

# Final Report from the DPI Advanced Placement (AP) Programming & Planning Workgroup

April 2025

Shortly before the pandemic, DPI formed the AP Programming and Planning workgroup. This group consisted of representatives from LEAs from across the state and other educators with expertise in the Advanced Placement (AP) program with facilitation from DPI AP consultant Mark Schwingle. The workgroup's charge was to identify opportunities to interrupt current trends in which students of color (SOC), students who are English learners (EL), and students on free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) are less likely to access and participate in AP coursework and succeed in AP exams.

## Overarching Goal

Increasing access, participation, and success for historically underserved students in Advanced Placement coursework and exams. Additional specifics include all of the following:

- Increased access for and participation by students - especially historically underrepresented students (i.e., students of color, students on free/reduced priced lunch, English learners) - in AP coursework.
- Improved scores - especially for historically underrepresented students (i.e., students of color, students on free/reduced priced lunch, English learners) - on AP exams.
- Increased numbers of students graduating high school with earned college credit.

## The Workgroup's Why

Statewide data shows a need for dedicated work to address educational equity in relation to AP coursework and exams. "Educational equity means that every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, across race, gender, ethnicity, language, ability, sexual orientation, family background, and/or family income." (DPI website at <https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/rti/pdf/rti-emlss-framework.pdf> and <https://dpi.wi.gov/emlss/emlssproject>, accessed April 23, 2025). In addition, "[r]egardless of where they live, students should have access to advanced coursework and a variety of educational choices that meet their learning needs" (accessed from [CCSSO's Leading for Equity report](#), p. 23, September 10, 2024).

### Recommended Strategies

The group met and brainstormed various strategies: those already being used successfully and those they felt were worthy of consideration. Some of the strategies came organically from the work group members, and others were based on ideas from two out-of-state school districts. This included information from Dan Wroblewski, former principal at Columbia Heights High School, Columbia Heights, Minnesota. Columbia Heights was the 2016 AP Small School District of the Year. In addition, representatives from the College Board shared some approaches used in the Chicago Public Schools at a later meeting.

It is critical to note that the strategies shown below were consolidated from a much larger initial list. Further, not all of these strategies are applicable or appropriate to all school districts. Budgets, school size, school population, and more should be considered when determining what strategies may be worth pursuing.

It is recommended that districts focus on only 1-2 of these high-value strategies at a time, so there is a concerted focus and strong collaboration.

The following are strategies for Improving Access, Participation, and Success in AP coursework. Each strategy name contains a bookmark for that section of this report.

<b>Improving AP Access &amp; Participation Strategies</b>	<b>Improving AP Student Success Strategies</b>
<a href="#"><u>Strategy 1: Collaboration</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Strategy 1: Provide Extra Learning Opportunities</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Strategy 2: Start Strong</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Strategy 2: Reduce Friction</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Strategy 3: Focus on English Learners</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Strategy 3: Encourage Mastery &amp; Resilience</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Strategy 4a: Remove Barriers</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Strategy 4: Analyze your Data</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Strategy 4b: Outreach</u></a>	
<a href="#"><u>Strategy 4c: Make Data-Informed Decisions</u></a>	

## **Improving Access & Participation**

### **Access & Participation Strategy 1: Collaboration**

**What:** High school AP staff should collaborate with middle school staff to promote AP and build the skills students need for AP through backward design/vertical alignment.

**Why:** Students must know that AP courses are a viable opportunity when they attend high school. More importantly, students must have the necessary skills (e.g., research, writing), for AP success.

**Evidence of Success:** Schools will regularly set aside time for vertical planning between high school and middle school teachers. Schools will also set aside time for school counselors at both levels to discuss strategies to promote AP coursework and identify students with potential in AP.

**Additional Information:** One educator in the workgroup highlighted the importance of these conversations for helping middle school teachers better understand the importance of building students' writing and research skills prior to high school. It also can be an opportunity to build direct relationships with middle school students to encourage future participation in AP courses.

### **Access & Participation Strategy 2: Start Strong**

**What:** Promote “gateway” AP courses in grades 9 or 10, such as AP Computer Science Principles or AP Seminar, so students can build skills and see their own early success.

**Why:** “AP Computer Science courses can help address traditional issues of equity, access, and broadening participation in computing while providing a strong and engaging introduction to fundamental areas of the discipline” (2023 AP Course Overview, accessed September 2024). In addition, some of these “gateway” AP courses include project-based learning opportunities that help students feel they have voice and choice related to a shared overarching question.

**Evidence of Success:** Schools will see more students taking project-based AP courses, and a higher percentage of historically underserved students taking additional AP courses.

