

Foreword

By Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Amber M. Winkler

The Advanced Placement (AP) program is enjoying a growth spurt in the United States. In 2003 and 2004, 1.1 million high school students participated in the AP program and took 1.8 million exams. Just four years later, 1.6 million young people sat for 2.7 million exams.¹ There's probably no education program in America that's been expanding faster.

This is indisputably a good thing, right? After all, even the notoriously tough reviewers that we at Fordham engage from time to time to judge the quality of state standards and curricula found AP generally worthy of gold star status.² Other studies have shown that, even when students score poorly on the AP exam (earning a 2) and don't receive college credit, they still achieve higher average GPAs in college than their non-AP peers (when matched on SAT scores and family income).³

But isn't it possible that the opening up and rapid democratization of AP might jeopardize its quality, perhaps adversely affecting the education of the top students who are most capable of tackling rigorous academic work? Are their AP courses being subtly "dumbed down" as more—and possibly less-prepared—students flock into them? What happens to a traditionally elite education program when it democratizes? Is there enough gold to go around? Can we, in John W. Gardner's famous formulation, be equal and excellent, too?⁴

We set out to investigate this question by asking AP teachers themselves what they see happening to the program. This report doesn't provide definitive answers (nor does any other accessible data source, but more on that later). What *Growing Pains in the Advanced Placement Program: Do Tough Trade-offs Lie Ahead?* does is present the on-the-ground perspectives of those charged with implementing this acclaimed, college-level, high-school curriculum. To our knowledge, this is the first-ever national survey of AP teachers on this topic—serious educators, nearly all of them, typically in love with their subjects and eager to share their knowledge with America's best and brightest young people.

We find their views about AP growth to be conflicted, mostly positive toward the program's expansion yet tinged with concern that the quality of the AP student body is diminishing. "A little more gatekeeping, please," is one message we hear, if faintly.



This study is part three of a five-part, multiyear examination of the condition of high-achieving students in U.S. schools in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era. The project is supported by the John Templeton Foundation and our sister organization, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. The first two parts, which included both an analysis of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data and a national teacher survey, were released in June 2008. Jointly titled *High-Achieving Students in the Era of NCLB*, they found that, although the lowest-achieving students made rapid gains from 2000 to 2007, the progress of top students during the same period was, as described by Brookings scholar Tom Loveless, "languid." And the Farkas Duffett Research Group found teachers reporting that they're paying considerably more attention to their lowest-achieving pupils than to their highest..

1 College Board. 2008. *Annual AP Program Participation 1956–2008*. New York: College Board. <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/ap-data-2008-Annual-Participation.pdf> (accessed March 27, 2009). Note: The number of students may be slightly inflated across years since some students take exams in more than one year.

2 See Byrd, Sheila, Lucien Ellington, Paul Gross, Carol Jago, and Sheldon Stern. 2007. *Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate: Do They Deserve Gold Star Status?* Washington: The Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

3 Hargrove, Linda, Donn Godin, and Barbara Dodd. 2009. *College Outcomes Comparisons by AP and Non-AP High School Experiences*. New York: The College Board. Also note: This study was reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse and found "not consistent" with its standards for evidence. See <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/quickreviews/apoutcomes/index.asp>

4 Gardner, John William. 1961. *Excellence, Can We Be Equal and Excellent Too?* New York: Harper.

Now we return with this national survey of Advanced Placement teachers. Once again, we engaged the Farkas Duffett Research Group (FDR), which we've long respected for its diligence, accuracy, and reader-friendly analyses. They've again done superb work and we're grateful indeed.

This report, like the last one, also benefitted from the expert counsel of an independent review committee that included Cynthia Brown, Director of Education Policy, Center for American Progress; Paul Gross, Professor Emeritus, University of Virginia; Frederick Hess, Director of Education Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute; Stephanie Pace Marshall, Founding President and President Emerita, Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy; and Joyce Van Tassel-Baska, Executive Director, Center for Gifted and Talented and Smith Professor of Education, College of William and Mary. We are much in their debt. Let's be clear, though, that not every suggestion made by every expert could be fitted into the final draft. And, of course, the views expressed in this Foreword need not reflect those of the review committee or the FDR Group.

