BRINGING EQUITY BACK

Research for a New Era in American Educational Policy

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Mandates Still Matter

Examining a Key Policy Tool for Promoting Successful Equity-Minded Reform

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Education reform is difficult. Huge challenges face those who attempt to change the practices, structure, or goals of America's schools. And, for those who attempt reforms designed to benefit low-income students of color, the obstacles multiply. We studied three American communities struggling with just such a reform—a difficult but meaningful equity-minded school reform. These communities are spread throughout the United States: San Jose, California; Rockford, Illinois; and East Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Notwithstanding their geographic differences, they shared similar histories and embarked on a common struggle to make the equitable treatment of students a reality within their schools. In particular, members of each of these communities turned to litigation within the federal court system to prompt the reduction or elimination of ability grouping in classrooms. They believed that the districts' tracking practices, intended to target curriculum and instruction to students of different designated levels of ability, had been used discriminatorily against African American and Latino students.

In this chapter, we use the term *tracking* rather than the term *ability grouping*. Most literature uses these two terms interchangeably, although some researchers and educators have drawn distinctions between the two terms, usually labeling as "tracked" those systems that place students at a given level across subject areas, and labeling as "ability grouped" those systems that group students class-by-class (see discussion in Slavin, 1993). In reality, both terms are misnomers, since some students "jump the tracks" of almost every tracking system and since placements in these systems are, at best, based on *perceived* ability (Welner, 2001a). More important, the day-to-day reality is virtually the same for the vast majority of students in schools approximating either definition. (For a more comprehensive definition of tracking, see Oakes, 1991.)

In each of the communities we studied, the plaintiffs alleged that the school districts used tracking as a form of second-generation discrimination in response to court-ordered school desegregation. That is, they contended that tracking subverted between-school desegregation by separating students within the school site.

Before turning to litigation as a policy tool, the change agents in these communities first considered and attempted other, more grassroots reform strategies. But these bottom-up attempts to bring about change starting at the local, grassroots level came up empty. The political and normative (meaning relating to values and beliefs) environment in and around these school districts was fundamentally inhospitable to the initiation of a detracking reform. Politically, detracking efforts generally must overcome local opposition and build supportive communities both within and outside the school. Normatively, tracking is grounded in widespread negative beliefs about human capacity and ethnic and class-based discrimination. In addition, tracking is supported by technical (or organizational) forces that interconnect it to schools' other practices (Oakes, 1992). In most places, such local barriers would draw the story to a close; however, the change agents in these three districts continued to fight for reform. They did so by moving their efforts to a forum where their political disadvantage would be a lesser impediment: the federal courts.

The resulting legal cases from these three communities carry with them lessons of great importance, and this chapter uses these lessons to support the contention that conventional, bottom-up or top-down approaches to school reform fall short when equity is the desired result. As the actors in these three communities have learned, enormous obstacles block the path to success for reforms aimed at benefiting those students who hold less powerful positions in schools and communities (generally speaking, African Americans, Latinos, and the poor). The courts do not really smooth this path, but they do provide a boost to educators committed to working on

the local level to overcome obstacles to equity-minded changes in public schools. For those change agents with a strong commitment to equity-minded reforms such as detracking, these cases and their effect on local change agents hold great promise in otherwise bleak situations.

For the past 2 decades and into the present, top-down mandates, especially those emanating from the federal government, have been criticized for minimizing local control and working against grassroots, bottom-up initiatives for change. For example, federal Title I funding now is provided to states, and ultimately to schools, in block grants with the expectation that people at the school level know better how to use the federal money for poor students. No Child Left Behind, the latest reauthorization of the federal law that provides Title I funding, did not change this, although state and local decisions now must be made in a highly proscriptive context tied to outcome measurements—and the backlash against this centralized role clearly is growing (Hoff, 2004; Hooper, 2004).

Federal- and state-level education reformers also have placed great faith in charter schools, which, in theory at least, are envisioned, designed, and governed by community members. Overall, the call for greater decentralization and local control has, at least since the early 1980s, been louder and more powerful than calls for centralized measures to ensure more equal educational opportunities between districts, schools, and students.

We agree that reforms initiated from the bottom-up, with substantial local buy-in, are generally preferable to top-down initiated reforms, and some research shows the need for an involved constituency for reforms to commence and prosper. Meanwhile, our research also shows that some school and community contexts are overwhelmingly inhospitable to locally initiated change. In those settings, top-down mandates may be necessary to help change that context in order to open a policy window for equity-minded reform. But this is not an argument for top-down mandates *as opposed to* bottom-up change. In fact, we reject such a dichotomy. Instead, we contend, based on the three communities we studied, that top-down mandates alone are unlikely to bring about equity-minded reforms. Rather, such mandates must be accompanied by bottom-up reforms grounded in the logic and strategies employed in social and political movements. This combined effort is more likely to expose, challenge, and, if successful, disrupt the prevailing norms of schooling inequality that frustrate equity-focused reforms that are exclusively bottom-up or top-down, but not both. Therefore, we conclude, as detailed below, that successful equity-minded reform generally must combine top-down and bottom-up reform strategies.[1]

In what follows, we argue that equity-minded change requires a fundamental reworking of the theory and practice of both top-down and bottom-up reform, and we offer some concrete suggestions toward this end. In

particular, we urge those embarking on such controversial reforms to be aware of, and to respond to, the powerful normative and political obstacles that they will likely encounter as they move forward with the initiation and implementation of their change ideas. As discussed below, we view equity-minded, top-down pressure as an important ally in this struggle. We also encourage practices that develop, among teachers in particular, normative beliefs consistent with the reform's principles. And we emphasize the need for political mobilization.

