

Tracking Is a District Problem

Schools of choice are actually less likely to use ability tracking

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

by Carol Corbett Burris

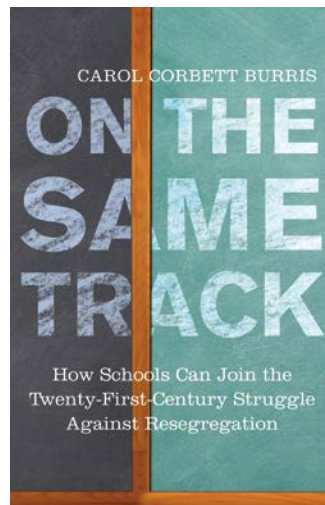
Beacon Press, 2014, \$24.95; 197 pages.

As reviewed by Patrick J. Wolf

Carol Corbett Burris hates ability tracking. She also hates parental school choice. A lot. One goal of this book is to convince the reader that the latter increases the former: that parental school-choice programs cause or represent ability tracking. On that count, the book does not succeed.

Ability tracking is the practice of assigning students within a given school to course streams of differing levels of challenge depending on each student's perceived intellectual capacity. Tracking is common, especially in traditional public schools. Burris combines reviews of academic studies, as well as personal anecdotes from her own experience as an educator, to argue that ability tracking has a negative effect on the educational achievement of "low track" students while also undermining social cohesion. Although the empirical research base on the effects of tracking is decidedly mixed, I am willing to grant Burris the point that ability tracking, as typically practiced in district schools, probably is bad for lower-ability students.

Burris devotes a chapter in the book to her own experience of helping to de-track a school district in Rockville Centre in Long Island, New York. One successful case does not prove that a policy of de-tracking will work in general. Moreover, her list of 10 key requirements for de-tracking at the end of the chapter suggests that the case occurred



in a reform "hot house" ideally situated to be successful. The history of education policy is rife with cases of hot-house reforms that produced positive results that could not be replicated elsewhere. Burris herself admits that "Rockville Centre is one of the few examples of a successfully de-tracked school system."

Still, her case study in de-tracking at Rockville Centre provides a sort of "proof of concept." Other chapters discuss less successful case studies in de-tracking, including some that returned to ability tracking after having been de-tracked. Burris argues that attitudes about IQ and learning, persisting from the Progressive Era, tend to combine with political considerations to slow or undermine efforts at de-tracking. School districts are, after all, political organizations.

In fact, much of Burris's book can be understood as a damning indictment of an education system that is rife with educator and parental attitudes of entitlement, racism, and low expectations for disadvantaged students, which manifest themselves in the entrenched nature of ability tracking. She needs to change all of that if ability tracking is to be assigned to the trash heap of history.

I wish her well in her quest.

The even more difficult assignment for Burris, however, is to convince the reader that parental school choice causes or at least increases ability tracking. Part of the problem with her argument is that the practice of ability tracking preceded the development of parental school choice programs by more than 50 years. Burris would have us believe that the baby birthed the mother.

Ability tracking was a reform of the Progressive Era of the early 20th century, intended to make public schools more scientific in their development of young minds. The assessment of intelligence quotient (IQ) was popular at the time, and the thinking was that a student's IQ was both fixed and largely determinative of how much a child could learn. (Both of those ideas have been debunked by modern science, at least in their most extreme expressions.) Smart kids would have their learning diminished by being educated with slower learners, and vice versa, the Progressives thought. It is better for everyone if students are sorted into like groups based on ability, as measured by IQ, and have their education delivered within these rigid tracks, they argued.

Ability tracking arose in part as a response to the challenges posed by another Progressive Era education reform: the consolidated public school. Individual schools tended to be small, tightly integrated, communal organizations prior to the 20th century—the famed little red schoolhouses. Progressives were convinced that public education would be delivered more effectively and efficiently if it were done on a grand scale, like the automobile industry. They launched a

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sustained and unfortunately successful effort at merging small schools into large ones, and independent school districts into large, consolidated districts. The total number of school districts in the U.S. dropped from more than 100,000 around the turn of the 20th century to less than 15,000 by the turn of the 21st century, even as the population of school-age children increased during that period.