Additional Information: AP courses like Computer Science Principles or AP Seminar/AP Research can serve as important “gateway” courses to bring students into the AP “world,” while simultaneously addressing persistent equity gaps in schools.

- a. Excerpts from the AP Computer Science Principles Course & Exam Description (accessed October 2022),
  - i. AP Computer Science Principles course “includes opportunities for students to collaborate to solve problems of their choice...”
  - ii. “Such a course can broaden participation in computing while providing a strong and engaging introduction to the breadth of topics in the discipline.”
- b. Excerpts from the AP Seminar and AP Research Course & Exam Descriptions (accessed October 2022)
  - i. “AP Seminar is a foundational course that engages students in cross-curricular conversations that explore the complexities of academic and real-world topics and issues by analyzing divergent perspectives. Using an inquiry framework ... the course aims to equip students with the power to analyze and evaluate information with accuracy and precision to craft and communicate evidence-based arguments.”
  - ii. “In AP Research, students cultivate the skills and discipline necessary to conduct independent research and inquiry to produce and defend their scholarly work.”

### **Access & Participation Strategy 3: Focus on English Learners**

**What:** Encourage bi- or multi-lingual students to take an AP course in their home language (e.g., AP Spanish Lang. or Lit if home language is Spanish)

**Why:** This is a recognition of the assets that ELs bring and an opportunity for them to show what they know in their home language while potentially gaining college credit.

**Evidence of Success:** The school’s AP coordinator, school counselor, and EL teacher(s) work together to increase the number of ELs who participate and succeed in AP.

**Additional Information:** This strategy is widely used in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system. CPS was the AP District of the Year in both 2011 and 2018. During that time frame, data show large increases in the percentage of Hispanic/Latino students taking AP exams from 14.7% to 25.1%, and the number of students scoring a three or higher rose from 35.1% to 49.1% (College Board Presentation, 11/03/2021). Note: these increases for Hispanic/Latino students cannot be solely attributed to the strategy of having EL students

take exams in their home language. This strategy, together with various other approaches, was part of a larger effort at CPS to increase access, participation, and success for all students in their district.

#### **Access & Participation Strategy 4a: Remove Barriers**

**What:** Remove barriers to participation such as GPA requirements that automatically exclude students.

**Why:** Barriers like GPA do reduce students' opportunities for learning and growth. They also support a deficit-laden message about who is an "AP student" and who has the option and potential to be an AP student. This is a no-cost barrier that can be easily remedied. Ultimately, we must remember to prioritize people - in this case, students - over systems (DPI Equity Mindset Cards), since equal treatment can sometimes be diametrically opposed to equity and equitable practices.

**Evidence of Success:** School and/or individual teacher policies that restrict which students are allowed to participate in AP coursework are examined and updated. In addition, intentional conversations on mental models<sup>1</sup> at play that currently support deficit-based thinking are necessary. These conversations simultaneously allow relationship building while promoting equitable practices and increased participation.

**Additional Information:** Consider structural barriers such as course scheduling as well. If, for example, a popular AP course is offered at the same time as music, art, physical education, etc., students are forced to make a difficult choice that often benefits no one.

#### **Access and Participation Strategy 4b: Outreach**

**What:** Directly reach out to students and families from traditionally underserved groups. Consider student leaders from specific groups as ambassadors who can help promote AP courses to their peers.

**Why:** Students and families may not understand the ins-and-outs of AP coursework and, thus, may never enroll. They may not have had experience with it, do not understand how

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<sup>1</sup> "[D]eeply held beliefs and assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk" FSG, Sept. 2024).

it can help improve college and career readiness, or do not understand what supports are available. Direct outreach can help, especially if the outreach comes from students who have already participated in AP.

**Evidence of Success:** Direct outreach to middle school students and students in grades 9 and 10 occurs at least once per year. Family-focused school events are held regularly, and the promotion of AP coursework is on the agenda.

**Additional Information:** The College Board also shares recruitment strategies that are similar in nature (e.g., Computer Science Recruitment Strategies). They also focus on outreach within the school to teachers, school counselors, and to middle school students as well.

#### **Access and Participation Strategy 4c: Make Data-Informed Decisions**

**What:** Use existing testing data (e.g., PSAT, Forward testing), AP Potential, and educator referrals as a means to recruit students who may not be considering AP courses during their four years of high school.

**Why:** Data can be used to drive change. It can help in identifying students who have been overlooked, and it can be used to bring students into AP rather than as another barrier to keep them out.

**Evidence of Success:** A group of diverse stakeholders will together set clear, measurable targets for participation in classes, in testing, and in performance. These targets will be regularly reviewed to determine if there is positive growth happening in access, participation, and success. When that is not occurring, “What’s Next” discussions should be held to “right the ship.”

