



SYSTEMS FOR SUCCESS: THINKING BEYOND ACCESS TO AP





In order to foster not just access but success, school leaders have to move beyond simply offering opportunities to creating the supports that will help students thrive both in AP courses and in the courses that lead up to them.



By Ashley Griffin and Davis Dixon

In 2008, administrators at a high-poverty school district in a predominantly Latino suburb in the Midwest decided to toss the enrollment requirements for Advanced Placement courses: Students no longer needed teacher recommendations, high GPAs, or even course prerequisites; all they had to do to enroll in an AP course was select which course they wanted to take. Administrators wanted to expand access to rigorous and college-level coursework and see more students — of all academic types, race/ethnicities, and income backgrounds — in more AP courses. So, they did the most obvious thing: Remove the barriers to enrollment. And it worked.

Since then, one of the high schools in the district has seen the number of students enrolled in AP courses more than quadruple, with students taking five times as many exams in 2016 as they did in 2008. The state recognized the district, and it was ranked in the top 10 percent of schools nationwide for AP enrollment. But just removing barriers wasn't enough to ensure success: While hundreds more students had gained access to AP coursework, less than one-third of those taking AP exams at the district's exemplary high school passed.

These district and school leaders are like many around the country responding to calls to expand access to AP courses, especially for students of color and those from low-income backgrounds.¹ In the 10 years between 2003 and 2013, the total number of AP examinees almost doubled from nearly 515,000 to a little over 1 million. The number of low-income students taking exams increased by almost five times in that same time span (58,489 to 275,864).² Additionally, the percentage of exams taken by Black and Latino students has increased over the years. Among 2013 graduates, 9.2 percent of AP exam-takers were Black, up from 6 percent among those in the class of 2004. Similarly, the percentage of Latino students among AP examinees increased from 13.1 percent in 2004 to 18.8 percent in 2013.³

But, as leaders promote access, they cannot ignore their responsibility to help students succeed. Students who pass exams, earning a 3 or higher, not only can receive college credit, but also are more likely to succeed in college than their peers.⁴ So while it is promising to watch overall AP

enrollment soar, gaps in success rates remain way too large. In 2013, 57 percent of all exams had scores of 3 and above.⁵ But, these numbers were much lower for exams taken by Black and Latino students, who passed 30 percent and 42 percent of exams, respectively.

In order to foster not just access but success, school leaders have to move beyond simply offering opportunities to creating the supports that will help students thrive both in AP courses and in the courses that lead up to them. This often means preparing students early on in their academic careers and setting high expectations for rigorous coursework before students even get to high school. Decisions to expand access, therefore, must be paired with deliberate and systematic support for students as well as for teachers.

To learn more about the deliberate practices and systems that successful schools employ to increase both access and success, we identified schools serving large concentrations of low-income students and students of color (Black and Latino students) that had both high AP access, defined as 35 percent of students taking at least one AP exam (which puts them in the top 15 percent nationally), and high AP success, defined as a 66 percent exam pass rate for students of color and/or low-income students. *(For more on school selection and site visits, see "What Did We Do?" sidebar.)*

In this brief, we tell the stories of two such schools — Alhambra High School, located in a suburb outside of Los Angeles, and YES Prep Southwest in Houston. From these examples of high-performing, high-poverty schools, we learned that the more systematic and purposeful a school is about promoting access, the more likely it is to achieve high levels of success. We also learned that successful schools don't just stop at the idea of increasing access, but put in place systems to identify, encourage, and support students. When open access is paired with a strong teaching staff that is trained and supported, a master schedule that promotes AP enrollment for everyone, a school culture that roots for all students to succeed, and extra tutorials and interventions for students who need help, access becomes much more than just an opportunity; it becomes a pathway to success.

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WHAT DID WE DO?



TO DETERMINE WHICH SCHOOLS TO VISIT, we merged (2014) College Board data on all AP test-takers with the Common Core of Data (CCD) from the same year. We used the College Board data to explore schools' AP access (test-taking) and AP success (exam pass rates), and we used the CCD to identify school-level student characteristics, such as race/ethnicity, free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) status, etc.

