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# The Daily Tar Heel

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## Ability groups help young students learn

By JOHN DRESCHER

The question of whether to group children in public schools by ability has been an issue for years across the nation. Now the issue has moved locally to Carrboro, where the halting of ability-grouped classes at Carrboro Elementary School has prompted new debate on the merits and drawbacks of grouping pupils by ability.

School board members have objected to the grouping of students, saying the policy does not conform to the board's philosophy. Local educators have said they should have the flexibility to group students by achievement when other teaching methods have proven to be less effective. The educators will bring the board a policy to consider later this month.

In an ability-grouped system, students are given tests to determine their ability levels in different areas. Generally, students are divided into three groups, according to achievement and ability.

There are a number of advantages to this system. Teacher effectiveness is heightened. Instead of trying to reach a broad spectrum of abilities, efforts can be more concentrated.

Any person who has tried to teach a class composed of vastly different students with vastly different abilities knows it is impossible to educate them all. If a teacher challenges the high-level students, the low-level students cannot keep pace, and they eventually become frustrated.

If the teacher tries to help the low-ability students, the high-level students are not challenged and eventually become bored. If a teacher takes a middle-of-the-road approach, he loses the attention of both upper- and lower-ability students.

Besides aiding teachers, ability-grouped classes help those who need help the most: young students. Ability grouping helps students to learn more because they are not lost in the intelligence shuffle. The student's peers are similar to him, and the student can learn more material on his own level.

Young students like division by ability; they can learn at their own pace and not be concerned with the social implications of being "different."

Ability-grouped classes do, however, have their drawbacks. Educators have determined that the interaction between different levels of students has a positive effect on low-achievement students. Without higher achievers as models, low-ability students become stuck in a rut where they never progress.

There is a workable solution to this problem. To ensure a certain amount of interaction between all students, the amount of time spent in ability-grouped classes should be limited. At Carrboro Elementary, students spent about two hours a day in ability-grouped classes and the rest in a regular classroom setting.

Another problem in the grouping system is that groups may become racially identifiable. Social class differences often correspond with achievement differences. Since race and social class often are interrelated, certain achievement levels may be dominated by one race.

At Carrboro Elementary, this was not a problem, because the groups were not racially identifiable. Guidelines, however, should be established by the school board to ensure that each race has its approximate percentage of representation in each division of students. Actual flexibility on the percentage of race representation is a matter to be decided by the school board.

Presently the school board has no established policy on ability-grouped classes. It has only a "philosophy," which should be clarified and more clearly stated as policy. The board should realize the advantages of ability grouping and adopt the philosophy in cases where teachers desire to use its advantages. At the same time, the board should establish protective safeguards so the system cannot be abused. The board's decision on whether to adopt an ability grouping philosophy will have a direct effect on the quality of education its students will receive.

John Drescher, a junior journalism major from Raleigh, is staff columnist for The Daily Tar Heel. He is a tutor at Carrboro elementary school.

## Slumping SATs

The steady, steep decline of scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test—the standardized test of verbal and mathematical ability taken by more than a million high school students each year—has continued unchecked for nearly two decades. During the last 17 years, the average verbal score has dropped from 478 to 424 of a possible 800 points, and the average math score has dropped from 502 to 466. In North Carolina, however, this year's scores actually went up, although they remained well below the national average. The statewide improvement to 393 verbal and 429 math may give educators a way to figure out why nationwide SAT scores are slumping.

A variety of reasons for the consistently poorer scores have been suggested and ruled out over the years. It appeared that the average score dropped during the early 1970s because more average and below-average students began taking the test, which was formerly taken mostly by the college-bound elite.

That theory might explain the sharp drops of the early 1970s, but recent scores have continued to worsen while the group taking the test has remained demographically stable.

A more plausible explanation, and one that might also account for the increase in North Carolina student's scores, links the decline in scores to the national de-emphasis of basic math and English courses in the last 20 years. The peak SAT scores came in 1963 and 1964, when the Cold War and fear of superior Soviet technology had accelerated the educational process in American high schools. Curricula, particularly in mathematics and the sciences, were made stricter and students were pressured to excel.

Since then, high schools have begun to offer a broader range of courses and to place less importance on classes that are basic, and sometimes boring. While too many educational ills have been blamed on an attitude of "permissiveness" in many schools, such an attitude is manifest in sundry new policies that have come into favor. Grade inflation is one; another is the policy of "social promotion," which is based on the premise that it is less damaging to send a student, unprepared, on to the next grade than to hold him back and label him a slow learner. It is also now widely believed among students and teachers that homework is unduly burdensome, and ought to be avoided at every opportunity. Fortunately, many schools are now reconsidering these policies.

