

On The Subject of Detracking

On the evening of December 10th, several members of the SFT attended the Board of Education meeting with the intent to speak regarding the detracking proposal. It was to our collective amazement and great disappointment that the Board thought it prudent to vote on the proposal before anyone in the audience had the opportunity to speak to it. For those who have never attended a Board of Education meeting, it seems as though you are watching an auction. Votes on financial matters and personnel appointments occur in rapid fire succession. The Board of Education voted and acted on the "Middle School Proposal" (a.k.a. "detracking") before any of us knew what had happened. Realistically, none of us were convinced that what we had to say would have changed the outcome. However, the opportunity to speak to the issue, even under the "grand illusion" of input, was something we believed we had every right to do.

As president of the SFT, I felt that I needed to speak publicly to this matter which, in my opinion, has been mishandled from the start. Key stake holders, namely teachers and parents, have been left largely out of the conversation. That said, in truth, it is not within our rights to dictate to the District on education policy. I do think however, that a lesson should have been learned as we have watched the State make decisions without the greater input coming from educators on the front lines.

Although I could not speak publicly to it at the Board meeting, I can make my thoughts public herein.

Good evening, members of the Board of Education and Central Administration. I know that your time is valuable and it is not often that I come into this forum and address you. But tonight, my concerns are deep; and I am compelled to share them openly with you.

I am speaking to you tonight in regard to the proposal regarding detracking. I do not have a problem with detracking, per se. I've been teaching one of the District's most diverse non-tracked classes for 25 years. Environmental/Marine Science has 12th, 11th and occasionally 10th graders of every level from AP to special ed push-in. A class can't get more heterogeneous. And for my first 19 years, I taught 7th grade, at some points when we had 3 levels – advanced, regular and the modified track, which is most similar to today's AIS group.

I have seen the benefits and the detriments in both modes of scheduling. I will tell you, however, that the Environmental/Marine Science class does not have a State or Regents exam attached to it. Pacing and curriculum are set primarily by me and can be easily modified to meet the needs of the students in each class and from year to year. Long-term projects and other activities are geared toward differentiation for the various levels of students so that all may succeed. And the pressure to meet curricular needs is not present. I can only imagine the pressure the students and I would be under to complete a more rigorous Regents curriculum with the same mix of students.

I also want to add that I don't have issue with change. One of my favorite sayings is "If nothing ever changed, there would be no butterflies." What most people don't know is that the actual butterfly stage is the shortest part of their life cycle. The longest stage is pupation: the planning and developmental time of the metamorphosis – from a lowly soft-bodied grub to a beautiful butterfly. It happens in a chrysalis – a cocoon. The process happens slowly; and if rushed to hatch early, the butterfly will emerge deformed.

The rushed timeline of this proposal is what concerns me the most. The SFT and the teachers, key stake holders in the educational process, were involved in the planning and decision making late in the game. Elementary school parents are by-and-large still unaware of the proposal and its implications for their children. They too, should be heard, for their concerns are just as valid as mine – perhaps even more, because after all, it is their children we are talking about.

In my opinion, from a scientific point of view, there are simply too many variables at work in the district right now – too many other changes which are still new and still being developed. For example:

- *The dissolving of the **ESL program**. Regular ed teachers are still being pulled for full day training sessions; and in our second year, it is still too early to say if this is working.*
- *7th grade **Teaming** was brought to 3 of our schools this year, again taxing our staff on training days and the learning curve to plan with their teams*
- *The **Co-Teaching Model** is brand new this year as well. Having two teachers in a classroom, a concept we tried 20 years ago and abandoned for multiple reasons.*
- ***Common Core** professional development, where again teachers are being pulled for full day training sessions. New materials are still being developed for classroom use by the State, and new Common Core tests and curriculum are coming into our District each year.*
- *The **Differentiated Instruction** model is being pushed across the District; and again, teachers are being pulled for training. What's more, across the District, administrators are on different pages with regard to the use of differentiated instruction.*
- *And then there are other mandates from the State such as the new **Alternative Pathways For Graduation**, just released from the SED a month ago. And now, with King's resignation and a new commissioner less than a month away, who knows what else will be forced upon us by SED?!*

Our teaching staff needs time to embrace the changes already bestowed upon us. We need time to master ESL, teaming, common core and differentiated instruction. If these pedagogical changes were part of a science experiment, the resulting data would be rubbish. There are simply too many variables to measure. In the future, if there is success or if there is failure, we will not know which of these variables needs adjusting or which to deem effective.