THE THREE CASES: WHERE COURT ORDERS
MEET LOCAL INITIATIVE AND RESISTANCE

San Jose, Rockford, and East Pittsburgh are all mid-sized urban/sub-urban communities with fairly stable school district populations and court-ordered school desegregation plans. Unlike bigger cities, where White and middle-class flight has made school desegregation so difficult, these communities have racially mixed schools with sizable middle-class enrollments. Our access to these communities, schools, and data collected for the courts allowed us to conduct in-depth, cross-case analyses of the districts as they struggled with issues of racial equity and school reform. The East Pittsburgh community of Woodland Hills, in particular, provided an opportunity to collect extensive data in the form of interviews, observations, and school district statistics concerning the detracking reform that followed from the court order.[2]

We learned of each of these communities when Oakes was asked (depending on the case, by either the plaintiffs or a combination of interested parties) to analyze tracking and detracking issues regarding racial segregation. The school district in each community was placed under a court order requiring "detracking" and the creation of racially balanced classrooms.[3]

The schools in Woodland Hills, Rockford, and San Jose all changed as a result of their court orders. And they changed to the general advantage of the districts' African American and Latino students. Undoubtedly, they could have changed more, and the changes could have resulted in greater benefits for these minority students. But the federal court orders and other supportive forces, such as reform-minded teachers, administrators, and community members, did not exist in isolation. Instead, these pro-reform forces existed along with a wide variety of additional forces, many of which pushed against the reform. These combined forces—bottom-up and top-down—resulted in a reform environment far more favorable to the detracking effort than it would have been in the absence of the court order. Still, the environment was far from ideal and changes were hard-won.

This nuanced conclusion should not obscure the fact that dedicated people in these districts spent years struggling to improve and as a result of their efforts, aided by the court mandates, schools became better places for low-income students and students of color. Furthermore, as we will demonstrate, the effects of these changes for White and more-affluent students in these three districts largely depended on how their teachers reacted to the equity-minded mandates. Below, we discuss how these themes evolved in each of the three districts we studied.

Woodland Hills

Prior to the detracking court order in Woodland Hills, this district's classes were extensively tracked, and these tracks racially segregated children within schools. But the court order prompted important changes. The district hired a new, reform-minded superintendent who was charged by the school board to implement the equity-minded changes that the court demanded. This superintendent and other school leaders instituted considerable detracking, particularly in the district's English courses, thereby enhancing the educational opportunities of students who for years had been disadvantaged by district policies.

For Woodland Hills's more advantaged students, those formerly enrolled in the higher-tracked classes, detracking brought mixed blessings. On the one hand, some teachers responded to the challenge presented by heterogeneous grouping and reformed their instructional methods. All students in these classrooms saw greater use of authentic instruction and assessment and more lessons designed to develop higher-order thinking. On the other hand, some teachers made insufficient changes, or none at all, to adapt to the new classes. Notwithstanding quantitative analyses indicating that detracking did not present an overall disadvantage to the formerly high-track students (Welner, 2001a), those students placed in detracked classrooms with less-skilled or resistant teachers probably experienced some of the poor teaching previously confined to the low-track environment. Interestingly, only one opponent of detracking acknowledged that these unsuccessful teachers also had no success under the former, tracked system.[4] This opponent, a White parent, described these teachers as "set in a rut, back in whatever year they started; they use the same dittos that they used then."

Detracking, however, exposed these weaknesses in two ways. First, while such teachers had never taught much in the way of higher-order thinking skills, they did pace their drill and memorization lessons at a rate they believed to be suitable for the tracked student body. The switch to heterogeneous classes pulled that comfortable rug out from under them,

leaving them pondering whether to "teach to the top" or water down the lessons to the "middle" or the "bottom."

Second, and more important, detracking exposed more privileged students to these weaker teachers. Before detracking, such teachers taught primarily the low tracks—a system that was effectively enforced by powerful parents. A secondary school principal noted that wealthy White parents knew the identity of the good teachers and "scream[ed]" if the school placed their children with the weaker teachers. This principal noted that the most knowledgeable parents, who are also the wealthiest, "will get the better teachers." Yet the district will "allow those [weaker] teachers to stay there and let the kids [with parents who are less politically savvy] fall where they may. It is unfair."

Another principal contended that this disparity arises because the "general kids" and their parents demand much less of their teachers.

> They don't go home and tell their parents, "Yeah, all we did today was a worksheet. Yep. All we did today, again, was a worksheet." They're thrilled to do that. Their parents are thrilled that they're not in trouble. Their parents are thrilled that someone's keeping them there for 40 minutes. I don't mean to be smart. I'm just telling you that's the way it is. If your child was in the college prep or academic, you would say to the child, "What did you do today?" Child might say, "I did a worksheet." That's okay. That'd be okay. If you came home the second day, "What did you do?" "I did a worksheet." Third day, "I did a worksheet." Now you're going to start to be concerned. "Do you read?" You will start asking him to tell things like that.

A high school teacher agreed. The less successful teachers in the detracked classes also accomplished little before detracking, he said, but "in the regular English classes, they were dealing with kids whose parents wouldn't complain that there were no standards. Now they are dealing with kids whose parents will complain when there are no standards."

Yet the situation was equally untenable from the perspective of the teachers who had been assigned to those low-track English classes prior to the detracking effort. One called them "nightmare classes." Another recalled, "You could hardly get through anything because [the students] just wanted to come and fool around." Students in these low-tracked classes were clearly bored with what educators described as poor academic instruction. A top district administrator characterized the old regular English course as "mindless synonyms, antonyms, drill, [and] sentence structure." A principal admitted that teachers generally made "no attempt to teach

the lower group." A teacher acknowledged, "We weren't doing what was right by [the low-tracked students]. I don't think we met their needs." And a school board member declared that she "could point out any number of pitfalls with the old system: The old system labeled children. The old system did not challenge."