**Additional Information:** Using data can also help increase dialogue between administrators and staff about what success looks like in AP in that particular school building and/or school district. Data can also be used to measure areas where curricular changes may be warranted, so students are more prepared to take and succeed in AP.

## **Improving Student Success**

### **Success Strategy 1: Provide Extra Learning Opportunities**

**What:** Allot time for AP study opportunities both inside (e.g., AP Study Halls) and outside school hours (e.g., Summer Bootcamp, Saturday School, and/or a Kick-off to AP summer school course for those new to AP).

**Why:** Students need dedicated time to learn course content and skills. Providing students with opportunities to collaborate with peers and educators can help them learn and grow more quickly and, as a result, improve AP scores.

**Evidence of Success:** The school offers new study opportunities both inside and outside school hours. And students take advantage of these optional sessions, which in turn improves their in-class learning experiences and their exam scores.

**Miscellaneous Information:** These extra learning opportunities should be part of a larger support “umbrella” for all students, but especially for those traditionally underserved students in our schools. For example, if done in conjunction with Success Strategy 2 on reducing friction, there can be a significant “pay-off” for participating students. It could also be important for those students who scored just under a score of 3 (Success Strategy 3) since these extra learning opportunities can be used to support that student if they decide to retake an exam.

### **Success Strategy 2: Reduce Friction**

**What:** Improve the exam day experience (e.g., provide transportation options). Feed students’ breakfast before they begin taking their exam(s).

**Why:** Harvard’s Todd Rogers talks about reducing friction not just in terms of AP but in ways that make it easier for students and families to participate and be engaged in school activities. Plus, research on college-aged students showed how “... students who consume an exact breakfast have greater concentration, examination results, [and] strength...” (Lakmali et. al, 2022, p. 4725).

**Evidence of Success:** A district’s participation on exam day increases over the prior year. And student scores improve because of reduced friction and a full stomach.

Additional Information: Help students practice for their exams using AP Classroom's Question Bank. This will allow them to see questions that have been used in the past so they can be better prepared and know areas where additional study may be needed.

### **Success Strategy 3: Encourage Mastery & Resilience**

**What:** Provide scaffolding and then encourage re-testing for students who were unable to obtain college credit. Register them as Exam Only students for AP Classroom access at the beginning of the school year.

**Why:** The concept of mastery is often debated. What is clear is that if students are expected to be taking college level coursework, then we want these students to master the content to the extent possible, so they are prepared for other classes in that same discipline. It can also provide them with the skills needed to succeed in other disciplines, too. Encouraging students to retake an exam provides them with the chance to better understand the course material and improve their own abilities to be resilient.

**Evidence of Success:** For the percentage of students who scored 2, at least 10% will retake the exam the following year. They will also take advantage of the internal support "umbrella" in their school and will use tools like AP classroom to help them learn and prepare for the follow-up exam. And a high percentage of those retaking an exam will score a 3 or higher.

**Miscellaneous Information:** Brown (2012) discusses one school's Failure is Not an Option initiative. In this study, teachers were focused on mastery of content (in any course, AP, and non-AP alike) and provided students with the opportunity to retake a test within two weeks after the test was returned. Review opportunities were also provided. "The program evaluation found the policy improved students' test grades by at least 16 points and impacted students' test grades in a majority of the departments ... [and] there was a statistically significant difference between the retake scores of the students who participated in a review session and the students who did not participate in a review session" (p. 22).

### **Success Strategy 4: Analyze your Data**

**What:** Look at courses where there are multiple students who are scoring a 2 and provide additional support so future students can score a 3 or higher in the future.

Why: There are a multitude of reasons why analyzing data is important. There are two main reasons for this particular situation. One, doing so can help teachers identify students who may need additional support, especially those students who wish to enroll in additional AP courses and/or those students who wish to retake an exam to obtain a score of 3 or higher. But these same data can also be useful in helping the teachers understand what areas his/her/their students are struggling to understand so they can adjust their curriculum accordingly. Taking these steps helps school staff be accountable to the students and families they serve.

Evidence of Success: Each year, the AP coordinator works with each AP teacher to review available reports that help identify students who need additional support and discuss ways to address curricular areas where multiple students are scoring less than expected. AP teachers participate in professional development opportunities such as the AP Summer Institutes, AP Workshops, AP Mentoring, and/or the AP Project-Based Learning Series.

Miscellaneous Information: The College Board has a slate of reports available to either the AP teacher or AP coordinator and other building or district-level administrators. The Instructional Planning Report, which is available to an AP teacher, contains valuable information. The Subject Score Report roster would also provide important data to an AP teacher. The AP coordinator has access to even more reports that could be used to support students and/or to make decisions about course curriculum and pedagogical approaches.

## Conclusion

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