The Rockville Centre school district, which is being held up as the model, has been detracked for many years - since well before Common Core, APPR and "differentiated instruction" became household words. It is part of the culture of that district. Bellmore-Merrick, a central high school district like ourselves - is also looking into detracking. However, they have targeted their current 5th graders for implementation; giving themselves additional time to absorb common core, increase reading skills and most importantly plan.

I understand and agree with the desire to raise standards, to increase college readiness and workforce preparedness. But we must be realistic as well. Not every student has the potential or capacity for college. Not every student needs or wants to pursue a college degree. I have a student this year who is a special education student. He is 19 years old and has not passed one Regents exam. We didn't let him down. The State let him down when they forced all students to take Regents exams and removed the safety net of RCT exams for special ed students. He is one of the sweetest students in the school and is also one of the most frustrated. No matter how hard he studies, he struggles and often fails. What life lessons are we teaching him?

Before moving forward with the detracking proposal, we need assurance that there will be safety nets for our students – special ed or otherwise. We need to be involved in the plans and the solutions.

- ~ Will there be enough funding for added extra help sessions, AIS or material resources?*
- ~ Will there be enough properly certified staff in the sciences during the transitional years.*
- ~ Where will the funding come from to further the science elective program or STEM programs when our students finish their science requirements in the tenth grade?*
- ~ And what are the plans, if these items can't be achieved?*

All of these things, in a perfect world – without a tax cap and minuscule State funding - would be wonderful to have, and easier to implement. But we are not in a perfect world – and these questions and a myriad of others raise doubts in my mind that this will be successful – at this time.

If the motivation here is to increase opportunity for students to enroll in more classes, then we also need to start looking at the current schedules of our juniors and seniors. Many of them take the minimum requirement needed to graduate, resulting in multiple periods "free" each day. We should also discuss reducing the pre-requisites for students to enroll in AP or other advanced classes, as long as the student shows motivation, desire and a capacity to make the grade. I don't agree that students are "stuck" where we place them. There can be change up or down a level depending on a student's performance year to year. Most of our students appear "stuck" simply because they have been properly placed in their "track" based upon their proven ability, desire and motivation.

Students who tend to head down the wrong path and make life-damaging decisions are more likely to do so if they find school frustrating and unsatisfying. Forcing all of them to take a course in which some may not meet with success only makes it more likely that they will do exactly that. I believe our children don't all have to be scholars at 13 or 16 for that matter. Some of them should just be allowed to be. Our students will not get a second chance at high school, and we will not get a second chance at fostering a love of learning in them.

In closing, let me assure you that I am fully invested in the children of this District. Over the course of my 25-year career, I have seen many pedagogical ideas come and go. Change, like metamorphosis, is cyclical. And change, like metamorphosis, takes time, energy and planning. I would like nothing more than to witness this District emerge, in its proper time, from its chrysalis and take flight.

I thank you for your time and consideration tonight.

While we may not agree with the manner in which the District is proceeding or the current course of action, we must maintain our professionalism and continue to give only our best to each of our students. Educational policies on the local, State and Federal levels are in constant flux; but as educators, we are trained to be flexible. I have confidence that we will continue to provide the best educational experience we can, and we will bend without breaking to meet each new demand imposed upon us.

On behalf of the entire SFT Executive Board, I extend our wishes to all of you for a peaceful and relaxing holiday with your families and friends. Another year is fast upon us, and every day is another gift.

In Unity,
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