Similarly, an African American parent recalled that teachers had miserably low expectations for students in the low-track English class. When these students misbehaved or ignored their work, the teachers did nothing, since the students "act[ed] just the way they [were expected to act], anyway." Detracking, she said, "put [these teachers] to the challenge." And some teachers began to meet that challenge; according to one, "I see some real benefits occurring for the regular student because he's expected to do more. I think . . . in many ways they're progressing."

Under either a tracked or a detracked system, Woodland Hills, like most districts, would contain some inferior teachers. But the poor teaching became much more apparent to powerful constituencies when highlighted by detracking. Those involved in school change often find the limitations of a traditional system (tracked classes, in this case) to be less noticeable than the limitations of the revised system. Researchers who have made the best attempts to measure the effects of tracking conclude that tracked students gain no achievement advantage over comparable nontracked students—even without accounting for changed instructional methods or curriculum. This holds true whether the students test in the high, medium, or low range (Slavin, 1990). And the quantitative data from Woodland Hills support these conclusions (Welner, 2001a).

The fact remains, however, that even though overall conditions in detracked classes were superior to those of the old tracked classes, some students who formerly were in high-track English classes likely did receive poorer instruction and more disruptions in their new detracked classes. To the extent that the parents of these students were upset about the decrease in the quality of their children's school experience, one might argue that their complaints were justified. However, the district's most vocal reform opponents campaigned for nothing more than a return to tracking. They did not aim to improve instructional methods throughout the school; rather, they sought a return to the previously flawed system. As their only concession, they called on the district to ensure nondiscriminatory class placements. While these parents complained loudly about the poor instruction their own children purportedly received in detracked classes, they remained willing to foist that same (or worse) instruction on other children.

Detracking opponents took a similar approach to classroom disruptions. Although most teachers contended that these disruptions decreased overall following detracking, resistant White parents focused exclusively

on the purported disruption increase in their children's classes as compared with the old advanced classes.

In addition, this resistance appeared to be prompted by other, less legitimate issues. Some parents objected to the withdrawal of status, for example, when the district removed the symbolic gold stars of high-track ranking from their children's foreheads. It is natural and reasonable for parents to view their own children as special; but these parents also felt entitled to demand something extra. Other resistant parents did not hide their simple preference for the advanced courses' racial and class demographics.

Similar positions surfaced in all three districts we studied, and we believe, based on our research and review of school change research literature, that most, if not all, American school districts house parents with comparable perspectives and attitudes. In many such districts, these powerful parents hold political sway, as they did for a long time in Woodland Hills, making it unlikely that the district would initiate equity-minded detracking reform. Even in the face of the court mandate, these parents maintained considerable influence and in some ways succeeded in watering down the reform efforts. Nevertheless, because of the power of the court order, real change ensued within Woodland Hills. This mandate, in concert with the support of some community members, teachers, and administrators newly empowered by the court order, pushed the district in a positive direction—a direction the district otherwise would not have taken. Such changes did not resolve all the district's problems, such as uneven teaching quality. Yet, from a perspective recognizing the district's former inequities, the change clearly did result in greater opportunities for African Americans, the group of students who had most suffered in the past.

This highlights two important themes of this chapter and of this book. The first was mentioned earlier: Equity-minded reform efforts benefit from a combination of top-down and bottom-up pressures. The second focuses on the nature of successful equity-minded policies. The detracking mandates that we studied were intended and designed specifically to make the school districts more equitable. While the policies also may have had unintended beneficiaries among the broader student body—for example, they may have led to improved instruction and better qualified teachers across all classrooms—they were targeted at minority students identified by the courts as having suffered discrimination. In this way, these mandates differ tremendously from the popular excellence- and choice-oriented policies that dominate today's landscape (e.g., standards, charter schools, and vouchers). Instead of targeting specific groups of students who have been disadvantaged in the past, these more recent reforms are supposed to change the entire educational system by infusing greater accountability and competition and, theoretically, freeing all parents and students to vote with

their feet by leaving failing schools and choosing good schools instead. Some advocates of these contemporary reforms may have equity-minded goals, and these goals sometimes are affixed to the broader policy, but the theory underlying these goals is generally that a rising tide will lift all boats (Hoxby, 2003).

As discussed in other chapters in this book, such nontargeted policies are not likely to further an equity agenda. In contrast, we found substantial progress toward equity goals in these districts, which were subjected to detracking mandates. Accordingly, our findings highlight this second theme: Equitable educational practices are unlikely to come about as an artifact of policies specifically promoting only excellence or choice; policies instead must be targeted directly at achieving equity goals.[5]

San Jose

With these themes in mind, and also keeping in mind a perspective recognizing these districts' former inequities, we now consider the reform process that we observed in the San Jose Unified School District. There the district leadership began with great enthusiasm for the consent decree containing the detracking mandate, enthusiasm described by one observer as a "love fest." Over time, however, as the change process proved to be politically complicated, the leadership shifted its focus away from a commitment to the reforms' success and toward the goal of obtaining a unitary status ruling and thus a release from the detracking mandate.

Nonetheless, since the time of the initial court order in 1985, the district participated in a variety of innovative reforms, including Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools and the College Board's Equity 2000. Thus, despite the district leadership's waning interest in detracking, San Jose's schools and classrooms did become more integrated, and remedial classes were eliminated. As a result of the lawsuit and the court order, empowered community groups with equity-minded missions formed and helped to raise the consciousness of many in the community concerning issues of educational equity and racial justice.

