These findings emerged from a recent national study of high school English instruction conducted by UW-Madison professor of sociology and education Adam Gamoran and colleague William Carbonaro (now at the University of Notre Dame).

The study’s two main findings were, first, that most of the high school English instruction observed did not meet high standards for either quantity or quality. On average, students spent little time on homework, and they carried out few sustained writing assignments. Reading, writing, and discussion were coherent in some ways but not others; in particular, few written reports on readings were required, and little class time was spent on writing development.

The second major finding was a student’s track position was the best predictor of the type of English instruction he or she received. In contrast, there were few consistent differences in instruction based on students’ personal characteristics, or those of their teachers or schools. It was hardly surprising to find a sustained pattern of differences across tracks, since track differences in high school English have been reported in many smaller scale studies.

The most important reforms for high school English pertain to all classes, not just those designated as lower tracks. All classes would benefit from greater coherence across activities and subjects and from greater incorporation of students’ ideas and experiences into the ongoing flow of lessons.

Funding for this research was provided by the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement and the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Researcher Adam Gamoran