

## The disparities of college prep

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Catherine Matthys flew through Advanced Placement exams starting as a Wilson High School sophomore, racking up 56 college credits before graduating last spring.

The classes were tough, but getting into them wasn't; the Southwest Portland school offered 16.

Across town at Madison High, Brian Torres landed in his first AP class as a senior. Madison offered only one AP course last year.

High school students who complete Advanced Placement courses have an advantage: a more rigorous education, a chance at college credits and a better shot at finishing a four-year college degree, according to a U.S. Department of Education study.

But at a time when AP participation is booming across the nation, only 377, or 3 percent, of Portland's 13,000 high school students took an AP exam last year, according to The College Board, the nonprofit organization that oversees AP programs nationwide.

The Portland high schools that serve the most low-income and minority students offer fewer AP courses than the city's other high schools. Course schedules at Wilson and Grant are laden with a dozen or more; Madison, Jefferson and Roosevelt offer a couple each.

Portland is an extreme example of a national trend. In a nation where 40 percent of students are minorities, 29 percent of students who took an AP exam last year were students of color, The College Board reports.

In Oregon, minorities accounted for 19 percent of high school students last year. They accounted for 16 percent of students taking an AP exam.

In Portland, the disparity is stark. Minorities accounted for 37 percent of Portland high school students in the 2003-04 school year but less than 2 percent of students taking AP exams.

Advanced Placement has been around for decades. The College Board reports 1.1 million U.S. students participated in AP classes last year.

The mostly juniors and seniors enrolled in AP work at a college level. They can earn college credit by scoring high enough on an optional final exam. AP students are expected to master more material faster than students in regular classes. On a recent AP English quiz, Madison students were expected to identify characters in "Frankenstein" and explain the context of quotes taken from the novel. By contrast, a quiz given to a lower-level English class asked students only to identify characters.

Research by the U.S. Department of Education and The College Board shows that Latino and African American students are more likely to pursue and finish college if they have taken demanding high school courses.

"Colleges look really deeply at that," says My Linh Nguyen, 18, a Madison senior taking her first AP class this year.

"It's kind of like we were missing out."

## **Beaverton does it better**

Beaverton schools provide clues as to how Portland could bolster its AP offerings.

Beaverton high schools tested more than twice as many students as Portland even though Beaverton has fewer high schoolers. Every comprehensive high school in the district offers a slate of Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes. College Board officials cited Beaverton's Westview High School as one of the nation's best at promoting and offering AP.

Westview students can choose from 15 classes that prepare them to take an Advanced Placement exam, says Barbara Traver, one of two teachers who works part time coordinating the school's AP program.

Traver says students hear about Advanced Placement at an information night held every fall for students as young as eighth grade.

"We don't have as many (minorities and low-income students) as we'd like, but we're working on it," Traver says.

Beaverton's middle schools teach algebra, Traver says, lining up students to take calculus early in high school.

All ninth-graders at Westview take English and social studies classes that prepare them for the Advanced Placement versions of those subjects. Proponents of that practice say it prevents schools from placing advanced students on a college-bound track while lumping everyone else in lower-level classes.

College Board officials say schools often limit participation by screening students, seeing only some as AP material.

## **Obstacles to AP classes**

Trevor Packer, executive director of the Advanced Placement program for the New York-based College Board, says schools should make middle school curricula more challenging, promote Advanced Placement in earlier grades and stop requiring students to have high grades and teacher recommendations before they take AP.

In Oregon, 27 percent of schools require AP students to demonstrate a minimum grade-point average. An additional 58 percent ask for a teacher recommendation. And 44 percent make students earn a high grade in a lower-level course, Packer says.

School administrators say they face their own barrier to providing more AP: Some students who show up in high school are unable to read or do math at grade level.

Schools that streamline AP prerequisites to promote participation can face criticism that they're making school too easy for the smartest students. Educators say AP courses are sometimes squeezed out of high school schedules because relatively few students take them.

Brian Torres, the Madison student, says he's tried unsuccessfully to encourage his friends to take upper-level classes.

"I've been the only Mexican in all my English classes," Torres says.

Portland Superintendent Vicki Phillips says changes are coming. Improving access to the most rigorous classes is key to reforming the district's middle and high schools, she says.

"We have to counsel and advise kids differently starting in middle school and all through high school," she says.

Phillips says she expects to ask the school board next spring to approve curriculum changes. Basic classes would become more challenging. The district would offer more AP courses at schools that lack them. And Phillips says she probably will recommend tougher graduation requirements, with students taking more advanced courses in early grades and possibly more credits overall.

Schools with large numbers of students below state benchmarks don't necessarily have to spend money and teacher time on remedial classes, Phillips says.

She cites a 2000 U.S. Department of Education study that shows students with low standardized test scores who are placed in college-level courses improve more than if they'd been assigned to vocational classes.

And state officials say low-income students shouldn't be scared off by AP exam fees. Using a federal grant, the state covers the \$82 exam fee for any student who qualifies for free school lunch. The program last year paid for 724 exams, 95 of them taken by Portland students, says Andrea Morgan of the state Department of Education.

Some Portland high schools have taken steps to improve AP participation. Some offer one level of English and social studies to freshmen instead of setting only advanced students on an honors or college-bound track.

The practice draws criticism from some parents of advanced students, including Margaret DeLacy, a champion of gifted students who is critical of Portland's Talented and Gifted program and has sued the district to improve programs for upper-level students. DeLacy says advanced students turn into unpaid teachers aides when they're grouped with average students.

"It's not rigor if you call a class algebra and you teach children how to add," DeLacy says.

Pat Thompson, principal at Madison, says teachers there are considering adopting a program next year that would place academically average students in more challenging courses. Students who earn B's, C's and D's would be eligible to take honors and Advanced Placement courses and would also attend a daily study skills class. Thompson says the school added three AP classes this year, though it meant class sizes increased in some lower-level subjects. The additions bring the school's AP offerings to four.

"I would be the first to tell you," Thompson says, "we've got to do a better job than that."

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