One of the many San Jose teachers we interviewed indicated, at the beginning of the interview, that her impression of the court order was that it had failed. As we talked, she mentioned a variety of programs and advances that she had witnessed over the years. Near the end of the interview, we asked her whether she thought those changes would have occurred without the lawsuit, and—seemingly surprised at her own answer—she said, "no." Most educators in the district, she explained, otherwise would not have embarked on these types of equity-minded activities. Other educators and community members in the districts we studied

shared similar sentiments. These court orders, it turns out, did not fail. They merely failed to accomplish all that they theoretically could have were it not for the districts' many other forces—including parents and advocates of high-track students—resisting these changes. Still, the court orders clearly brought about much more equity-minded change than would have occurred had these policies not been targeted specifically toward such goals.

Rockford

Meanwhile, reformers in Rockford began their efforts facing even greater hurdles than those in either San Jose or Woodland Hills. The within-school segregation was more overt, the racial divisions more pronounced, and the district leadership extraordinarily resistant.[6] From this perspective, in particular, Rockford also accomplished a great deal. While the district retains tracking, the lowest tracks have been eliminated, and the highest tracks are no longer reserved for White children. The tracks are also less rigid, allowing some upward movement. Even given the hostility of high-level policymakers toward these reforms, the court forced real change.

UNDERSTANDING THE NORMATIVE AND POLITICAL HURDLES FOR EQUITY-MINDED REFORM

The key lesson from these three communities (and from other de-tracking schools we've studied[7]) is that districts and schools that initiate detracking reforms without preparing to overcome normative and political obstacles are likely to see their change efforts substantially undermined. The initiation, implementation, and sustainability of equity-minded reforms all depend on the creation of a policy context favorable to the reform's goals. Creating such a favorable environment requires bottom-up efforts, including grassroots constituency building and mobilization, but often it also requires top-down efforts such as federal court orders and legislation.

Because many education reform movments approach the change process from a technical perspective, rarely do reformers focus on the political and normative issues that hold inevitable sway over any efforts to affect equity-minded change. Detracking depends on the commitment and re-sourcefulness of teachers, administrators, counselors, parents, students, lawyers, and others in attending to these normative and political needs from both a top-down and bottom-up perspective. In fact, the success of almost all equity-minded reform depends on what people believe about learning and students, about who can and must learn, and about whether some stu-

dents must receive less in school in order for other students to receive "the best" (see Oakes, Wells, Datnow, & Jones, 1997).

We observed in all three of the districts we studied that tracking's strongest supporters, whether teachers, students, or parents, invariably focused their attention on preserving the quality of high-track classes; they could not defend, and thus rarely addressed, the poor-quality education routinely offered in low-track classes. In fact, most parents who denounce their local schools' efforts to detrack, no doubt would fight ferociously to keep their own children out of those schools' lower tracks. Tracking's bene-fits, if they exist, adhere to those outside the lowest tracks.

These perceived benefits, moreover, are extremely visible. High-track classes are the most coveted in any given school. They produce the Na-tional Merit Scholars, the science fair winners, the "good kids." Teachers enjoy these classes because the students appear more motivated and bet-ter behaved. Students form cliques of friends within these classes, and they can be very reluctant to let go of that security and camaraderie. Parents of high-track students value the higher-quality instruction as well as the sym-bolic status tied to their children's achievement as recognized in the track placement. All are aware of the college admissions criteria that place a premium on honors, advanced placement (AP), and international bacca-laureate (IB) courses. For all these reasons and many more, many teachers, students, and parents see detracking as redistributive. Far from a neutral organizational change, detracking becomes a perceived threat to some of the most highly valued aspects of a high-track child's education.

In important ways, many would-be detrackers acknowledge these concerns held by supporters of tracking. For instance, most detracking reforms are designed around retaining the challenging instruction often found in high-track classes and extending these benefits to all students (e.g., Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools). Schools engaged in this reform are exceedingly wary of the potential for "watering down." Most senior high schools retain (and even extend) the availability of AP and IB courses. Many schools also make a concerted effort to inform parents and teachers of the research noting tracking's educational harms and detracking's educational benefits.

However, these same detrackers usually do little if anything to respond to the considerable opposition brought on by their efforts, even when such opposition is not tied to rational, straightforward educational concerns. For example, consider the teachers of high-track classes in the districts we studied who perceived detracking as requiring them to lower their aca-demic expectations and resort to watering down their curriculum. Even some teachers of low-track classes were apprehensive about detracking, particularly those who would be required to move away from teaching

rudimentary skills and thus adopt a more rigorous curriculum; they felt unprepared to engage their new heterogeneous classes in more-challenging instructional methods and curriculum. Teachers also must overcome normative biases, most notably their long-held values and beliefs about student ability and potential. For detracking to be most successful, teachers must buy in to the belief that each of their students can learn at a high level.

In addition, for equity-minded reforms to succeed, parental opposition must be addressed. Some parental concerns, as stated above, are decidedly legitimate. Parents should not be criticized for seeking the best educational opportunities for their children or for doing their best to prepare their children for the college admissions game. But we have found that, particularly in communities with socioeconomically and racially diverse student bodies, many parents' and educators' concerns go far beyond these legitimate, educational issues. Detracking reforms confront a familiar conflation of race and intellectual ability. That is, many people inside and outside American schools continue to believe that students of color are less intelligent. These concerns mirror those of some teachers: belief in the noneducability of low-track students.

