

The AP lever for boosting access, success, and equity

Four New Jersey districts with different demographics substantially increased the number of students taking AP exams without significantly decreasing the average student scores.

By Rachel Roegman and Thomas Hatch



People are starting to be aware. People are sort of surprised at the initial AP enrollment numbers. That you know, we removed some of these levers, and all of a sudden, like, 'Where did this come from?' Students capable of AP work were always there, folks. You just were missing them.

— New Jersey superintendent

Preparing students for college remains a primary aim of K-12 education. Yet every year, studies show that goal has not been achieved. Among students in the class of 2013 taking the ACT, for example, less than 40% met three or more college-readiness benchmarks, and almost one-third were unable to meet any benchmark (Adams, 2013). Furthermore, almost 60% of students in their first year of college have to take remedial courses (SREB, 2010). Certain groups of students — including youth of color, youth living in poverty, youth receiving special education services, and youth who are learning English — are more likely to be among the underprepared, often a result of fundamental systemic structures that place students on different academic paths.

These structural barriers create gaps in academic opportunity that lead to disparities in student outcomes. These gaps can be closed if districts attack structural barriers that affect how students are placed in academic courses, including tracking and admission to honors courses. Access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses, in particular, is a ready target. While critics fault AP courses for sacrificing depth for breadth, AP courses are often seen as the most rigorous coursework that high school students have access to, and they offer students an opportunity to gain college credit (Schneider, 2009).

But districts often face resistance from teachers and families when they try to open up AP because of concerns about watering down the content or slowing the pace. However, districts in this article and reports by the College Board (2014) — which administers AP exams — show that increasing access is not correlated with decreasing scores. Districts can address concerns and resistance and make increasing access to AP a productive first step in addressing issues of equity because:

- Changing course requirements is relatively straightforward;
- Results can be measured and communicated clearly; and
- Many parents and members of the public see value in taking AP courses.

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Further, by increasing access to AP courses, district leaders can build a constituency and develop momentum for working on issues of equity that are more complex or challenging of the status quo.

The districts

The districts highlighted in this article are members of the New Jersey Network of Superintendents (NJNS), comprising 15 superintendents who work together to develop systemwide approaches to educational equity. To achieve their shared goal, NJNS superintendents meet monthly and engage in a variety of activities, including analyzing data, observing classrooms, and getting feedback on district strategies.

Jersey City Public Schools is a large urban district with over 80% of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. When the superintendent arrived in 2012, she asked school board members how many students took AP classes. “They really didn’t know,” she explained. “They didn’t get any reports.” She quickly found, however, that the district’s highest-performing high school (one of the top-ranked in the state) had many AP offerings but that students in the other high schools had few, if any, AP opportunities. In response, she charged one of her assistant superintendents with going “full steam ahead” in adding AP courses to all high schools.

Elizabeth Public Schools is another large urban district with over 80% of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch and almost 15% enrolled in bilingual education, with students speaking over 44 languages. Like Jersey City, Elizabeth has a test-in high school that ranks high on state and national lists and offers a range of AP courses. The superintendent found that her predecessor, like the superintendent of Jersey City, “wanted to make sure it didn’t matter which high school you chose to go to, that you would have access to AP courses.” The Elizabeth superintendent continued her predecessor’s commitment. One step she took, for example, was to assign a strong principal to a school that had few students enrolled in a small number of AP offerings, with the expectation that the principal increase the number of courses offered and the number of students enrolled. “I don’t care who [the students] are, if they want to get in [to AP], they’re getting in. And the teachers [say], ‘You can’t do it.’ That’s their attitude. That’s my job to change that [attitude],” the principal said.

West Windsor-Plainsboro School District is a large suburban district with a wealthy population,

This initiative helped lay the foundation for other equity-focused reforms

including many people who work in the nearby science research corridor. The district is experiencing shifting demographics as more Asian-American families move in and more white families move out, and access to programs such as AP are in high demand. However, the district found that black and Latino families were not advocating to enroll their children in AP courses, and teachers were not recommending these students for AP courses, even if they met the prerequisites. As a result of a legal decision, the district was required to revise its AP enrollment criteria and did so in a way intended to encourage the participation of students whose teachers were less likely to recommend them. One administrator said that “part of the notion was that teachers were holding students back in terms of their recommendations. . . . And what we saw in the transition is that it’s opened access wider.”

Superintendents in these districts have shown that increasing access to AP classes has not decreased the average AP score.

