



## **The Advanced Placement Program Benefits Mainly Well-Prepared Students Who Pass AP Exams**

Many policymakers and education leaders have embraced the Advanced Placement (AP) Program as a tool to strengthen the high school curriculum and prepare students for college. The popularity of the AP program among these policy leaders reflects their belief that the traditional high school curriculum has often failed to provide rigorous courses with well-specified curricular content and end-of-course examinations to verify that students have mastered that content—and that AP courses and exams can supply the rigor missing from the high school curriculum.

Further, some policymakers have sought to expand the AP program in schools serving primarily minority and low-income students, in the belief that access to AP courses will promote educational equity and greater readiness for college and career among these students.

Are these beliefs supported by the evidence? From 2002 to 2006, the National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA) conducted research on the relationship between students' participation in AP courses in high school and their later success in college—relationships that are often misunderstood or misinterpreted. The research is summarized in a report (Dougherty, Mellor, & Jian, 2006) and a book chapter (Dougherty & Mellor, 2010). This brief highlights the four major findings of this research.

### **1. Taking AP Courses Alone Is Not Related to College Success.**

Simple comparisons of outcomes for AP and non-AP students can be extremely misleading. They might simply show that whatever personal characteristics cause students to choose to enroll in AP courses—such as motivation and family support—also help them succeed in college. After taking these and other types of pre-existing factors into consideration, there was no evidence in NCEA's research that merely taking AP courses is related to college graduation rates.

### **2. Taking AP Courses and Passing AP Exams Is What Matters.**

On the other hand, we found that passing the corresponding AP exams is related to college graduation rates. That is, students who demonstrate that they

are ready for college and that they can successfully complete an AP course and pass an AP exam in high school are also those who are most likely to graduate from college. In general, school systems that do a better job of preparing students for college and career produce more students who take *and pass* AP exams and also produce more students who later graduate from college.

### **3. Low-Income and Minority Students Have Low AP Exam Passing Rates.**

AP exam passing rates are low for minority and economically disadvantaged students, not just when measured as a percentage of the entire population of students from those groups, but also among students from those groups who complete AP courses. Of the African American, Hispanic, and low-income students in the high school graduating class of 2002 in Texas who took AP courses in English, mathematics, science, or social studies, only 11, 14, and 13 percent, respectively, actually passed the corresponding AP exams. This compares to 35 percent passing rates for White students and non-low-income students. This information indicates that we have a long way to go to prepare minority and low-income students for success in AP courses.

### **4. Academic Preparation in the Early Grades is Critical for AP Readiness.**

Students need strong academic preparation in K–8 to have a reasonable chance of successfully completing AP courses and passing AP exams. In these studies, only the group of students who performed at the top of the score range on the eighth-grade state test in both reading and mathematics had a 10 percent or greater chance of passing at least one AP exam in English, mathematics, science, or social studies in high school.

## **Conclusion**

AP courses are college-level courses designed for high school students who are ready for college-level coursework. Because of this, a student taking an AP course should be ready for college-level coursework in the relevant subject *before* taking the course in order to be adequately prepared to succeed in it. Embracing and promoting the notion that “AP is for everyone” does not relieve schools and school districts of the responsibility to ensure that students are adequately prepared to benefit from these courses. Therefore, educators and policymakers who are serious about expanding access to AP courses and exams should focus their attention on ensuring that elementary, middle, and high school curricula prepare all students—particularly minority and low-income students—for college-level work.

## **References**

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8701 N. MoPac Expressway Suite 200 Austin, Texas 78759 800/762-4645

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