A detracking reform also can be counted on to bring to the fore the related cultural anxieties carried by many White parents and educators about disruptions and even violence, especially from low-income and African American males. A related parental fear—one that we see even in racially and socioeconomically homogeneous schools—is that the low-track students will expose their high-track children to an undesirable "culture" in various forms—for example, drugs or a de-emphasis on academics. Often, these objections are honest expressions of deeply held cultural prejudices.

We have painted this picture of normative and political opposition to detracking because the success of attempts to move beyond tracking, or to pursue any equity-minded reform, usually depends on overcoming that opposition. These normative and political forces create contexts that are inhospitable to equity-minded reform efforts. Only the combination of top-down mandates plus new approaches to bottom-up support for reform is likely to counter their powerful resistance.

BUILDING A NEW ATTITUDE TOWARD TOP-DOWN MANDATES

The three cases discussed above demonstrate that complex forces come into play when reform threatens to redistribute precious resources and to renegotiate the meaning of high-status culture. As important, these cases demonstrate the need for a reframing of conventional thinking, as set forth in most scholarly research and practitioner-oriented publications, about

educational change. Few axioms are as well accepted in the change literature as Milbrey McLaughlin's (1990) "We cannot mandate what matters" (p. 15). Moreover, the relative lack of success experienced by many attempts at top-down, mandated change would seem to provide strong support for this axiom. However, the communities we studied show that equity-driven, top-down mandates should not be viewed as new attempts to mandate what matters. Instead, these are attempts to *change* pre-existing mandates— mandates including both articulated and unarticulated cultural imperatives to do things in particular ways.

We define a top-down mandate as a force external to a local school or community that shapes policy in that school or community. Such mandates carry with them a legal, economic, or administrative power-based obligation to comply or face consequences in the form of some type of sanction or setback. In our multilayered democratic system, top-down mandates are perpetually and inevitably being issued and include the pressures derived from college admissions practices and the real estate market. New mandates simply add to the mix. Thus, a single, top-down mandate, unless it is an extremely powerful one, is unlikely to be effective in tremendously influencing the overall impact of a myriad of external influences on a school or community.

We also question the assertion within much of the so-called "school change" literature that successful policymakers set the conditions for effective administration but refrain from predetermining how those decisions will be made, instead charging local practitioners with the development of solutions (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Firestone & Corbett, 1989). The bottom-up focus of the change literature looks to local educators and community members as the foremost generators of school change. However, at the local level, equity issues rarely emerge as primary concerns of the political majority. As a result, decentralization of policy-making authority to these local communities may lead to a severe neglect of the equity concerns of the politically less powerful (Elmore, 1993). In normal circumstances, "local elites" can (and often do) block reforms that they perceive as grounded in values different from their own (Wells & Serna, 1996).

On the other hand, more-central authorities sometimes are able to advance equity policy goals to a much greater extent than local authorities (Peterson, 1981). Even Arthur Wise (1982), a strong critic of centrally mandated reform, acknowledges that some local schools are unwilling or unable to solve some equity-minded problems, and, in such cases, central authorities are more likely to be successful. Further, bottom-up strategies diminish the opportunity and responsibility of leaders with status and power to inspire and educate on behalf of their least politically powerful constituents.

Accordingly, community resistance to practices perceived by politically powerful local residents as harmful to their personal interests (i.e., those perceived as substantively equity-minded and redistributive policies) usually prompts the need for top-down mandates and monitoring (Peterson, 1981). Discussing tracking specifically, Wells and Oakes (1998) point out the importance of recognition by policymakers that local political resistance to reforms aimed at giving low-income and non-White students access to high-status knowledge will be difficult to counteract in a highly decentralized system.

These researchers seem to be describing what can be termed as an "equity exception" to the general recommendations against top-down mandates requiring specific changes. This exception arises because equity-minded reforms differ from other reforms in kind, not merely in magnitude. A central policy-making body desiring to promote an equity-minded reform would, for example, be ill advised to merely set forth some general equity principles, because resistance and political opposition by local elites would undermine any anticipated bottom-up organizing to create or influence reform. Instead, the central body must craft a more specific mandate, sufficient to substantially shift what is politically possible within the district and thereby to overcome such local resistance. As Boyd (1989) has argued, what is needed is a balanced approach to educational improvement using elements of top-down and bottom-up reform judiciously, "according to the characteristics and needs of the given policy problem" (p. 517; see also Fullan 1994, 2001; Huberman & Miles, 1984).

Thus, we argue that if equity-minded reforms are to be initiated, the context surrounding the reform effort must change. A top-down mandate, which would not be recommended by most authors of the change literature (see Tyack & Cuban, 1995), becomes an attractive option with this new perspective. The cases we have studied provide ample illustration. In none of the districts would detracking have risen to the top of the reform agenda, and even if it had, it would not have garnered the support of those who could ensure its successful implementation. Rather, the push for detracking came more from those who were adversely affected by the tracking system—the parents, students, and educators affiliated with low-track classes. In the end, these actors, by turning to the court system, helped to create a top-down mandate that would allow much-needed grassroots change to take place. But, as we have noted, the court orders are only one crucial component of the change process. In the following sections of this chapter we focus on what needs to happen at the school level before equity-minded, top-down mandates can be successfully implemented.