Freehold Regional High School District is a large district covering over 200 square miles. It is a high school-only district, which receives students from eight K-8 districts, each with its own curriculum, demographics, and socioeconomic characteristics. When the superintendent entered the district, he analyzed data around participation in advanced courses and lower-level courses and developed several initiatives to increase rigor by eliminating lower-level courses and removing barriers to higher-level courses. These were meant to address disparities in enrollment related to the sending K-8 districts as well as students’ race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and special education status. Before this, an administrator said, “we had roadblocks everywhere. For AP, we literally did not allow people to waive in. . . . it didn’t matter what you did. It didn’t matter who you talked to . . . that was it.”

In the two districts with more students living in poverty and more students of color, increasing districtwide access was a priority, with leaders engaging in a “full-court press . . . to support teachers who are teaching children who were historically not prepared for Advanced Placement” and increase the number of AP courses offered in all district high schools. In the two wealthier districts, AP initiatives have focused on students who had traditionally not taken AP courses — identifying these students and placing them in existing AP courses. In one of these districts, for example, central office administrators “talked a lot about access into upper-level classes . . . We have

also talked about some of the different data points by ethnicity — so, why are some kids getting in and others are not, when they have similar scores [on benchmark exams].”

These districts embraced a variety of strategies as they tried to equitably increase access to AP courses, boost enrollment in AP courses, and maintain or raise AP scores. In spite of the socioeconomic differences among the districts, they shared a number of similarities in terms of initiative effect (see Figure 1).

Strategies that increased access

Districts pursued three kinds of strategies to increase access:

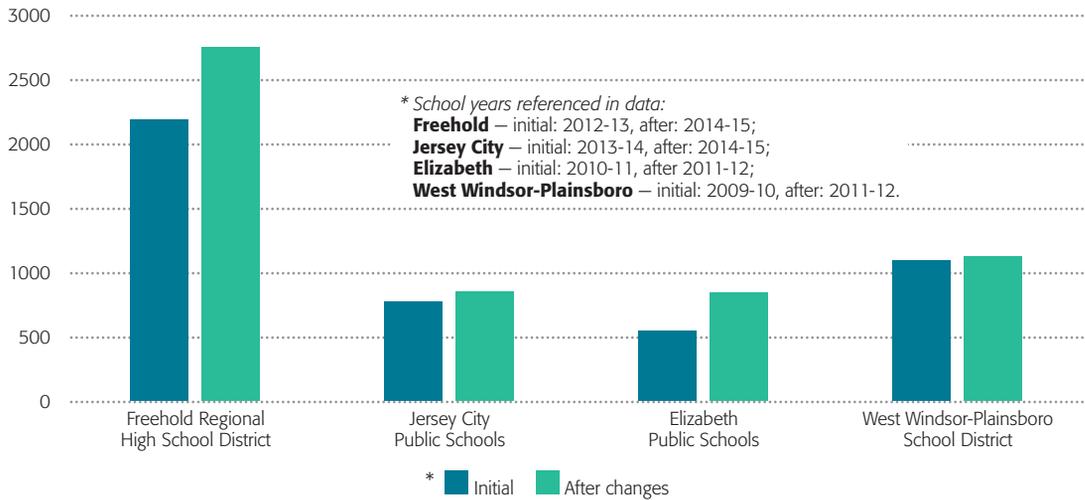
- Structural changes in offerings;
- Policy changes in requirements and reporting; and
- Educational or professional development strategies to increase the quality of teaching and/or advising (see Table 1).

One district began by opening more sections of AP courses and ensuring that all high schools offered a similar selection of AP courses. This change coincided with a districtwide high school redesign that included expectations that all high schools increase the number of AP courses they offered. Another district developed an AP preparation program over the summer for students who had never taken an AP course. This structural change — adding a new program — had the unintended welcome consequence of raising expectations of teachers who taught in the summer program about first-time AP students’ capacity. A third structural change involved making an AP course the standard course for a given subject or eliminating the honors level. For example, in one school, all juniors take AP Language and Literature as their required language arts sequence. Finally, one district initiated a more literal structural change, building a new science lab so the district could offer more sections of AP science courses that required a lab element.