We also thank the Fordham team for conscientiously seeing this report to completion and dissemination, particularly program associate Christina Hentges, media and public affairs staffers Amy Fagan and Laura Pohl, Vice President Michael Petrilli, copy editor Rene Howard, and designer Edward Alton.



A resounding theme emerging from this study is that AP teachers are generally satisfied with the overall quality of the program's curriculum and courses. Most say these bedrocks have stayed fairly consistent, even during a time of rapid expansion. Granted, the survey's respondents (and focus-group participants) have a lot of "skin in the game," since they are themselves guardians of a respected, even iconic, program. We might reasonably expect them to give the AP program the high marks that they want their pupils to earn on its exams. Yet we also find here a schism in how AP teachers view the program's democratization.

We asked them to choose whether it's better to open up the program to all students so as to widen opportunity or to limit it to those high school pupils most capable of meeting its demands. On this key question, they are not of one mind. The majority (52%) says it's best to allow only those students deemed able to handle the material into AP classes. A large minority (38%), though, would allow in more students who want to take the classes, even if they do poorly. (The rest said "neither" or "unsure.") It's not an overwhelming margin, but more teachers are concerned about an open-doors policy than are eager to embrace it. That's not necessarily elitist. Conscientious educators typically want to ensure that students are up to the classroom challenge and able to overcome rather than feel beaten down by it.

Some influential folks would forge ahead with AP democratization regardless of teacher concerns. Veteran *Washington Post* education reporter Jay Mathews—our friendly sparring partner in this AP debate—is one of them. Years ago, Mathews devised the "Challenge Index," which purports annually to rank the country's best high schools. Roughly speaking, Mathews divides the number of AP tests taken in a school by the number of its graduating seniors.⁵ He uses the quotient to rank high schools—and it's clearly getting traction. Forty percent of those who have any familiarity with it say it's had at least some impact on their school's approach to AP. Mathews insists that AP courses should be made available to all students on grounds that it's a good program and its rising tide will lift all boats.

We're not so sure. Boats that aren't properly moored can capsize or sink when the tide rises.

One thing *is* for sure, though: The College Board agrees with Mathews. For years, it has beaten the equitable-access drum, routinely tracking what it calls an "equity and excellence gap." "True equity," the College Board says, "is not achieved until the demographics of AP participation and performance reflect the demographics of the nation." That's surely an admirable goal. But what happens when schools don't equitably prepare students to handle the AP challenge? The Board maintains that "All

5 Note that Mathews recently instituted a "Catching Up" list, intended to cast light on those schools with high AP test-taking rates but few passing scores. The list includes all schools with AP or International Baccalaureate (IB) test-passing rates below 10%.

willing and academically prepared students deserve the opportunity to succeed in rigorous, college-level experiences.”⁶ Sounds great, but therein lies the rub: *Are all willing* students also academically prepared?

The most recent College Board statistics shed a little light on this question—and reviews are mixed. On the one hand, the percentage of the 2008 high school graduating class scoring at least one 3 on an AP test rose to 15%, up from 12% in 2003.⁷ On the other hand, the percentage of *all* exams receiving grades of 3 or higher declined from 62% to 58%, and the mean score slipped from 2.96 to 2.85.⁸ That’s neither a ringing endorsement of, nor a fatal flaw in, the more-open-doors policy. Still, it’ll be worth watching to see if mean scores continue to inch down in the coming years as AP access continues to widen.

Plenty more about AP should be watched, studied and analyzed. Changing policies (i.e., from gate-keeping to gate-razing) should be open to evidence-based scrutiny—scrutiny informed by widely available third-party analysis.

But don’t hold your breath on that front. We know dreadfully little about the impact of the AP Program on important student outcomes, much less the impact of a more-open doors policy on the program and its student outcomes. The primary cause of that ignorance isn’t analysts’ lack of interest or capacity; it’s that the College Board has been distressingly tight-fisted with AP data.