Using a cluster analysis, a statistical analysis that groups a set of similar schools in the same group, we created four school clusters defined by the school size, percentage of students of color and low-income students, and locale.

We then identified schools in each cluster from which we could learn. Alhambra and YES Prep Southwest were both in our cluster of "high-need schools." Schools with both high AP access and high AP exam pass rates, we called "high AP performers." To determine access rates, we divided the number of students who took at least one AP exam by the number of students enrolled in the school. To determine success, we divided the number of students who passed a test with a 3 or better by the number of students who took at least one AP exam. To disaggregate our success rates, we took the same approach for each race (e.g., the population of Black students with a 3 or

better divided by the population of Black students who took at least one AP exam).*

To be considered a high performer, the access rate must have been in the top 15 percent nationally — meaning at least 35 percent of students in the school take at least one AP exam and the pass rate must have been at least 66 percent for students of color (Black and Latino students) and/or low-income students. To validate our choices, we also examined school graduation rates, postsecondary enrollment rates, and state standardized test data.

To conduct our case studies at each school, we interviewed principals and AP coordinators and observed both AP classes and non-AP classes, all of which provided insight into the rigor of courses at all levels and the extent of vertical alignment (what students learn in one course or grade level that prepares them for the next) within each school. We also organized separate focus groups with AP students of color and AP teachers. Broadly, we asked participants in interviews and focus groups to talk with us about their school's:

- Vision for AP access,
- Procedures for enrolling students in AP courses,
- Definitions of student success, and
- Systems for supporting student success.

**We did not have available data to disaggregate access rates.*

Alhambra High School

SYSTEMATICALLY CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT FOSTERS SUCCESS

LOCATION: ALHAMBRA, CALIFORNIA

2014 AP
ACCESS RATE:

35%

2014 AP
SUCCESS RATE:

68%

SCHOOL SIZE: 2,512 STUDENTS

DEMOGRAPHICS: 1 PERCENT BLACK, 51 PERCENT LATINO, 72 PERCENT LOW-INCOME

WHEN DUANE RUSSELL JOINED ALHAMBRA HIGH SCHOOL AS ITS

principal in 2013, although districtwide AP open enrollment had started a few years earlier, a lot of outdated processes and assumptions about AP still existed: that some students are “AP material” and others aren’t, and that a fixed set of criteria should determine who gets access to AP courses and who doesn’t. As a result, if students wanted to take an AP course, they had to get a signature from their current teacher in the corresponding subject area and sometimes get one from an academic counselor too. Teachers and counselors used students’ academic histories to determine if they should participate in the courses — a practice that historically left out a huge portion of Latino students, who make up half of the student body. “We had a lot of traditions that we’ve really had to break down,” Russell said, including the elimination of summer assignments that served as a requirement for AP enrollment even

though students had to complete them without any feedback or guidance from staff.

Now, in the place of those traditions is a school culture that promotes successful AP experiences for both students and teachers. The only barrier to enrollment in AP courses is a student’s own desire. As a result, Alhambra’s AP access rate — the percentage of students taking at least one AP exam — is currently 35 percent, which is 10 percentage points greater than the national average. And its success rate — the percentage of test-takers who pass an exam — is 68 percent, which is 1.2 times the national average.

One of the first things that Russell had to confront when he arrived was expectations. Prior to the district’s move to open enrollment, teachers were accustomed to being told students were capable of AP based on grades and recommendations. With open enrollment, they had to believe all

students were capable of completing and excelling in AP coursework. Some teachers expressed concerns about having to simplify their teaching or slow down the pace of instruction in order to accommodate a wider variety of skill levels. To change that mindset, Russell, along with Rosa Northcott (assistant principal of instruction), started facilitating conversations — rooted in student achievement data — about the value of high expectations. “We tell teachers the expectation in the school district is it’s on you,” Russell said. “What are you doing to ensure that kid is going to be successful in your class?”

