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Advanced Placement: An Open Invitation

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Evanston Township High School is making sure that advanced placement classes reflect the rich diversity of its student body.

At a Saturday event at Evanston Township High School, prospective advanced placement (AP) students explore their academic horizons. The students start out timidly but gain enthusiasm as they build balloon towers together, masking tape in hand. When time runs out, teams reflect on the task, reinforcing the similarities between constructing a tower with balloons and tape and being an AP student. By the end of the event, students have connected with others who share their hopes for the future, and they've gained new insight about the commitment and resilience it will take to succeed in AP courses. After all, we're a team.

How did we get here?

Not too long ago, our high school, located just north of Chicago, had a typical highly selective advanced placement program. The program was steeped in tradition; Evanston Township was one of seven high schools selected as a beta site for AP courses in 1952. To enroll, students had to have the prerequisite grades, and some AP courses were by invitation only. The result? Although the percentage of AP students who succeeded was high, participation and diversity in AP courses were low. The makeup of these courses did not match the school's diverse student population, which was 30 percent black, 16 percent Latino, 43 percent white, and 11 percent other ethnicities.

Today, advanced placement enrollments and success rates at Evanston Township High School have risen dramatically. But even more important, the diversity of those classes has increased, adding new richness to the class experience. The following numbers show the progress made from 2011 to 2014:

- The number of advanced placement exams taken increased from 1,551 to 2,086.
- The total number of AP students increased from 681 to 888.
- The percentage of black 11th and 12th graders enrolled in AP courses rose from 29 to 38 percent.

- The percentage of Latino 11th and 12th graders enrolled in AP courses rose from 28 to 51 percent.
- The percentage of all Evanston Township students who took at least one AP course by graduation rose from 65 to 73 percent.
- The increase in enrollment was accompanied by an increase in success. The number of AP exam scores of 3 or higher (enough to earn college credit) rose from 1,008 (65 percent of exams) to 1,480 (71 percent).
- In 2014, we had more scores of 3 or higher on AP exams (1,480) than we had *total exams administered* in 2010 (1,384).

Our teachers deserve much of the credit for these accomplishments, but it's important to consider three other factors that have contributed to the success of our AP program: school board policy, restructuring of 9th grade core classes, and student mobilization.

Set the Direction

In 2011, our board of education adopted an equity and excellence statement to guide the district's work: "Embracing its diversity, Evanston Township High School dedicates itself to educating all students to their fullest potential." Central to this statement is the dual focus on raising achievement for all students and eliminating racial achievement gaps. The board also established that two of the measures to determine progress would be AP enrollment and success on AP exams. Having a guiding principle articulated by the school board has been essential in expanding our advanced placement program.

To get started, we created the Increasing Awareness, Access, and Success in Advanced Placement Committee with broad representation of faculty, staff, and administration. The committee's goals are to increase the number of black and Latino students enrolled in AP courses and to help ensure their success in those courses.

College-readiness research provides a compelling argument for expanding advanced placement enrollment opportunities for all students. In fact, there is an emerging consensus in the scholarly literature that even attempting an AP class increases a student's academic trajectory (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson 2009; Jackson, 2010; Keng & Dodd, 2007). For example, research shows that students achieving an AP exam score of 2 (which means "possibly qualified" and is not high enough to earn college credit) are likely to have better college performance and higher four-year college graduation rates than are students who did not take an AP course (Hargrove, Godin, & Dodd, 2007). Research findings like this made us even more determined to expand AP enrollment until all college-bound students at Evanston Township High School have completed at least one AP course so that they are better prepared for college and career success.

Challenge Learners from the Start

The board of education also approved restructuring the freshman year, linking AP skills in history, English, and biology to high expectations in a real and sustainable way. We stopped tracking 9th graders into honors and regular-level sections. Instead, we created diverse classrooms with high expectations for all students and adopted an *earned honors credit* model.

All students in these classes have a rigorous, honors-level curriculum. Throughout the semester, all students take a series of assessments aligned to AP skills, which account for 20 percent of their grade. To receive honors credits for the semester, students must earn 80 percent of the *earned honors credit* points on these assessments and earn a C or better in the course. Because the assessments are highly challenging, not all freshmen earn honors credit. But all freshmen have the chance to try.

The use of rubrics that communicate high standards provides students with clear expectations regarding honors-level work. Claude Steele (2010) asserts that this combination of high standards and constructive feedback reduces stereotype threat, enabling students to focus on meeting the standards instead of doubting their intellectual abilities.

We recognized that along with increased rigor, we needed to provide abundant supports. Therefore, we make academic support available throughout the school year. Our Academic Success Center is open before, during, and after school Monday through Friday. Students are able to receive help from their teachers Monday through Friday before school starts. Our AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) and STAE (Steps Toward Academic Excellence) programs also support many freshmen. In addition, Evanston Township offers an academic intervention team of trained professionals to identify and assist students who are struggling.

