

# First-Grade Sorting Begins Life in the Low Track through Elementary and Middle School

Current schooling systems identify first-graders who are not doing well enough academically and place them in special education, place them in low first-grade groups, or retain them for a year. Some children receive all three of these treatments, all designed to help them overcome their academic deficiencies and move them back into the mainstream of their education process.

But according to CRESPAR researchers Karl L. Alexander and Doris R. Entwisle at Johns Hopkins University, none of these first-grade mechanisms, whether employed separately or all together, succeed very well in moving these children back into the mainstream. These students, in fact, disproportionately continue to experience further low tracking throughout their elementary grades and into the sixth grade of middle school.

Examining the elementary school careers and the sixth-grade middle school curriculum placements of students who were in special education, retained, or placed in low reading groups in first grade, Alexander and Entwisle find significant associations between the first-grade practices, placement beyond first grade, and sixth-grade placement. The findings are based on analyses of longitudinal data from the Beginning School Study, which has been monitoring the academic progress and personal development of 790 children who began first grade in 1982 in 20 public schools in a large urban school district.

The first-grade data show the extent of early tracking for these children—more than 16 percent of these students were held back at the end of first grade, 13 percent received special education services in their first or second school years, and 22 percent were classified as being in the lowest group in their classroom in first grade.

Of these students, just over half experienced only one of the three practices, while 15 percent experienced all three:

placed in a low reading group, assigned to special education, and held back at year's end.

These children's first-grade experiences put them at greater risk than other students for continued low placement through the elementary grades. For example, almost three-fourths of the children in low first-grade reading groups were retained at some point (over half in first grade)—and 35 percent were retained a second time in elementary school. In comparison, only 12 percent of high first-grade reading group children experienced retention in elementary school.

Children placed in special education were more likely to have to repeat a grade between first and sixth, and were much more likely to repeat two grades (31.5 percent, compared to 9.8 percent of the children who started with them in first grade but who did not get placed in special education).

The same pattern holds for children who were retained in first grade. About 44 percent of these children were retained a second time before getting out of elementary school. Among children who were promoted at the end of first grade, just 6.5 percent were held back for two years during elementary school.

## Curriculum Tracking in the Sixth Grade

What happens to these students when they hit sixth grade? First, not all of them hit at the same time, given the heavy retention occurring throughout the elementary grades. Of the 720 total students in the Beginning School Study, sixty-one percent were on-time sixth-graders, 32.3 percent took seven school years to get there, and 4.7 percent took eight years to make it.

Tracking in middle school occurs primarily through the assignment of students to low-level or high-level courses. Alexan-

der and Entwisle find that:

- *two-thirds of students who were retained in first grade were in low-level English in sixth grade, compared to about one-third of students who had not been retained in first grade;*
- *61.5 percent of students who were in low reading groups in first grade were in low-level English in sixth grade, compared to 26.3 percent of students who were in high reading groups in first grade;*
- *students who were retained, in special education, or in low reading groups in first grade were significantly less likely than other students to be taking high-level English, math, or foreign language courses in sixth grade. Students who had been retained in first grade were especially hard hit—only two of these students were in high-level sixth-grade English and only one was in high-level sixth-grade math. In contrast, of children who were not retained in first grade, about 25 percent were in high-level sixth-grade English and about 14 percent were in high-level sixth-grade math.*

## Implications

Alexander and Entwisle paint a portrait of a set of elementary school practices that sort first-grade children into low placements through grouping, special education, and retention. The purpose is noble: to provide these children with special attention and practices that will improve their achievement and put them back into the mainstream. The results, however, are ignoble: children who are subjected to these first-grade tracking practices are more likely than other children to simply continue to be retained, to be in special education, to be in low classroom groups, and, in the middle grades, to be tracked into low-level courses.

The elimination of tracking structures, to be replaced by more effective organizational and instructional processes coupled with individual help as required, is a basic tenet of the Talent Development schools envisioned by CRESPAR. Alexander's and Entwisle's findings illustrate the need in urban schools at the elementary

level.





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## UPCOMING ISSUES

Future issues of the CRESPAR *R & D Report* will continue to describe the implementation and outcomes of Talent Development schools and the research and development that accompanies and supports this work, which is being conducted in the following areas.

**Resilience and cultural integrity.** Resilient children in elementary, middle, and high schools continue to succeed despite the odds. Center research is examining how these children cope with exposure to violence, how they transition through levels of schooling, and how they function in out-of-school environments. Experimental and naturalistic studies are examining classroom instructional practices and classroom contexts that emphasize the cultural integrity of low-income African-American schoolchildren.

**Early education and development.** Early intervention programs hold great promise, but children's achievement gains don't stand up over time. Center researchers are examining how effective early intervention coupled with effective elementary school programs could be the key to continued success.

**School and classroom interventions.** Components of effective education exist at all levels of schooling; most need further specification, more rigorous evaluation, and integration into theory- and research-based comprehensive programs such as the Talent Development models. Center researchers are evaluating the effects of components such as after-school programs, performance assessment, literacy programs, responsive teacher teams, career academies, and so on.

**Language minority.** Working with schools to develop and evaluate more effective bilingual education programs, Center researchers are examining curricular interventions, two-way bilingual programs, schools that focus on schoolwide biliteracy, the Spanish version of Success for All, and the use of teacher learning communities in professional development. A series of studies are being carried out on effective American Indian education.

**School, family, and community partnerships.** This work is concentrating on developing, evaluating, and moving effective programs and practices of school-family-community partnership into use in schools nationwide. A specific program of partnership -- the SAFE START violence prevention program -- addresses the needs of children and families in violence prone communities.

**Systemic and policy-related studies.** Center researchers are examining how national, state, and local policies can best provide the systemic support that is needed to bring about the widespread implementation of effective Title I programs, exemplary school and district programs, and research-based school improvement models.

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