

## Why ability grouping in schools is a mistake

By **Valerie Strauss** May 21, 2013

Many elementary schools to create ability-group classrooms in an attempt to better prepare kids to meet the [Common Core State Standards](#). In the following post, Joanne Yatvin explains why this is a problem. She is a past president of the National Council of Teachers of English and now she supervises student teachers for Portland State University and writes books for teachers.

By Joanne Yatvin

Over 25 years as an elementary school principal my relationships with parents were good. I was available, I listened, and when complaints or suggestions were reasonable, I acted. But there was one area where I stubbornly held the line against the wishes of parents and that was the placement of students. I made clear early on that I would not honor requests for children to be placed with a particular teacher, nor would I form ability-based classrooms. My position was not a matter of showing who was “boss,” but of my unshakable conviction that mixed ability classrooms are the best places for children to learn and live.

Although I understand that many elementary schools are moving to ability-based classrooms in the belief that they will do a better job of teaching what students are expected to know and do under the Common Core State Standards, I still think they are a big mistake.

Teaching to the presumed level of a whole class never works as well as hoped because students still have significant differences in work habits, paces of learning, and outside of school experiences. But there is another, more serious problem: the effects on students in the low level classes. Those kids know who they are, why they are there, and resent it. Other kids know, too. In the end, low-level classes can be a self-fulfilling prophecy: “Everybody thinks I’m dumb. I’ll show them just how dumb I can be!”

Don’t mixed classrooms have the same problems, you may wonder? Not if they’re structured like a symphony orchestra or a professional sports team to form a supportive and harmonious whole while each member plays his own role. Instead of spending time and effort creating ability-based classrooms, schools could do better by letting this year’s teachers who know the students place them in situations where their abilities, interests, and personalities are complemented by those of their classmates.

That is what we did in both schools where I was principal, and it worked out fine. Yes, we had small groups within

the classroom for reading and math, but they were temporary, and students moved from one to another as their skills or interests changed.

When the brightest kids, the most outgoing, the shy ones, and the strugglers work together in a classroom, there are not only 25 learners, but also 25 partners and 25 social equals.

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Valerie Strauss covers education and runs The Answer Sheet blog.

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