it's not super engaging and is a pretty dry read.

Donna Schubert says

loved reading this book very much i learned alot from it
