

Executive Summary

What we want is to see the child in pursuit of knowledge, and not knowledge in pursuit of the child," said George Bernard Shaw. Does that suggest that it's cause for celebration when record numbers of U.S. high school students show up in Advanced Placement (AP) classrooms, presumably pursuing knowledge and at the very least choosing to study harder? Alas, showing up is just part of the equation. Quality of instruction and learning, the intellectual rigor and integrity of the program, students' motivations for enrolling, and academic achievement—all of these and more must also matter.

Growing Pains in the Advanced Placement Program: Do Tough Trade-offs Lie Ahead? is a study of AP teachers in America's public high schools. The research included a national random survey (in which 1,024 AP teachers participated) and four focus groups with AP teachers.

The study focuses on two basic research themes. We asked AP teachers:

1. What explains the growth in the AP Program? Is it the mounting demand? Are students and their families so focused on beefing up college applications and saving tuition that they're clamoring for more and more AP? Is it the supply side, with school systems and administrators pushing AP expansion to impress their communities and improve their ratings? Or is growth the consequence of the schools' equity-driven efforts to encourage previously overlooked youngsters to enroll in AP courses?
2. What impact has this growth had? Is it watering down the quality of the program? Has student quality declined? Have AP grading standards been weakened? Are AP exams less rigorous or scores falling? Or has the AP Program managed to serve more students without appreciable negative consequences?

Findings

In a nutshell, the nation's AP teachers told us that, even though they believe that the program's quality is holding up in the face of tremendous expansion, they also see troubling signs in their classrooms from students who overestimate their abilities and parents who are overeager to see their kids in AP courses.

Six key findings follow:

- The AP Program's tremendous growth is largely driven by student demand. Students appear, however, to be focused on AP for utilitarian or pragmatic reasons, not intellectual aspirations.
 - Ninety percent of AP teachers say AP is growing because there are more students who want their college applications to look better.
 - Only 32% attribute AP growth to more students who want to be challenged at a higher academic level.
- AP's growth is also boosted by district and school policies. High schools seek to burnish their reputations by showcasing AP; they've mostly done away with gatekeeping (the practice whereby school personnel recruited some students into AP and discouraged or ignored others) for the program.
 - Seventy-five percent of AP teachers believe that high schools are expanding their AP program to improve their school's ranking and reputation in the community.
 - Sixty-nine percent report that their high school's AP classes are generally open to any student who wants to take them. Only 29% say there are limits on access, such as GPA or teacher approval.

- The overall quality of the AP Program remains strong, despite its growth. Teachers report that course rigor, exam integrity, and student scores have changed little in the last several years.
 - More than three in four (77%) rate their own high school’s program as good (52%) or excellent (25%).
 - Fifty-nine percent say that the level of difficulty and complexity of the material covered in the AP courses they teach has stayed about the same; 27% say it has become more difficult.
 - Only 18% report that their students’ AP exam scores have been declining in the past five years.
- But there are warning signs that the quality of the AP program is threatened, mostly because of concerns about declining student aptitude and skills.
 - Over half (56%) of teachers believe that too many students overestimate their abilities and are in over their heads. Sixty percent think that many parents push their children into AP classes when they really don’t belong there.
 - Teachers are considerably more likely to report a decline in the quality of their AP students in terms of their aptitude and capacity to do the work than to say that student quality has improved (39% to 16%); 43% say it has stayed about the same.
 - More than six in ten (63%) believe that conducting more screening of students to ensure that they are ready to do AP-level work before they get in those classrooms would improve the program.
- AP teachers regard AP exams as legitimate assessments of learning that safeguard quality — a sharp and intriguing contrast to most K-12 teachers’ unenthusiastic attitudes toward standardized tests and assessment-based education quality control in general.
 - Nine in ten AP teachers believe that AP exams effectively maintain the quality of coursework (86%) and are aligned well with curriculum and course objectives (90%).
 - Eight in ten believe that the AP exam helps to motivate and focus students (81%) and that AP exam scores at least partly reflect how well they teach (78%).
 - In contrast, a 2006 Public Agenda study showed that only 18% of public school teachers believe that standardized tests are necessary and valuable. Sixty-two percent called them “a necessary evil” and 19% thought that they do much more harm than good. Another 71% of public school teachers overall believe that students are required to take too many standardized tests. Only 27% said that things are about right.¹⁴
- AP teachers working in the nation’s poorest schools — where more than 75% of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches¹⁵ — report dismal student performance on the AP exam. Only 25% of these teachers say that most of their students score 3 or better on the AP exams, compared with 70% of teachers in low-poverty schools.¹⁶

The survey also queried teachers about their overall assessment of the AP program at their schools, their feelings about the national underrepresentation of minority students in AP, and their familiarity with Jay Mathews’s “Challenge Index” (which annually ranks the country’s high schools according to the ratio of students taking college-level exams; for more details, see The Challenge Index section in the text). We also compare the views of AP teachers in high-poverty schools with those in more affluent schools, as well as by region.

When discussing survey results, a perennial issue is the extent to which respondents — in this case AP teachers — are reporting reality or merely their own preconceptions and values. In other words,

14 Ott, Amber, Ana Maria Arumi, and Jean Johnson. 2006. *Reality Check 2006: Is Support for Standards and Testing Fading?* New York: Public Agenda, p. 9.

15 Families with incomes at or below 185% of the poverty level are eligible for free or reduced price lunches at school.

16 A score of 3 is the traditional cutoff that determines if students are eligible for college credit.

can we depend on teachers to give us reliable accounts of what is happening on the front lines of the program? We leave this to the reader to judge but point out that in either case, it's valuable to hear the voices of educators and to understand their perceptions, concerns, and sources of satisfaction.

One final note: In the United States, accelerated learning options in high school also include the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program and the Dual Enrollment Program, where high school students can take college-level courses for college credit. We focus on AP primarily because of its magnitude, but also because of practical limitations in the design and execution of the study.

About the Study Methods

The study is based on survey findings from a randomly selected, nationally representative sample of 1,024 public school teachers who are currently teaching at least one AP course. It is also based on qualitative data from four focus groups conducted in spring 2008 in Maryland, Texas, Utah, and Wisconsin. The margin of error for the overall sample is plus or minus three percentage points; it is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups. In general, the qualitative data from the focus groups (mostly presented in the Observations sections) serve to put the survey findings in context and present illustrative examples of AP teachers' personal experiences. Appendix A includes a complete description of the methodology, and Appendix B contains the entire questionnaire and survey results.