Five days before the start of the school year, Russell and Northcott convene department chairs to lay out all of the school’s achievement data (course performance, standardized test scores, AP potential performance or scores on PSAT and SAT) from the previous year in front of them to have frank and honest conversations about areas of success and improvement for the

coming year.⁶ By focusing on the data, Russell moves his teachers away from relying on the types of excuses that he's heard for 30 years: that students' potential is determined by where they come from, what kind of challenges they may face in their home life, and what level of education their parents have. "It's the same stuff I heard in the '80s ... and we're just not going to accept it," he said.

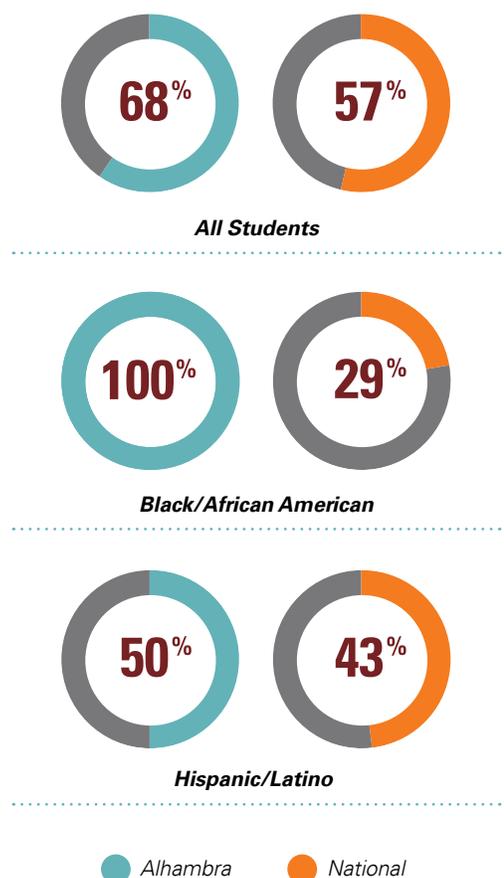
Part of what helps teachers change their perspectives, Northcott said, is having the resources and tools to differentiate their instruction, as needed. Russell, therefore, has set up a systematic way to ensure teachers gradually gain the knowledge and experience to lead AP courses. "AP is rigorous for the teachers, just like it is for the kids," he said. So, he wants teachers to feel confident about the material.

First, all AP teachers get AP training. Some go to the AP Summer Institute provided by College Board, which helps teachers understand the demands of AP courses and prepares them to teach AP students. Then, new AP teachers may have the opportunity to teach one section of an AP class while a veteran teaches the other three sections. The veteran teacher acts a mentor for the new teacher who learns by observing, collaborating, and receiving feedback in real time. Over time, the new teacher takes on more responsibility, until they are teaching multiple sections independently. Russell and Northcott are also known for teaching a sample lesson or two to illustrate the kinds of rigor and instruction they expect. Alhambra's leaders also create other opportunities for teacher collaboration, which Russell sees as a key piece for replicating good ideas and maximizing impact. Once every other week, students are dismissed early and teachers have training opportunities and/or department meetings. And whenever needed, Russell and Northcott send new or struggling teachers to observe veteran teachers in other schools to learn new techniques or approaches.

Once the staff was focused on fostering AP capacity in all students, Russell and Northcott set to work on creating the systems in the school to support that focus. Chief among them was creating a comprehensive

AP PASS RATES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

The percent of students enrolled in AP who took the AP exam and passed it with a 3 or higher



master schedule to manage the availability of courses, tutoring, and other activities. All other systems derive from the commitment to a strong master schedule, Russell said, pointing to a large printout on the wall in what is affectionately called the "war room." Alhambra's leaders named it that because of the tough negotiations — for courses, for students, for opportunities — that take place there.

Using the master schedule, school leaders try to fulfill all student course requests, but it's a tough balance to strike: ensuring that enough teachers are available and trained and also that enough students show interest. The district requires that classes are as close to 36 students as possible.

The process of creating the master schedule begins in the early days of second semester (February) and continues through the summer. Northcott, with the help of the counseling staff, “painstakingly” reviews course assignments for every single student and tries to accommodate all of their course requests. And for more than 90 percent of students, they are successful. Even for the students who don’t receive every class they request, the administrators make sure to give them a class that is at least in the same course family. All students at Alhambra can be assured that if they request it, they will get at least one AP course. Once the schedule is finalized, administrators review the student makeup of each course, especially AP courses, to be sure it reflects the makeup of the school. If the course doesn’t, they set out to figure out why and ensure that it will in the future. One teacher recalled, “Three years ago, I had one or two [Latino students]. Now, I have about half [Latino students in one AP class].”