Districts also changed policy. Several districts adopted a key policy change around how students were recommended for AP courses. All districts found that entrance criteria, particularly teacher recommendations, excluded students who could succeed. Districts addressed this challenge differently. For example, one district had a policy that only the previous year’s subject-matter teacher could recommend a student for an AP class unless a parent overrode that decision. District administrators were concerned that teachers didn’t always recommend black students, students with IEPs, and students who were perceived as average, even if they had high grades. The district revised the recommendation policy to include a number of metrics and a notice to parents that

FIGURE 1.

Increases in number of students taking at least one AP course



Increases in number of AP exams administered

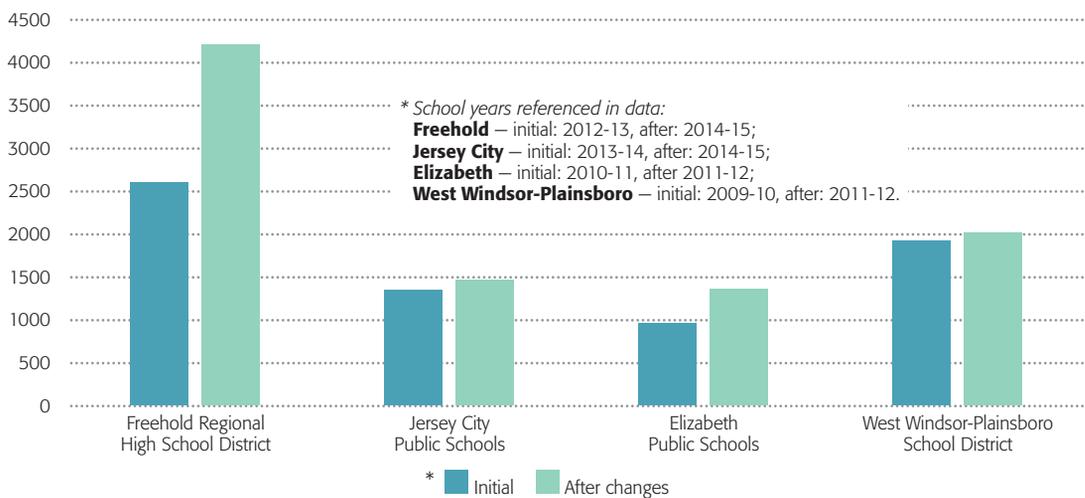


TABLE 1.

Strategies for increasing access

Structural changes

- Open more sections and offer more courses.
- Develop an AP preparation program for first-time AP students.
- Make an AP course the standard course (or eliminate the honors level).
- Build more science labs.

Educational strategies

- Send teachers and administrators to College Board workshops.
- Tell parents it's better for students to take AP courses, even if they get a lower grade.
- Train guidance counselors on identifying and encouraging students to take AP courses.

Policy changes

- Require students to take the AP exam to have AP listed on transcripts.
- Loosen or eliminate enrollment criteria.

Snapshot of district demographics

Jersey City Public Schools

High school enrollment.....	6,200
Number of high schools.....	8
Hispanic:	38%
Black:	32%
White:	11%
Asian:	18%
Free/reduced-price lunch	80%

Elizabeth Public Schools

High school enrollment.....	5,210
Number of high schools.....	6
Hispanic:	65%
Black:	24%
White:	9%
Asian:	2%
Free/reduced-price lunch	81%

West Windsor-Plainsboro School District

High school enrollment.....	3,100
Number of high schools.....	2
Hispanic:.....	5%
Black:	6%
White:	40%
Asian:.....	49%
Free/reduced-price lunch.....	3%

Freehold Regional High School District

High school enrollment.....	11,700
Number of high schools.....	6
Hispanic:.....	6%
Black:	4%
White:	82%
Asian:.....	7%
Free/reduced-price lunch.....	6%

their child was eligible for an AP class based on these metrics. Another district waived all requirements for AP courses, encouraging guidance counselors to encourage promising students to take an AP course.

Three of the districts also helped educators and community members better understand AP courses. Two districts, for example, sent several educators to various College Board workshops. These included training for AP teachers as well as workshops geared for administrators around equity and access. Another district analyzed students' strength of schedule alongside their college acceptances to prove to parents that a lower grade in an AP course (versus a higher grade in a less rigorous course) correlated to admissions to more selective colleges.

While each district responded with different changes, across districts, the numbers of students taking AP districts increased substantially. Importantly, despite fears such as the watering down of courses, increasing the number of students taking AP exams did not significantly decrease average student scores.