TAKING A NEW APPROACH TO BOTTOM-UP REFORM

The three cases we studied also make clear that top-down and bottom-up reforms are not dichotomous. Successful equity-minded reform requires a mix of both. Consider a hypothetical teacher who would like to move her school toward detracking. In 2002, she brings up the idea with some of her colleagues and is told, in no uncertain terms, that they like the present tracked system and have no interest in change. In 2003, a federal court, in response to a plaintiff's complaints of discrimination via the tracking system, issues an order requiring the district to detrack its schools. Now, in 2005, this teacher and others at the school site and at the community level, who before were unable to mount an effective reform effort, can move forward more confidently with their *bottom-up* ideas. The opponents of detracking may persist in their opposition, but their strategic position and their political power and influence have been moved by the court. Those who were once on the fringe—the teacher mentioned above as well as the plaintiffs in the case—now have more power to implement their ideas. By analogy, the boundaries of the playing field have shifted to include some who were previously on the sidelines. It is, perhaps, unlikely that they will overwhelm the more established players, but they are now in the fray (see Thompson, 1984, for an elaborated discussion of this point).[8]

According to many change theorists and researchers in the field of education, meaningful change requires buy-in by as many constituents as possible. To garner this buy-in, reformers often must be careful not to offend anyone involved in the change process. Consequently, researchers as well as change agents find themselves in wholly unfamiliar territory when collecting data on and writing about equity-minded reforms in education. For instance, White researchers usually squirm at the sound of the "r-word"; mid- to high-income researchers feel a hidden guilt when discussing issues of poverty; men hesitate to talk about gender issues; and only the bravest few traverse the taboo grounds of sexual orientation. Even in some of our best efforts, researchers and school leaders huddle behind all-inclusive, and nonspecific, words like "equity," "diversity," and "heterogeneity"—words that, without greater explication, may become little more than "window dressing for the same old beliefs and practices" (Oakes, 1995, p. 3). As a consequence, equity-minded reformers find little in the educational literature that offers guidance about how to confront and overcome powerful normative and political obstacles to changes that will upset the status quo in racially diverse schools.

Left standing in a theoretical and conceptual vacuum, only a few reform leaders at the schools we studied were able to begin deconstructing

the hidden ideologies driving the opposition of anti-change forces and to operate accordingly. These educators often were able to unmask the opposition often because they were able to identify with the "standpoints" (Banks, 1995; Harding, 1993) of students and parents who were ill served by the tracking structure. This insight made them acutely aware that the opposition to detracking was driven not solely by rational thought, but also by nonrational "symbolic politics" (Sears & Funk, 1991).

Often because of past experiences, and sometimes because of their own social status, these educators had reached a level of "individual consciousness," enabling them to interpret their situation differently, thus allowing for a more penetrating critique of their opposition (Hill-Collins, 1991). However, even these educators, who moved beyond a neutral perspective regarding the reform, found themselves lacking in tools to help them apply their critique to the reform process. The following three sections offer some practical tools for equity-minded educators attempting to effectively detrack.

Moving Beyond Technical Approaches to Professional Development

Because of the unique obstacles standing in the path of equity-minded reform, staff development efforts should, in addition to providing assistance with instructional techniques and curricula, prepare teachers to confront important normative issues and to change instructional practices in detracked classes (see Welner & Oakes, 2000). Many teachers simply do not believe that all students should be academically challenged at a high level—that each child can learn. Many other teachers are, to a lesser degree, skeptical of the concept of such high universal expectations.

Some recent work, not often considered as part of the "school change" literature, may provide us with a theoretical head start toward understanding how educators and community members might come to understand and grapple more systematically with, and therefore implement more fully and positively, un-sought-after and often unwelcome equity-minded reforms. This work suggests that if changes are to be more than a refinement of the status quo—in terms of fundamental school goals and norms—then the status quo needs to be critically examined as part of that change process.

Sirotnik and Oakes (1986, 1990), for example, suggest a site-based "critical inquiry" process (discussed in greater detail below) whereby teachers systematically challenge their own beliefs and actions. They posit that through this process, educators undergoing reform can come more thoroughly to understand and critique deeply held beliefs and ideologies about intelligence, racial differences, social stratification, White supremacy, and elite privilege as powerful forces to be reckoned with inside and outside

of schools. The need to delve deeply into these contentious issues is articulated clearly by many social theorists writing both inside and outside the field of education (see hooks, 1992; West, 1994). These scholars explain that social constructions such as race and class are not simply elements of society that are more pronounced in some institutions than in others, but that these elements actually help constitute our personal, societal, national, and international worlds (West, 1994).

The proposition underlying critical inquiry is that an active and forthright confrontation of these beliefs will enhance greatly the ability of school actors to overcome obstacles such as those that we witnessed in our study of the three school districts. For example, participants in critical inquiry continually remind themselves that the problems they face have a current and historical context, and that the routine problems of schooling—such as using time effectively, staff communication, and grouping students for instruction—must be situated in these contexts in order to be understood. "What are we doing now?" and "How did it come to be that way?" are questions that help frame this discussion. Such critical inquiry also asks participants to recognize and contend with embedded values and human interests in school practices, by asking, "Whose interests are (and are not) being served by the ways things are?"

Critical inquiry also demands that knowledge of all types—for example, results of research, newly developed professional practices, and participants' own multiple experiences and perspectives—be brought to bear on the matters under discussion. Critical inquiry is based on the premise that fundamental, democratic change is possible when people are accountable to one another, express themselves authentically, and negotiate common understandings that support collective action. The questions to ask at every opportunity are, "Is this the way we want things to be?" and "What are we going to do about it?"

The critical inquiry process can prompt teachers to re-evaluate debilitating beliefs and provide teachers with normative armor to shield against, and to counter, attacks by pro-tracking parents and others. By providing the opportunity for open and serious dialogue around these issues, this process directly targets long-held beliefs and understandings about students and their abilities that serve as barriers to successful detracking. For example, teachers participating in a critical inquiry focused on detracking would question explicitly and openly whether they believe all children can learn and would question whether they believe that White children have greater intelligence or better behavior than African American and/or Latino children. They also would question the bases of these beliefs. All these questions should be considered using an accepted ideal, such as social justice, as a touchstone. Thus, teachers also would question their beliefs

about the nature of a just society and would contemplate how their own norms and behavior conform to that ideal. Critical inquiry's goal would not be to understand the culture and context of African American and/or Latino students; rather, the goal would be to explore and confront individuals' barriers to understanding and having high expectations for these students.

