Academic tracking means that students are placed into certain classes based on their abilities. Let’s say Jasmine shows an aptitude for mathematics in sixth grade. She would then be put in advanced math courses starting in seventh grade and continuing all the way through high school. But Oscar, who is in her class, starts off slowly in math so he takes a completely different and easier set of math classes. In her senior year, when Jasmine knows more math than Oscar, is this because of aptitude or experience?

The arguments for and against tracking policies have many components. Some people think tracking is a good idea. Students can learn at their own speed. Higher-track students do not have to wait for others to catch up with them. Lower-track students do not have to deal with students who are faster and get impatient with them for slowing the class down. However, studies show that teachers who have lower-level classes also have lower expectations for those students; lower expectations for student success do not support student learning. Furthermore, researcher and professor Jo Boaler discovered that students in mixed-ability math classes outperformed students who were tracked.

People who oppose academic tracking point out that the tracks are decided by testing. Tests can misrepresent students’ skills. People who think tracking is unfair argue that students who do not test well end up in low-level classes where they have fewer chances to learn. Maybe the students who score poorly on the test just need tutoring or a little more time to learn the same material as the high-tracked students. Tracking opponents complain that schools do not involve themselves in helping lower-tracked students learn because they are busy getting higher-tracked students ready for college.

What do you think about this? Is this practice fair? Do kids like Oscar miss out on a better education because they are put into a low track?
USE THE FOCUS WORDS

tracking (noun) grouping by ability

Sample Sentence: Academic tracking means that students are placed into certain classes based on their abilities.

Turn and Talk: Why do you think there is rarely tracking in P.E. class? Should there be?

aptitude (noun) ability, ease of learning

Sample Sentence: Let’s say Jasmine shows an aptitude for mathematics in sixth grade.

Turn and Talk: What is something for which you have an aptitude? What is something for which you do not have an aptitude?

policy (noun) course of action

Sample Sentence: The arguments for and against a tracking policy have many components.

Turn and Talk: What is an example of an anti-bullying policy at your school?

component (noun) part

Sample Sentence: John’s musical talent was an important component of his application.

Turn and Talk: Describe the components of a recent project you had to complete.

involve (verb) to engage; to include

Sample Sentence: Tracking opponents complain that schools do not involve themselves in helping lower-tracked students learn because they are busy getting higher-tracked students ready for college.

Turn and Talk: What can be done to involve students who don’t like to participate in class discussions?
Hughes Middle School follows a policy of academic tracking. The school has advanced math classes for students who have an aptitude for math. Choosing students for this program involves giving all students a math test with two components: calculating and critical thinking. Students must earn a total score of 80% to qualify for the advanced class.

Option 1: Julie received 95 out of 120 points on her math aptitude test. Will she qualify for the advanced math class?

A. Yes  
B. No

Option 2: On the math aptitude test, the calculating component is worth 70% of the final grade, and the critical thinking component is worth 30%. If Bethany gets half of the calculating problems right and all of the critical thinking problems right, will she qualify for the advanced class? (You can assume that all problems within each of the two sections are worth the same number of points.)

No, Bethany’s score would be 65%.

Discussion Question: Tracking involves measuring each student’s aptitude, and this usually means giving a test. A policy of tracking students using a test score means that some students will miss qualifying for a higher track by just a few points. Is it fair for a student to be put into a lower track based on a few points? Is there a way to make tracking decisions more fair? What components should a fair tracking system have? Or is tracking just wrong?
Mr. Seemy has just returned from a teacher conference during which teachers discussed the pros and cons of academic tracking. He’s interested to hear what his students think about the idea.

“I wish our school used academic tracking,” sighs Candice. “Different students are good at different things. Separate tracks would make things easier for everyone!”

“Maybe,” says Rohan, “but tracking policies can involve some unintended negative results. I read online about a famous study done in 1964 by a professor named Robert Rosenthal. He told some elementary school teachers that a special new test had shown that certain students were probably about to make huge academic advances. In reality, Rosenthal had chosen the students at random. But at the end of the school year, those students really had done better than their classmates, because of the high expectations of their teachers. And other studies have shown that teacher expectations are an important component of student achievement.”

“I doubt that,” says Candice. “I can’t see how a teacher’s expectations would affect a student’s aptitude.”

“I can,” says Warren. “Here, let’s do a little informal experiment. I’m going to draw two short comic strips. Both show a student and a teacher on the first day of school. I am going to ask people which cartoon shows a teacher with high expectations and see which one they pick.”

Students will likely say Comic A’s teacher has low expectations. Alternatively, Comic A’s teacher could be inexperienced whereas Comic B’s teacher has learned to be patient and encouraging. Or, Comic A might show a math game where students are timed, and Comic B shows regular instruction. Like expectations about people, what we’re told to expect in the comics can influence how we judge them.

Comic A’s teacher gives up on the student quickly, while Comic B’s teacher treats their hesitation as a sign of productive thought.

How do you think scenarios like these, repeated many times over the course of a school year, might affect the student?

Note: Either experience might teach the student to share the teacher’s high or low expectations, altering their self-image and behavior. Other students might work extra hard to disprove a teacher’s expectations.
SHOULD MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS USE ACADEMIC TRACKING?

DEBATE THE ISSUE
Pick one of these positions (or create your own).

☐ Students should be tracked in school.

OR

☐ Students should not be tracked in school.

OR

☐ Students should be tracked temporarily and those in lower classes should be given extra support to catch up.

OR

☐ CREATE YOUR OWN

Jot down a few notes on how to support your position during a discussion or debate.

Be a strong participant by using phrases like these:

“Can you show me evidence in the text that...”

“You make a good point, but have you considered...”

“I believe that...”

“I agree with you, but...”
TAKE A STAND

Support your position with clear reasons and specific examples. Try to use relevant words from the Word Generation list in your response.

tracking | aptitude | policy | component | involve

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