With a triple-checked master schedule in place, it becomes easier to offer other activities, like tutoring, at times that will not force students to sacrifice support in one area for another. For example, leaders know to schedule tutorials around the writing center on Wednesdays, which is provided on school grounds by California State University–Los Angeles. They can also more easily see when teachers’ schedules might conflict, which is particularly helpful when scheduling their one-hour after-school AP tutorials, another support system. (Some teachers also offer extra help on Saturday mornings, for up to three hours.)

Everywhere you look, Alhambra is steeped in systematic processes for improvement — from expanding access and supporting students to training and developing teachers to creating schedules that promote opportunities. Students, too, help keep enrollment up by talking up the AP program at recruitment fairs each year before registration. “It’s really kind of cool because they walk in the gym and it’s kids, not teachers, selling the program,” Russell said. Students tell their peers about the types of assignments and work they are doing in AP courses — and the benefit of enrolling and ultimately taking the exam: to get college credit without paying for college tuition. Almost three-quarters of Alhambra students receive free and reduced-price lunch, a proxy for low family income, so these cost savings can be especially beneficial.



“We tell teachers the expectation in the school district is it’s on you, What are you doing to ensure that kid is going to be successful in your class?”

– Duane Russell, Principal



WHAT CAN SCHOOL LEADERS LEARN FROM ALHAMBRA?



Eliminate barriers for students, but back it up with support.

To expand access to more students, schools leaders must be honest about where their barriers exist and what they mean for their most vulnerable students. They should seek to eliminate them, but under conditions that encourage and support students on their AP trajectories.

Systematically support teachers.



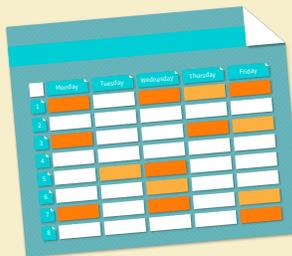
Alhambra's practice of sending AP teachers to an off-site training and then exposing them to AP instruction gradually and with real-time support is a strategy that builds a cadre of teachers who are confident and effective in the classroom.

Employ data to drive change.



Teachers often have lower expectations and perceptions of students not seen as "AP material." Use student data (grades, AP potential, standardized tests) to change mindsets and show teachers their students' capacities to achieve in these rigorous courses.

Optimize the master schedule.



School leaders should ensure there are enough trained teachers to accommodate the number of students requesting courses, and they should organize courses so they don't overlap — thus providing students the opportunity to enroll in courses that match their interests and take advantage of support that is offered outside the classroom.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR ALHAMBRA?

Despite their success, Alhambra's leaders aren't fully satisfied. Though they are focused on maintaining the systems they have in place, they are also thinking through new ways to get more students on track for rigorous coursework. One idea is to develop summer bridge programs to enhance the pipeline from regular courses to honors courses. The bridge program would also create an early

opportunity for the staff at Alhambra to build relationships with students, to get to know where they are academically, and establish the expectation of AP participation. Even though the school has open enrollment, administrators emphasize that students still have to have the desire to take AP courses. The bridge program would serve to further build that interest among students.



To expand access to more students, school leaders must be honest about where their barriers exist.

