



Advocacy for Gifted and Talented in New York

Watering Down 'Advanced' Classes

By: Patrick Welsh

The nation's high schools are being flooded with AP, or Advanced Placement, courses. You'd think that would be a good thing. Think again.

What parents wouldn't want the best for their child?

So when they are told that the high school Advanced Placement (AP) program provides the best courses for the best students, parents understandably don't want their son or daughter left out.

On a recent night at T. C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Va., where I teach English, parents of 9th-, 10th- and 11th-graders came to school to consult with teachers and counselors about which courses their children should take next year. Similar scenes are now being played out in schools throughout the country. Not surprisingly, one of the most common questions is whether students should sign up for college-level AP courses. Certainly there are many reasons for parents to want their child to do so, not the least of which is that students who do well on the national AP tests at the end of the year can get college credits, often saving thousands of dollars in tuition fees and also vaulting the child ahead of his or her college peers.

The executive director of the College Board, which administers the exams (at a cost of \$82 per test), says AP courses are "the gold standard." But there is evidence the gold is losing its luster as public schools, in response to a variety of pressures, herd more and more kids into AP courses.

Nationwide, the number of students taking at least one AP test increased 38% between 2000 and 2004. In 2004, 11,196 public schools (about 60%) participated in the AP program, an increase of 417 schools from 2003.

In theory, the trend looks promising. Who can argue against more kids taking challenging courses? Well, count me as one who can. School officials are deluding themselves that they're raising standards for more students. From what I've seen, this trend is starting to lead to more discouragement and less learning among students who do not have the skills or motivation to do the work in an AP course. It's also watering down the courses.

In the 25 years I have been teaching AP English, I have never seen such growth in the numbers of AP students as during the past three years. Last year, T.C. Williams had eight sections of AP English; this year, there are 11 — defining about half the senior class as "advanced." Is this year's senior class so superior to last year's that three new sections had to be added? Hardly.

One reason for the increase nationwide is that the College Board has made a big effort to convince school districts and the public that the best way for kids to show "college-level mastery" of a subject — and impress colleges — is to get a score of 3 or above (on a scale of 1 to 5) on an AP test. This is a spurious claim — at least from my experience — given that any reasonably bright kid could get a 3

on the English literature test without taking the course. In fact, some universities, for this reason, are beginning to give college credits only for a score of 4 or 5.

Another factor in the increase is that the College Board has been playing a race card of sorts. In its recent "Advanced Placement Report to the Nation," the College Board points with pride to the fact that African-American students demonstrating college mastery of a subject (scores of 3 or above) on AP tests rose 59% from 2000 to 2004. But there is no mention that 70% of African-American students who took the AP test last May in English literature, to cite one category, received scores of 1 or 2. Many of those kids would have learned much more had they been in a class geared to their academic needs. The same is true for the 30% of white kids who scored 1 or 2.

Adding to the pressure from the College Board is the so-called challenge index created by The Washington Post with the well-intended purpose of giving credit to schools' efforts to promote academic achievement. A school's rank on the index is determined by dividing the number of students in the senior class into the total number of AP exams given. The index does not take into account scores kids receive on the tests.

In a measure of the index's national significance, Newsweek magazine (which is owned by The Washington Post Co.) in recent years has published a list of what it calls "America's Best High Schools" based on the challenge index rankings. Websites of school districts from the state of Washington to Florida boast about their schools that made the list.

Schools need to get beyond the hype and their quest for a better public image, especially one that suggests that the needs of minority students are being met when they are not, and that tells kids and parents, in subtle and not so subtle ways, that only AP courses matter.

So what should parents do? Don't believe the labels in a school curriculum guide. Check out who's teaching the courses, not just whether they have an AP moniker. It's better for a child to have a great teacher in a regular course than a poor teacher in an AP course.

Most of all, don't believe the propaganda coming from all sides about AP. In the year of its 50th anniversary, the Advanced Placement program should not be reduced to a fad.

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