The public education system was transformed by the Progressives into a small set of large, industrial-type organizations governed by elected politicians. The educators in those organizations faced a problem. These new, large schools brought through the school doors a heterogeneous mix of students with widely varying levels of educational preparation and ability. The Progressives' solution to the problem of scale that they had created was ability tracking at the school level and parental school choice through "exam schools" at the district level. As social scientist George Ansalone reported in 2003, "The practice of tracking is entrenched in the philosophy of American education and is practiced in 60 percent of all primary and 80 percent of all secondary [public] schools in the United States." Ability tracking simply is

what district schools do.

Exam schools in particular are undeniably a mechanism of ability tracking used in school districts, and they appropriately evoke Burris's ire. Having established that the form of parental school choice offered within school districts is a harmful way of ability tracking, Burris uses that example to tarnish parental school choice in its other forms of public charter schooling and private school vouchers as well. It is here that Burris's indictment of school choice falls apart.

There is a compelling research literature on ability tracking and public charter schools and private schools. The seminal works on the question include

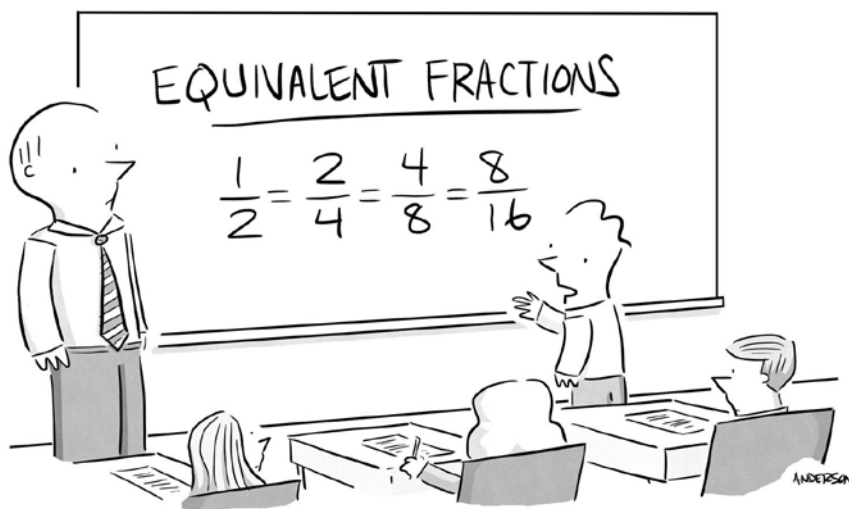
Catholic Schools and the Common Good, by Anthony Bryk and his colleagues (1993); *Choosing Equality*, by Joseph Viteritti (1999); "Politics, Markets, and Equality in Schools," by John E. Chubb and Terry Moe (1995); and "Getting Beneath the Veil of Effective Schools," by Will Dobbie and Roland G. Fryer (2013). These studies show, consistently, that parental schools of choice not controlled by public school districts 1) are usually prohibited by law from screening out students based on admission exams, 2) use ability tracking less frequently than traditional public schools even when, legally, they can, and 3) may use ability tracking, but when they do, it is less likely to have a negative effect on the achievement of low-track students. In fact, there is substantial evidence that escape from the harmful effects of ability tracking in the district schools is a major factor driving disadvantaged families to charter schools and private school choice.

Unfortunately, you won't find any of these seminal books and articles mentioned in Burris's highly selective review of the education literature, as their findings completely undermine her claim that parental school choice increases ability tracking. A broader understanding of the history of ability tracking and school choice, grounded in the complete scholarly literature, holds that the consolidated schools of the Progressive Era begat ability tracking, which begat worse educational experiences and outcomes for disadvantaged students, which caused minority and low-income families to flee traditional public schools for alternative schools of choice that treat them better.

In sum, I have very good news to pass along to Carol Corbett Burris and her supporters. We already have an approach to education in the U.S. that minimizes both the frequency and the harm of student ability tracking. It's called parental school choice.

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