YES Prep Southwest

SYSTEMATICALLY BUILDING A TEACHING STAFF TRAINED TO EXCEL FOR AP STUDENTS

LOCATION: HOUSTON, TEXAS

2014 AP
ACCESS RATE:

40%

2014 AP
SUCCESS RATE:

68%

SCHOOL SIZE: 926 STUDENTS

DEMOGRAPHICS: 10 PERCENT BLACK, 89.5 PERCENT LATINO, 87 PERCENT LOW-INCOME

SEVEN YEARS AGO, THE AVERAGE TEACHER AT YES PREP

SOUTHWEST was in their first two years in the profession. “Most teachers came in and left after a year,” Jennifer Baugher, director of academics, said, and that created a lot of instability. A teaching staff that is mostly upended year after year usually isn’t a teaching staff that collaborates well or builds structures or continuity for students; There simply isn’t enough time to develop that type of rapport in the nine months of a school year. The instability also made AP course planning difficult: Without time to grow teachers into the demands needed for AP instruction — and without the ability to forecast which teachers might be around to offer AP courses — school leaders stuck to the basic offerings: AP English language, which is a requirement for graduation, and AP calculus and AP English literature. “You just don’t let teachers teach AP ... until they’ve been teaching for at least a couple of years,” Baugher said, “and only if they’ve been pretty successful in the regular courses that they were teaching.”

To discontinue this cycle of teacher turnover, Baugher set her sights on “hiring smart.” She began by recruiting teachers who had degrees in their fields and expressed a desire to stay at Southwest for at least three years. For teachers at the beginning of their careers, she looked for potential to teach AP in the future. Now, Southwest’s staff boasts 20 teachers (38 percent of the staff) who have been teaching for at least three years. And this strong teaching staff — one that is committed to student success — is making all the difference. Based on data provided by the school, since 2012, the percentage of students passing AP exams has increased from 44 percent to 68 percent in 2015.

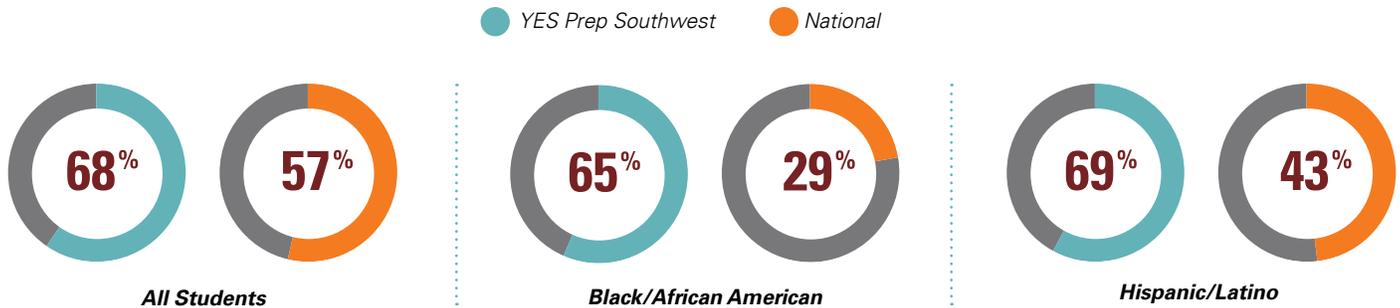
Because so much of this success depends on the teacher — from creating an environment with high expectations to delivering course material in ways that engage students — Southwest has created systematic ways to ensure teachers are getting the support they need. To start, all AP teachers and aspiring AP teachers have

an opportunity to attend College Board’s AP Summer Institute, which helps teachers understand the demands of AP courses and prepares them to teach AP students. Veteran AP teachers also serve as mentors to new AP teachers. For example, an AP calculus mentor teacher and a new mentee teacher might co-teach Calculus AB and Calculus BC courses. This gives newer teachers a resource for immediate feedback and guidance as they develop their AP teaching skills. When asked, one of the teachers involved in the co-teaching experience said, “I’m really lucky to have a co-teaching dynamic with someone who has taught the course for multiple years. So, it would be ideal for everyone [to have that opportunity].”

Southwest also benefits from collaboration with other schools. It is one of 16 schools in the YES Prep charter management organization, which provides one curriculum for all schools within the CMO. So teachers in the same subject area — for example, AP calculus — from different

AP PASS RATES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

The percent of students enrolled in AP who took the AP exam and passed it with a 3 or higher



schools come together every six weeks to share resources or plan assignments. This extra support is instrumental in addressing content-specific needs, something that is harder to solicit from grade-level colleagues, and it can help distribute the burden of creating new assignments or exams. It also ensures that new teachers don't feel helpless and that all teachers are grading assignments and exams to the same standards and levels of rigor.