According to its own data release guidelines,⁹ the Board typically declines requests for school-level and student-level data. Researchers must get permission from *individual* states and schools. No organization that believed in transparency would adopt such guidelines, which make for unreasonable delays, unmanageable expense and unacceptable burden—the more so when one is interested in examining a critical mass of participating schools. (We understand well the need to protect a school’s—and especially a child’s—identity, but there’s no reason that both can’t be assigned unique identifiers to shield their privacy.) This policy has real time and cost ramifications. For instance, if an analyst is interested in comparing the number of students enrolled in AP versus the number of those same students who actually took the tests, he’d have to approach individual state education departments and perhaps individual schools (depending on the former’s policies).

Another dismaying element: the College Board reserves the right to approve how its data are analyzed and used. Take page nine of its guidelines: “Any data that are released by the College Board to any individual or institution remain the property of the College Board, and may not be used for any purpose other than that specified in a license agreement between those who request data and the College Board.” On the surface, this sounds like standard legalese, but its effect is to give the Board control of which types of analysis can be done.

To its credit, the Board periodically releases its own useful macro-level reports. But the country would benefit from more nuanced—and closer to the ground—slicing and analysis of those data by independent analysts.

Besides program quality and outcomes, one other aspect of AP growth has been little discussed or examined. Simply put, it’s expensive. A recent study by education-finance expert Marguerite Roza compares district spending, including AP costs, in three districts.¹⁰ She found that spending on AP courses in two districts significantly outpaced spending on regular and remedial courses. In one district, for example, per-pupil spending on honors and AP courses exceeded spending on regular classes by 80%

6 College Board. 2009. *The 5th Annual AP Report to the Nation*. New York: College Board. http://www.collegeboard.com/html/aprtn/pdf/ap_report_to_the_nation.pdf (accessed April 3, 2009).

7 Ibid.

8 College Board. 2008. *AP Grade Distributions—All Subjects 1988–2008*. New York: College Board. <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/ap-data-2008-Grade-Dist-All.pdf> (accessed April 7, 2009).

9 College Board, 2006. *Guidelines for the Release of Data*. New York: College Board. http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/research/RDGuideforReleaseData.pdf (accessed April 28, 2009).

10 Roza, M. Forthcoming. “District budget decisions.” *Education Next*.

in math and 23% in English. In another district, AP teachers (who are generally more senior) earned substantially more—almost \$17,000 more—than teachers of remedial courses; they also taught far fewer students (14 versus 19). These costs are not negligible. And that’s without even calculating the cost of taking the exams, now \$86 a pop.¹¹

Yes, there’s good news in these pages. The United States has been succeeding in ensuring that the AP program is available to more students,¹² including the disadvantaged among them.¹³ But we’d be wise now to make sure that further growth is judicious, not foolhardy. As we seek to substantiate school spending in economically challenging times, we need to know if the benefits accruing to students—whether they be willing, able, or willing *and* able—justify the program’s costs. Similarly, if tough choices have to be made, who will (or *should*) benefit more in the long run—pupils deemed best able to handle the rigors of AP or those less able but nonetheless willing to take the plunge?

Will the warning signs identified by teachers (e.g., students in over their heads) lead to eventual watering down or beefing up of the program? Will the progress of our brightest AP students turn “languid” even as we applaud the gains of middle or lower performing pupils? Or will we avoid all such revelatory data, honest analyses, and tough choices and simply hope, without knowing for sure, that we can be equal and excellent, too?

11 The College Board offers fee reductions for low income students, and participating schools retain part of student fees to help cover their own operational costs. Still, multiply the 2.7 million tests taken in 2007-2008 by the standard fee (\$86) and one immediately sees that the Board (and participating schools) deposit hundreds of millions of AP-fee dollars per annum into the revenue side of its ledger. Sure, they also incur many expenses and give various discounts—but it’s pretty obvious that the (non-profit) Board benefits financially when AP participation grows. Could that possibly help to explain why it’s so secretive with program data?

12 The U.S. Department of Education has no doubt catalyzed this growth. In the last two years, it’s appropriated \$56.5 million to the Advanced Placement Incentive Program, which has a goal of enabling grantees to increase the participation of low-income students into the AP Program.

13 In the 2008 graduating class, 17% of AP examinees were low-income students, up from 11% in the class of 2003. College Board, *5th Annual AP Report to the Nation*, p. 2.