

Pre-COVID Ability Grouping in U.S. Public School Classrooms

DATA POINT
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This Data Point examines whether public schools in the United States used ability grouping (also referred to as tracking) as a method to organize classes or students. It uses data from the public school data file of the 2017–18 National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), which is a national sample survey of public and private K–12 schools, principals, and teachers in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. State representative information is also available for public schools, principals, and teachers.

In the NTPS, public schools indicated the methods used to organize classes or students during the 2017–18 school year. One method schools use to group students for learning is ability grouping.¹ Ability grouping is often referred to as “tracking.” It is a complex issue that has been the focus of ongoing debate and research regarding equitable access to instruction for all students, including whether the various forms lead to economically or racially segregated classrooms.^{2, 3, 4, 5} Specifically, NTPS asked schools whether “students are assigned based on their ability (i.e., tracking)” as a method to organize classes or students.

Does use of ability groupings by public schools vary based on the type of community or level of the school?

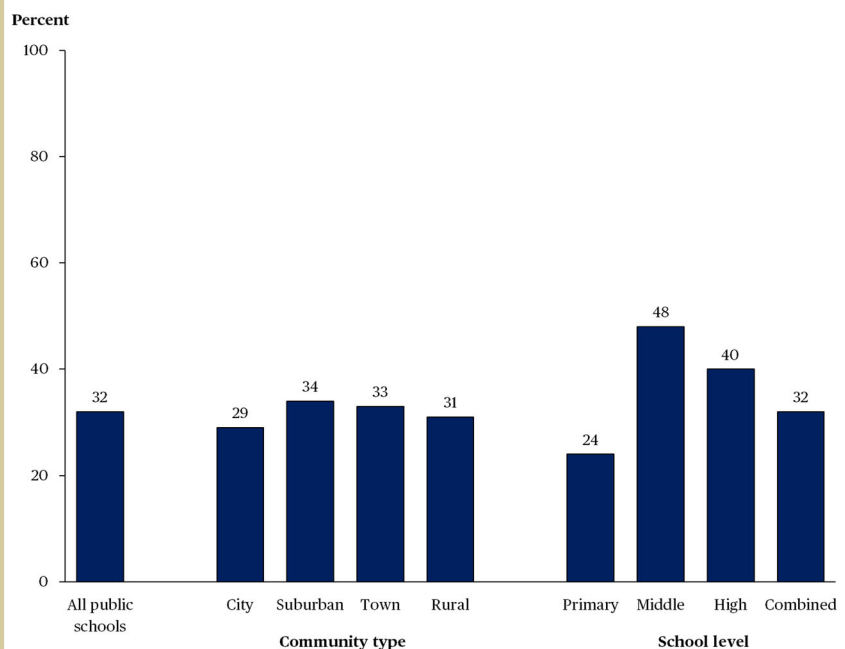
During school year 2017–18, one-third of public schools (32 percent) reported assigning students based on their ability (FIGURE 1).

The percentage of schools assigning students based on ability showed some variation by school characteristics, with differences by school level particularly notable. Nearly half of middle schools (48 percent) assigned students based on ability, which is higher than the 40 percent of high schools, 32 percent of combined schools,

and 24 percent of primary schools using this method. Similarly, the 40 percent of high schools using ability groupings is higher than the percentages for combined schools and primary schools. The 32 percent of combined schools using ability grouping is greater than the percentage for primary schools.

The use of ability grouping across different types of school communities ranged from 29 percent to 34 percent, where suburban schools (34 percent) more often assigned students based on their ability compared to city schools (29 percent).

FIGURE 1. Percentage of public schools that assigned K–12 students based on ability, by community type and school level: 2017–18



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), “Public School and Private School Documentation Data Files,” 2017–18.