Freshman year restructuring helped create a growth mind-set (Dweck, 2006) because students were given opportunities to work toward earning honors credit throughout the semester. Rather than being labeled as honors students at the start of the course, our students in 9th grade history, English, and biology courses are in the process of *becoming* honors students through their own efforts, which mirrors our philosophy of treating all students as potential AP students.

Show Learners the (Path)Way

Early on, we met informally with diverse groups of students in the college and career center. When we engaged our students of color in casual conversations about their academic experiences, common themes emerged.

The students said that Evanston Township High School was not doing enough to inform students of color about advanced courses and how taking these courses would affect their college and career achievement. Once students of color enrolled in AP courses, they struggled to feel they belonged in an academic culture that appeared to favor white students. Many students spoke about the challenge of being the only student of color in their AP class.

One of our goals, therefore, was to put enough students of color in AP classes to ameliorate stereotype threat and signal that they belonged in that space. Although restructuring the freshman year was significant, we needed a champion for awareness, access, and success in advanced placement courses—someone to rally students, teachers, and parents. We needed an individual who could coach students and connect AP coursework with post-secondary success. In the end, we found a calculus teacher and a college counselor to serve in this capacity; together they helped mobilize students in developing several long-term awareness, access, and success initiatives to support current and prospective AP students.

Our first awareness initiative, the annual Pathways to AP forum, included a diverse panel of nine current AP students and sought to inform the community, 10th and 11th grade students, and their families about the importance of taking challenging courses, the benefits of successfully completing those courses, and the supports available to help students reach their goals. The forum has since expanded to include 7th–11th graders and a breakout question-and-answer session to address students' and families' common concerns, such as the appropriate number of AP courses to take and how to manage course expectations.

After All, We're a Team!

Stemming from the success of the first forum, AP students who had appeared on the panel formed [teamASAP](#) (Access and Success in Advanced Placement) to empower all students with the belief that they can successfully navigate the most challenging coursework and give them the tools they needed to do so. The team is composed of past, current, and future AP students, as well as faculty and staff members. What began with nine students in 2011 is now a team of more than 250 AP students of diverse backgrounds, who play a significant role in supporting their peers. Around school, it is well known that ASAP also stands for *as soon as possible*—which is when we plan to accomplish our goals!

Students involved with teamASAP share their AP experiences with faculty, staff, and administrators in monthly meetings, as part of panels, and through fishbowl activities. One of teamASAP's black female seniors, Indyia, sees these activities as

a perfect breeding ground for trust. TeamASAP not only helps us, the students, but teachers as well because they get to hear our thoughts and improve based on our feedback.

Tanya, a Latina 12th grader, describes how teamASAP has supported her:

After having almost convinced myself to quit one of my AP classes due to mental exhaustion and feelings of inadequacy, I found myself supported and understood by my friends in teamASAP and decided to follow through with what I had signed up for.

Support Learners on the Journey

With help from the Increasing Access and Success in AP Committee, team ASAP has created a series of student-centered events to prepare, support, and empower students for the

successful completion of advanced placement courses, leading to increased opportunity in the future.

Awareness and success events are held on selected Saturdays throughout the year to help students feel more confident about deciding to enroll in AP courses. Attendees participate in icebreakers and team tasks, and teamASAP members facilitate small-group discussions about how the tasks relate to being successful in AP courses. Events are strategically scheduled so that students can attend one before and one after choosing their AP courses.

We have also enhanced day-to-day supports for students enrolled in AP classes. During structured morning, evening, and Saturday review sessions, study centers and classrooms are abuzz with AP students teaming up to study. These sessions, along with the use of technology for review and support, provide students with many opportunities to engage with one another to deepen their understanding of AP concepts and material. The support students give one another through our peer-tutoring program, in study groups, and in less formal structures plays a significant role in creating the feeling that "we're all in this together."

The work continues over the summer with the AP and College Application Summer Camp. Each three-hour AP summer camp course focuses on continuing team-building, introducing content, reviewing summer assignments, and exploring resources and supports. Our newest course, College Applications 101, was proposed by a student last fall to give students the opportunity to fill out college applications and start their college essays, thus reducing the stress they would feel if they were starting these tasks while diving into AP courses in the fall.

The Results Are In

Today, we see the positive effects that high expectations, a sense of belonging, and a growth mind-set have on student achievement. Forty percent of black students and 62 percent of Latino and Latina students who walked across the stage at Evanston Township High School graduation last year had taken an advanced placement course.

Through deliberate action of the school board, restructuring of the curriculum, and mobilization of students, Evanston Township High School has transformed its AP program to one of expanded access and success. A student-driven network with a passion for creating a positive and encouraging environment for students of color in advanced curriculum has been central to achieving our goals. With increased rigor, we are serving our students in new and exciting ways to help ensure a successful future for all—no invitation needed.

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