Moving forward

While the district contexts are diverse, they all face challenges to increasing all student access to rigorous intellectual engagement, both in terms of schooling structures and cultural beliefs and expectations, and they have pursued AP coursework as part of their overall strategies. With the support of the network and their central office staffs, superintendents in these districts have shown that increasing

access to AP classes has not decreased the average AP score. On the contrary, increased access has led to more students taking more AP courses across district high schools, with scores remaining relatively flat, whether in urban or suburban, wealthy or poor districts. Other superintendents can use this kind of evidence to combat the predictable resistance they may face when they embark on similar initiatives.

Furthermore, increasing AP access was a relatively straightforward initiative in all of the districts — all four districts were able to implement changes in a relatively short period of time, with relatively limited resistance, and they all had quantifiable results that were easy to understand. As a result, this initiative helped lay the foundation for other equity-focused reforms. One district, for example, is building off its AP successes by beginning to eliminate lower-level tracks in math and science. The superintendent said changes in AP access have created “a positive story” that makes teachers more open to other reforms. “Teachers aren’t threatened; they’re seeing that these kids are succeeding, that the data bears out that they’re succeeding,” he said.

While these districts increased access to AP classes in relatively short time periods, all of the districts reported some resistance from parents and teachers. In some cases, the resistance came from those who were concerned about maintaining privileged educational opportunities for wealthy, high-performing white and Asian-American students. The superintendents shared how being part of a

network of superintendents focused on equity supported them in making a change in the face of such resistance. One described the network as “a place where you can feel that there are other people out there with a similar mindset trying to do the same sort of work running in to the same sorts of barriers . . . For me, what’s really beneficial from the network is seeing how others approach those issues and which ways they’re going and what they chose to do or not to do and then sort of layering that in with my own work and building from there.”

Nonetheless, several challenges persist. In particular, though all of these districts reported success in increasing access without significantly affecting average scores, they all experienced a similar challenge: how to ensure access was equitable. This requires that districts disaggregate AP data, in terms of access and performance. Black and Latino students, students in poverty, and students receiving special education services in particular are underrepresented in AP courses, and even though several of the districts specifically sought to increase their representation, these strategies did little to increase their presence and did not emphasize disaggregating data. In fact, some districts reported that their initiatives, such as the summer program, had the unintended consequence of encouraging first-time Asian-American and white students, instead of enrolling students from the district’s Latino population. In another district, the percentage of black students enrolling in AP courses actually decreased as the district’s overall enrollment in AP courses increased. For these districts, next steps include developing strategies that take into account and address the disparities by various racial and ethnic groups, and aligning structural, policy, and pedagogical changes with an equity focus.

All four districts continue to address the process for placing students in AP classes and the critical role that educators play in this process. Teachers and guidance counselors often expressed concerns that black, Latino, poor students were unprepared and that enrolling them in advanced courses would lead to failure. This “protection from failure” actually worked to deny students opportunities for rigorous educational experiences. Districts began to eliminate subjective elements that kept students out of honors through changing enrollment criteria and not requiring a teacher recommendation. This led to more students having the opportunity to enroll — however, this did not affect the work of guidance counselors who could encourage or discourage individual students from enrolling in various courses. Thus, districts need to continually work on raising everyone’s expectations about all students and to address problematic beliefs that hold students back.

Ultimately, while central office administrators be-

lieved in students’ capabilities as well as the ability of teachers to teach all students, they had difficulty getting buy-in across their schools. Thus, their experiences demonstrate the importance of working with parents, teachers, and guidance counselors to address problematic assumptions that reinforce low expectations for black and Latino students, students living in poverty, English language learners, and students receiving special education services. Districts need to build a culture of access and support, from the school board down to the students, communicating the belief that all students are capable of achieving at high levels.

An equity-based framework positions districts to embark on these types of initiatives from the outset, so they’re aware of and act on structural and cultural issues. In regard to increasing access, this type of framework entails eliminating lower-level classes, reviewing placement criteria, and raising expectations for all students. As such, this framework positions districts to increase access in ways that do not simultaneously increase inequities in student performance — a potentially unintended consequence that some of these districts are working to address. If these districts were to apply an equity-based framework, they would eliminate barriers to access while simultaneously disaggregating and analyzing data around access and performance for all student groups, while also developing specific supports to enable marginalized students to be successful in advanced coursework. While these districts addressed access before addressing performance, addressing access in this manner may be insufficient. As the leader of the network argued, “The main goal is not getting in the ‘seat’ but being supported to achieve success once you are there. Access and success need to be worked on simultaneously.”

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