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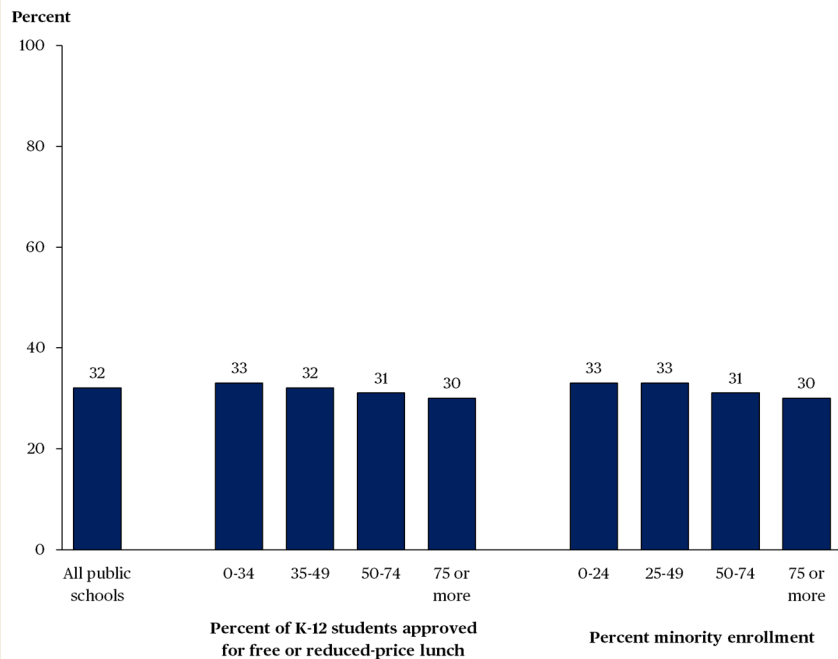
Does use of ability groupings by schools vary based on the percentage of students in the school approved for free or reduced-price lunch or the percentage minority enrollment in the school?

The percentage of schools assigning students based on ability showed no difference based on the percentage of K–12 students approved for free or reduced-price lunches or the percentage minority enrollment in the school (FIGURE 2). The use of ability grouping across schools with different levels of students approved for free or reduced-price lunches ranged from 30 percent to 33 percent. Similarly, the use of ability grouping across schools with different levels of minority enrollment also ranged from 30 percent to 33 percent.

Endnotes

¹ The survey asked whether the school used various methods to organize classes or students, including whether “students are assigned based on their ability (i.e., tracking).” Ability grouping is the practice of grouping learners together based on their strengths and talents within a learning environment. The NTPS did not ask schools to distinguish between assignment to instructional groups within classrooms and assignment to classes or courses of study. Note that this definition of ability grouping was not explicitly provided to respondents.

FIGURE 2. Percentage of public schools assigning students based on ability, by percentage of K–12 students approved for free or reduced-price lunch and percentage minority enrollment: 2017–18



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), “Public School Data File,” 2017–18.

² Bolick, K.N., and Rogowsky, B.A. (2015). *Ability Grouping is on the Rise, but Should It Be?* *Journal of Education and Human Development*, 5(2), 40–51. Retrieved Sept. 5, 2020 from http://jehdnet.com/journals/jehd/Vol_5_No_2_June_2016/6.pdf.

³ Loveless, T. (2013). *The Resurgence of Ability Grouping and Persistence of Tracking* (Part II, 2013 Brown Center Report on American Education). Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution. Retrieved Sept. 5, 2020 from <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2013/03/18-tracking-ability-grouping-loveless>.

⁴ Harklau, L., Lew, S., and Yang, A. (2018). *Tracking and Ability Grouping in Kindergarten to 12th Grade Settings*. Retrieved Feb. 18, 2021 from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0109>.

⁵ Buttaro, A., Jr., and Catsambis, S. (2019). *Ability Grouping in the Early Grades: Long-term Consequences for Educational Equity in the United States*. Teachers College Record, v121 n2 2019. Retrieved Feb. 18, 2021 from <https://tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=22574>.