

BRIEF SUMMARY:

This policy brief highlights the problems associated with academic tracking, the practice of separating students into different classes based on perceived academic ability or past performance. Students are first tracked in elementary school and typically remain on a track once assigned. Following an overview of the issue, the brief examines the origins of academic tracking, describes how the practice is currently used in North Carolina's public schools, and then outlines ways that academic tracking harms students, particularly students of color. The brief concludes by proposing three possible alternatives to the current academic tracking system which deny students of color access to high quality education: 1) eliminate the tracking system altogether, 2) alter the teacher-recommendation process to limit the impact of conscious and unconscious bias on which students are selected for advanced level courses, and 3) allow students to self-select into honors and advanced level courses.

HOW IS ACADEMIC TRACKING USED IN NORTH CAROLINA?

TRACK		6 th GRADE	7 th GRADE	8 th GRADE	9 th GRADE
Low Track	5 th Grade Math	Common Core Math 6	Common Core Math 7	Common Core Math 8	Common Core Math I (high school credit)
Middle Track		Common Core Math 6 PLUS	Common Core Math 7 PLUS	Common Core Math I (high school credit)	Common Core Math II Honors (high school credit)
High Track		Compacted 6 PLUS / 7 PLUS	Common Core Math I (high school credit)	Common Core Math II Honors (high school credit)	Common Core Math III Honors (high school credit)

→ *Students in the highest track earn high school math credits two years before those in the lowest track, which affects grade point averages, time to graduation, and college admissions.*

ALTERNATIVES TO THE TRACKING SYSTEM

#1 **Eliminate the tracking system altogether.** Would get rid of course level distinctions in one of two ways: 1) "honors-for-all" approach giving high level instruction to everyone or, 2) slowing the pace of instruction for all students allowing more time to absorb course material.

#2 **Keep the system but change the recommendation-based selection process.** Teachers, most of whom are white, play a large role in deciding which students have access to higher tracks. Relying on less subjective criteria for track selection might limit the impact of teacher bias.

#3 **Keep the system but create a student-based self-enrollment process.** In theory, this approach would give equal access to advanced level courses. However, students of color might still be discouraged from taking more challenging courses, or excluded due to enrollment limits.

THE IMPACT OF ACADEMIC TRACKING ON STUDENTS

Academic tracking denies educational opportunities to NC's students of color in several ways:



Students of color are disproportionately placed in lower tracks due to biased selection processes.



Students of color are more likely to be assigned inexperienced teachers while in lower tracks.



Students in lower tracks have lower grade point averages due to weighting, which affects college admissions



Controlling for other factors, Black students are 23% less likely than white students to take an honors level course.

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