It can be argued that broader curricula and more flexible academic policies have made education more useful to students in the 70s and 80s, but it is clear that they have done little to sharpen the basic skills in English and math that the SAT tests. In the 17 years since scores peaked in 1963, high school education has become more uniform and thus less valuable. High school has become, for many, less something to excel in than a way station to be endured on the way to college or a job. While we have benefited from keeping more students in high school, we have lost, in some measure, the proficiency once possessed by those who got out.

It is thus encouraging that North Carolina scores are improving in the face of national decline. The trend seems directly linked to the increased teaching of basic math and verbal skills to prepare students for the state's own competency test, which must be passed if a student is to graduate from high school. The competency test gauges the same type of abilities as the SAT, and the state has made an unforeseen gain nationally by tightening its own standards.

Only a few states have competency tests, but North Carolina can attest that they are useful tools in improving, as well as gauging, students' abilities. It would be gratifying if North Carolina, so long a state with poor schools, would begin to reverse the nation's trend toward poorer public education.

## Fall Break

It is good (for us baseball fans) that on the weekend of the World Series, Fall Break comes. Those of us who haven't looked at a television for more than five minutes at a time during the past two months welcome it. We have papers to write and tests to take and stories to edit, but all of that will wait. There are problems in the world, lots of them. But for at least a little while, they'll have to wait, too.

We shall go to the mountains this weekend and watch the leaves turn. We shall go to Boston and rejoice in the trip. We shall walk upon the empty beach and think of the ocean's vastness. And we'll put our feet up on a table, eat a sandwich and watch a baseball game. That's what fall breaks are for. We may even try to catch up on schoolwork, but we probably won't.

## Abandon hope, ye fanatics

By WILLIAM DURHAM

It was a dark, dank section of Wilson Library. Cobwebs dripped from the moldy books, and rats scuttled in the corners. I was midway through the *Inferno* when my desk lamp sputtered and went out...

When I could see again I was sitting on a dirt patch in a forest. Nearby I saw a smoking hole in the ground. As I walked over to it a little hairy fellow crawled out and greeted me.

"Hello there. My name's Fred. Welcome to Section Four of Hell, the section reserved for fanatics." He stuck his finger in his ear. "For a pound of flesh I can take you on a tour." He winked and leered. "It's cheap at the price."

"It sounds pretty interesting." I searched my pockets. "But all I can offer is a Bic pen and a piece of gum."

"That's all right. Just follow me," he cackled as he started back down the hole, high-pitched giggles floating up behind him. I followed, clutching my Bic pen and bubble gum.

We seemed to climb forever into the smoke and fumes. There were sounds out in the darkness gurgling and grunting and screams.

Finally we reached the bottom of the ladder. Fumes swirled about us, and slime grew on the dripping walls. "This way," Fred wheezed, stepping into the darkness.

He led me over to a hand rail, next to which was a sign reading, "Danger: fanatics ahead. Do not abandon your grasp on reality. Do not feed the fanatics."

We trudged on through a thick, green slime. Suddenly there was a roaring, and Fred said, "Quick, give me your bubble gum. I must throw a sop to the terrible guardian of the underworld." I instantly handed over my treasure, and Fred threw it into the darkness. There was a snuffling and a subdued scuffling and then all was quiet.

"That beast guards the way to the fanatics," Fred explained, scampering ahead. "If you don't pay him, he chews off your hair and turns you into a hari krishna."

As we rounded a corner I suddenly heard loud groans and wails. "These are the nature fiends," Fred said. "They're the ones who eat natural chips and shrink at the mention of refined sugar." He snickered. "Their punishment is truly ingenious."

As we drew nearer I could see dozens of people, off to the left of the path. They all were wearing loudly colored clothes and were wallowing in a goopy substance. All were bald.

Fred laughed evilly. "These poor people are doomed to wear lavender polyester forever. The only food they can have is fried, and they must sit in a mixture of canned tomato paste and diesel fuel."

As we walked by the poor wretches we could hear them plaintively wailing. "Sprouts, please give us some sprouts." Others were crying for lettuce. One fellow was dazedly muttering something about incomplete amino acids. All were unhappy.

"Look up at the ceiling," chortled Fred, poking me in the ribs. I did so, and was rendered speechless by the cruelty of the torture: For from the ceiling hung hiking boots, flannel shirts, hand-tooled leather goods and large salads to go.

"Here, have a french fry," Fred sneered, tossing a thick, pale, greasy piece of potato to one fellow. The poor guy screamed as it touched his body.

"Let's go on," Fred said, scuttling ahead. "If you liked that, you'll love this part. These tortures are of my own personal design." He twisted his ear, skipping around on the path delightedly.

Up ahead I could hear more moans and wails. We

approached an iron gate, which Fred opened, saying, "This pit is reserved for the hyperplus, hee, hee."