Importantly, while teachers using, for instance, a social justice touchstone would work toward providing an excellent education for all students, the critical inquiry process might prompt some probing of the foundation for achieving such a broad goal. That is, the broad goal would be unlikely to generate a neutral, "rising tide lifts all ships" approach to ensuring that all children are academically challenged. Instead, the participants would work to identify existing barriers to the goal and would critique their own role in erecting or failing to confront those barriers.

Critical inquiry, however, is no panacea. In many ways it is highly problematic, since the majority of teachers in most districts are not very open to this idea. For instance, many teachers of detracked classrooms acknowledge their classrooms' imperfections but lay the blame for those problems on a variety of external factors: the students' parents, culture, and race; the socioeconomic differences among students; and even the unwise decision to detrack. Thus, only a fraction of teachers may be open to engaging in such inquiry.

We have found, however, that each district typically contains a group of insightful teachers and administrators who have already begun confronting some of the enormous normative barriers to successful detracking. This group could be expanded by infusing such issues into the district's staff development activities. Accordingly, critical inquiry should still be pursued, as it remains a useful and direct way of confronting the beliefs that would undermine successful reform. An ongoing critical inquiry process could help to change schools' culture and, in combination with the other recommendations set forth below, could be a tremendous boon to the pro-equity-minded reform forces.

This discussion of critical inquiry highlights a point that is crucial for us as supporters of detracking: As an educational reform, detracking must consist of much more than the mere formation of detracked or heterogeneously grouped classrooms. Curriculum in the mixed-ability classes should be challenging for all students and should be project-based, allowing for individualization of assignments. Staff development should be available to help teachers adopt the revised curriculum and, if necessary, adjust their teaching styles to become more constructivist. Academic supports should be introduced for students, particularly those students formerly in undemanding, low-track classes. As noted by Clarke, Madaus,

and Shore (Chapter 5, this volume), inequality is additive; the later the cycle is halted, the more acceleration is necessary. Finally, for detracking to be most successful, teachers must truly believe that each child in their classes should be academically challenged at a high level. In our experience, this element of detracking is the most difficult to achieve—but it is very, very important.

The central issue here is that effective detracking will result only from a change of the hearts and minds of many teachers who are burdened with stereotypes and biases against low-income students of color. While top-down mandates create the political space for this to happen, they are not enough in and of themselves.

Engaging in Democratic Public Discourse

Bottom-up support for equity-minded reform is unlikely to emerge, even from critical inquiry, without participation of all who have a stake in the reform. The reform process must include regular, public opportunities for diverse groups of parents and community members to discuss the schools' progress toward high-quality education for all students. Such forums should be designed not simply as a public relations effort, but as a genuine opportunity for public, community-wide deliberation concerning the normative and political issues raised by the reform, as well as the changes in structure and practice. The agenda for the forums should explicitly stress the goal of high-quality education for all, rather than focusing on, for example, improving the education of the poorest served or avoiding watering down the education provided to the highest achievers. All such issues are encompassed within the broader goal, and all concerns should be welcomed.

Such an approach to effective implementation of an equity mandate requires a deliberate and tenacious bottom-up effort to bring parents and community members from different racial groups and socioeconomic positions to the same venue to talk. Much care must be taken to ensure that all members of the community feel welcome, and that all have an opportunity to voice their opinions—the politically powerful should not be allowed to dominate the discussions or the agenda (see discussion of democratic deliberation in House & Howe, 1999). Such public discussions can help community members avoid the too-easy trap of responding to difficult reforms like detracking with blame—blaming uncaring or ill-trained teachers; competitive or self-serving parents; short-sighted administrators; a neglectful, uncaring community; government bureaucracy, and so on. Sometimes, the blame lands squarely on the very people who are themselves the objects of the inequality: students and groups of students who are thought to be unmotivated or not smart enough to learn.

Unless such views are examined in public, many will continue to see the inequality in opportunities and achievement that now plague the school system as logical, sensible, and inevitable. Only with the full participation of all segments of the community can educational change agents hope to engage schools in grappling seriously and effectively with the gap between the ideals of equity and the reality of educational failure for so many students.

Political Mobilization

In addition to providing for inclusive, public discussion of equity reforms, we recommend that steps be taken to ensure that all constituents have an effective political voice. True democratic deliberation requires responsiveness to all people, not just those with the loudest voices. On a practical level, each school should review the composition of its parent groups to ensure that they reflect enrollment. If they do not, the school should monitor agenda-setting practices, meeting times, locations, communications, outreach, and other procedures to increase the groups' accessibility to all members of the school community.

Just as important, further steps should be taken to ensure democratic deliberation within diverse parent groups. Low-income parents, African American and/or Latino parents, and parents of lower-achieving students should be welcomed into an environment wherein they can speak about what they want for their children, with as much confidence and sense of entitlement as wealthier parents, White parents, and parents of higher-achieving children. At the same time, educators also can assist in developing an environment wherein more-advantaged parents can struggle openly, and in the presence of those who are not White or middle class, with the schools' efforts to reform an education system that is politically and academically skewed in their favor. This type of effort brings the process of equity-minded reform, as well as the struggles inherent within that process, to the fore, where all community members can engage together in developing the best educational environment for all children.

