Nancy Flanagan on Ability Grouping

I have a different take on ability grouping and tracking, as an instrumental

music teacher. Most band, choir and orchestra teachers ability-group (if

they have enough students). There's the "top" group, the second level, and so

on--with the top group perfectly balanced, instrumentally/vocally, and the lower groups

comprised of leftovers and trainees, theoretically pining to move to the top group.

I had a huge instrumental program in my middle school--300+ kids, in two grades (7-8),

about 60% of the student population. As the program grew, I did what most band

directors did (and what the MI School Band & Orchestra association endorsed, through

their competition rules): sifted out the top 60 or so, then the next 60, until I had five

groups. I gave them descriptive names: The Symphonic Band, The Cadet Band,

The Intermediate Band, etc.

I took the top 3 to contest, where you entered by school size/class, with "A"

bands playing more difficult music and having higher standards for judging. One year,

I took an A, C & D group (D was the lowest class). The D group got the highest ratings,

in the D class. All the groups did well--but the D group got perfect scores.

I sort knew that was going to happen. It was about the composition of the 3rd group--lots

of talented 7th graders who made big strides in what was their second year of playing

an instrument, one of those fun classes where kids were willing to take risks and try

music just a bit over their heads.

But the comments on the bus ride home were awful. "You played baby music" and

"the other bands in your class sucked, so you just looked good" and "we're better

than you are, and we're in the lower band."  Awful. I had turned my budding young

musicians into competitors.

The next year, I re-organized the program. I put all 8th graders in two groups, and all

7th graders in two groups, and opened up a Jazz Ensemble slot. I divided the 8th graders

into two equal-ability groups (minus the kids who opted for Jazz Ensemble). I called

them "3rd hour 8th grade band" and "4th hour 8th grade band."  When the kids arrived

in the fall, they were confused. Which band was better? Neither, I said. Both groups

will be playing "A" music. The two 7th grade groups will play "B" music to begin with.

When it came time for contest, the MI B & O Association flipped out when I sent

in four applications--including two in A class. Which one is your top group, they wanted

to know. When I told them how I'd divided the kids, no top group, they thought I was nuts.

And when I told them how many special ed kids were in each group (there was a rule that

Sp Ed kids didn't have to be counted in classification protocols), they were mystified.

Why would any music teacher organize their students that way?

All four groups did well. And the next year, I stopped--permanently--going to contest, and

used the money to support an out-of-state three-day travel experience where the kids

played on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, York Plaza in Toronto, at a Veterans' Home

in St. Louis, or worked with college band directors on university campuses. Much more

educational. Much more fun.