As we stepped through the gate, I could see groups of stern-faced, conservatively dressed people strapped to chairs in front of movie screens; the grimaces on their faces were horrible.

"They're being forced to turn the other cheek," Fred explained. "They have to watch scenes of people sinning and then say, 'I forgive.' That's something they had trouble doing during their lifetimes."

He took my arm and pulled me along. "Over here is one of my favorites," he giggled. "These are the television evangelists." He winked at me. "You'll love them."

We entered a large warehouse where men with diamond stickpins were endorsing Social Security checks for the underprivileged and saying, "Bless you, my son."

"This is awful," I gasped, overcome by the expressions of anguish these Christian gentlemen had on their noble visages. They were obviously tormented by charitable deeds they were being forced to accomplish.

Next I was led to a large room that resembled a bank. In it were several people behind teller gates handing out money. They were acutely unhappy, gnashing their teeth and trembling with suppressed rage. Behind them were little winged beasts with cattle prods.

"These are the radical student communists," snickered Fred. "They're forced to dress in conservative three-piece suits, speak politely and give money to the chairmen of multinational corporations. Whenever the urge to spew their shrill Marxist flatulence overcomes them, they're poked in the back by those little demons and have to apologize."

Near us, one of the gentlemen in line was speaking to his friend. "We're expanding into another Third-World nation next week. I can't wait to begin oppressing the masses."

The teller, a short fellow with red hair, turned bright red and started screaming, "You capitalist pigs and the materialistic, imperialist aggression of the ruling class will—" Then one of the demons swooped down and swatted him and he squealed, "I love Exxon, thank you, sir."

Fred wheezed merrily and we moved on. "This last section is reserved for the overly aggressive feminists. These women were, angry—angry indeed." He chuckled. "They were so angry that they blew a gasket, and now they're here."

We walked on. "This is the neuter room," Fred said. "Notice that these people are all wearing potato sacks with shaved heads. Nothing here has a gender."

As I watched, one of the small people ran over to a large bagged figure and wailed, "Mommy, Mommy, Brother stepped on my finger."

The bagged figure grabbed the little girl by the neck and intoned in a deep voice, "If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times, I'm not your 'Mommy.' I'm your parental unit. Number 17 is not your 'brother,' he is your sibling accessory."

Fred led me away toward a door marked "exit." Behind me I could hear the bagged figure continue her lecture. Then the door shut behind me, and I was facing a large, gaping hole in the turf.

"This is the end of the tour," Fred said, and without warning pushed me in. I spun around and around, and then stopped with a thump in my hard wooden chair in the library.

William Durham, a junior English major, is editorial assistant for The Daily Tar Heel.

## letters to the editor

### Rude theater-goers interrupt performance

To the editor:

On Oct. 4 my husband and I drove from Fayetteville to see the matinee performance of *Da*.

The play began slightly after 4 p.m. However, because people were noisily milling around in the lobby, we could scarcely hear anything.

Latecomers were traipsing down the aisles to their seats as late as 4:27 p.m., and two souls were actually seated at 5 p.m.

Where is the standard policy of no seating once the performance has begun?

I was appalled, angered and very much annoyed at the rudeness of this audience.

Another point: A shade was left partially raised allowing the afternoon sunlight to ruin the lighting design.

I realize the policy of the "Broadway On Tour" series is not to refund ticket money; however, if the remainder of the series is conducted in this slipshod manner, I am going to demand a full refund.

Maggi Flynn  
Arts/Entertainment Editor  
The City Forum  
Fayetteville

#### On the Wall

To the editor:

Bewildering, isn't it, that there have been no cries of outrage from the student body protesting the spending of \$7,000 in student fees to primarily benefit a private food concern (ARA)? Does no one marvel at the high-handed manner in which the most traveled Union thoroughfare was closed off to boost profits? Both decisions were made



without student input. Who was responsible for this inconvenient, expensive, and peremptory state of affairs? I, for one, damn well want to know.

Adrian R. Halpern  
216 East Rosemary St.  
CCR hearing

To the editor:  
The revised College Curriculum

Report reflects some concrete proposals for changes in undergraduate education here at UNC-CH. On Oct. 30, students will have the opportunity to voice their thoughts on these revisions at a public hearing in Gerrard Hall, and Student Government encourages everyone interested to attend this session.

Undergraduate education, however, encompasses many more issues than those addressed by the CCR. The University's advising system, the role of

professors as teachers as well as researchers, and other vital concerns await meaningful discussion and action.

In short, we all must realize that the newly proposed curriculum attempts to provide only one aspect of our educational structure; discussion and subsequent changes will be made. Let us not lose sight, however, of other facets of the academic pyramid.

Bob Saunders  
Student Body President

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