CONCLUSION: SOCIAL MOVEMENT STRATEGIES TO FURTHER EQUITY-MINDED REFORMS

Equity-focused change projects demand explicit attention to the cultural and political dynamics of social and racial stratification. This attention is more likely to be generated and sustained when fueled by a revolutionary social movement than by the efforts of actors usually charged with

preserving the status quo. Without attention to normative and political dynamics of change, hoped-for reforms are either abandoned entirely or implemented in ways that actually replicate (perhaps in a different guise) the stratified status quo. However, few reformers are equipped with the legal, strategic, or even moral capital to stand up to the cultural resistance and backlash that arise when reforms actually begin to redistribute schooling resources. Further, the vast majority of the literature on school reform does little to help reformers acquire such capital (see Welner, 2000).

Most of this literature—to the extent that it addresses reforms that aim specifically to benefit students with less power in schools and communities—assumes that school systems are filled with well-meaning educators who simply need some centralized assistance or prompting to help their bottom-up efforts achieve more equitable and efficacious pedagogies. As Hochschild (1984) explains, this assumption is grounded in the premise that racist practices and beliefs are at odds with basic American values, and therefore Americans will, if given the opportunity, naturally move away from past racist practices. However, the struggles faced by equity-minded reformers over the past 3 decades suggest that this rarely happens.

In this chapter, we have attempted to clarify the exceptional barriers that change agents encounter as they attempt to initiate and implement equity-minded and racially explicit school reforms. In the United States at least, struggles for equity for low-income children and children of color expose and challenge contradictions deeply rooted in American culture. This struggle is an integral part of the change process, in part because equity-focused changes are grounded in universal principles that are nonetheless highly context-dependent. Thus, the process of change cannot be transferred in whole cloth from one setting to another. These are local matters. What and how schools will change must be constructed in ways that make sense locally and must rely on collaboration with those who will enact and sustain the changes locally. Still, as we have noted, this does not mean that top-down mandates to change the status quo and redistribute opportunities and access are unnecessary. Indeed, we have found that such mandates are often essential.

The abstract principles of equitable education are deeply engrained in the cultural rhetoric of Western democracies. They permeate the rhetoric of schooling, and most educators and citizens espouse them. In the United States it is easy to find consensus around certain highly abstracted and universally sound principles—one current example being, *No child should be left behind*. However, making contextually appropriate changes based on equity principles requires that these principles must be moved beyond the abstract.

As the principles become locally and collaboratively defined—and made concrete in programs and practices—the unequal and stratifying consequences of the status quo replace consensus with conflict. This is exactly what one would expect when the potentially redistributional impact of equity-minded change is made concrete and explicit. Such explicitness reveals the fragility of the local agreement about equity; those advantaged and disadvantaged by the status quo rarely agree on the local specifics of equity and fairness for diverse groups of students. Moreover, since those currently advantaged nearly always have disproportionate influence over the conduct of schools—including their change efforts—the specifics, if not the abstraction, of equity-focused change are resisted by those with the power to halt them. This power inequality yields a process whereby the educational change effort loses consensus and becomes a cultural struggle.

Consequently, those who seek a redistribution of opportunities and outcomes perceived to be scarce, and who challenge practices that reflect racist and classist values, should look to strategies used in social and political movements, such as local organizing and combining constituencies (i.e., church, youth, service, and education). And we contend that these strategies additionally should be combined with engaging the courts as powerful, if not omnipotent, guardians of educational equity. Equity-minded reforms present daunting normative and political obstacles. Such reforms will meet with greatest success when change strategies are altered to directly confront these obstacles from both the bottom-up and top-down.

orders. Most notably, in Summer 2000, the presiding judge reaffirmed the *Rockford* decision, clearly stating that the within-school segregation evidenced in high school classes was unacceptable and must be fixed. But this was reversed by an appellate decision that essentially absolved tracking as a wrongful and harmful policy, instead attributing unequal outcomes to poverty, family size, "parental attitudes and behavior . . . and ethnic culture" (*People Who Care* v. *Rockford*, 2001, p. 1076). In 2000, in the case involving the East Pittsburgh community of Woodland Hills, the federal judge found that the district had complied with nearly all of the court's requirements, including some aspects of detracking, although he instructed it to continue to work to detrack its high school mathematics program. See *Hoots* v. *Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*.

4. We conducted more than 90 interviews with educators, policymakers, students, and community members, all during the 1996–97 school year.

5. Welner (2001b) proposes a litigation approach to turning high-stakes outcome standards into a basis for challenging low-track courses. In a nutshell, he argues that standards-based accountability systems leave no rational educational or legal justification for schools' provision of less demanding classes.

6. See the court's written opinions in all four *People Who Care* v. *Rockford Board of Education School District No. 205*.

7. See, for example, Oakes, and Wells, and associates (1996); Oakes, Wells, Yonezawa, & Ray (1997); Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen (1998); Wells & Oakes (1998).

8. For a more detailed discussion of these ideas, see Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen (1998). The authors thank Kluwer Academic for their kind permission regarding the use of this work.

NOTES

1. Successful equity-minded reform does occur from the bottom-up. Burris, Heubert, and Levin (2004) recently described a very successful detracking reform in Long Island, NY, for instance. However, this and other bottom-up efforts undeniably take place within larger policy contexts, often shaped in powerful ways by top-down policies. These contexts should not be thought to deterministically control bottom-up possibilities, but neither should their strong influence be underestimated.

2. For a more detailed discussion of these three cases, see Welner (1999, 2001a) and Welner, Oakes, and FitzGerald (1998).

3. See *People Who Care* v. *Rockford Board of Education School District No. 205, Vasquez* v. *San Jose Unified School District, Hoots* v. *Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.* Each of these cases has given way to subsequent decisions modifying the original

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