This sort of scaffolding — gradually giving teachers more responsibility and autonomy, while also setting up supports along the way — has led to a schoolwide environment that values AP for all students. Because every student must take the AP English Language course to graduate, teachers are thinking about AP long before students do. "When you take AP, you're going to need to know this," Baugher often hears teachers say, which puts in place a mentality that all students are suited for AP.

Teachers back up their beliefs with action, in the form of after-school and weekend tutorials focused on AP content and exam prep. "I think [the tutorials are] especially useful in this school because in wealthier schools, like my high school, students who struggled would hire a tutor," one teacher said. "That's not really an option for these students. So the outside help they need to get is either through friends or staying for tutorials. Tutorials are the best way for them to get help outside of class." Teachers also allow students to re-take classroom exams or re-do assignments; the extra practice, they say, gives students more exposure to the material and the type of critical thinking that AP exams require. "Once you're in an AP class here, the goal is to pass the test and not just take the class," Baugher said. Over the summer, teachers

organize academic boot camps in calculus and reading analysis that mostly aim to keep students engaged and to help curb any potential learning loss between grades.

Because YES Prep schools serve students in grades six through 12, district leaders take advantage of the fact that they can create a curriculum structure and pace that is intended to prepare students for AP coursework over six years. They align the curriculum, beginning in the sixth grade, by progressively incorporating more rigor and demanding more critical thinking skills that students will be required to handle in AP later in their academic careers. YES Prep also administers common assessments (aligned to AP) to all students across all schools twice per year, which provides important information to teachers about students' progress. Sixth grade is also the point at which intervention programs (particularly in English since all students are required to take AP English language to graduate) begin — for some, up to three hours per day.

Wherever students are — be it in middle school classes, intervention classes, or tutorial sessions — teachers are there offering support by creating lessons and activities that challenge and prepare students. "My primary job is to provide them an extremely rich educational experience that is equivalent to what they would be getting from a rich, White private school down the road because they are extremely deserving of that experience," a teacher said.

Perhaps it's no surprise then to see Southwest students "wearing" their AP courses as a "badge of honor," proudly and confidently taking AP-level coursework, because it is "what they do" and because they know their teachers have given them the tools they need to succeed.

WHAT CAN SCHOOL LEADERS LEARN FROM YES PREP SOUTHWEST?



Hire committed, subject-matter experts, and then help them develop their craft.

School leaders should aim to hire teachers who have degrees in their subject matter content areas and demonstrate a commitment to stay for an extended period of time. Research shows that teachers who display a higher level of content knowledge in their teaching improve the learning outcomes of their students.⁷ Then, school leaders should groom these subject matter experts to teach AP courses by providing opportunities to attend AP training sessions and to collaborate with AP colleagues across the school and district.

Build a curriculum that ushers students toward AP.

Preparation for AP begins long before junior or senior year. Courses should be aligned and paced in such a way that students have an opportunity to develop the independent problem-solving and critical-thinking skills needed to succeed in AP. An effective curriculum also accounts for students who come in behind academically by building interventions that bring students up to speed, while also preparing them to be successful in AP.

Create the expectation that all students are suited for AP.

It's no secret that what counts matters the most. By making an AP course a graduation requirement, both students and teachers become fixed on making it happen. Students are more likely to be identified for intervention sooner, supports are established before they're needed, and the question of whether students are "fit" for AP never arises — because all students are.



Systematically support students.

This starts with opening enrollment in AP, but it's continued by providing access to support systems and tutorials that deepen the educational experience and increase their chances of success.



WHAT'S NEXT FOR YES PREP SOUTHWEST?

Jennifer Baugher has a very specific focus for YES Prep Southwest's future. Until 100 percent of her students are college-qualified and ready, she said she will not rest. Of course, a key ingredient is the need to retain strong teachers in the courses that they are teaching. But the biggest challenge now, she said, is to improve the outcomes of the school's English learners. Since every student will have to take the AP English language course, Baugher recognizes that she has to do even more to place EL students in the best possible position to succeed. (According to the most recent accountability report card, 15 percent of the school's students have ELL status.)

Baugher plans to address this challenge in two ways: first, by continuing to implement intervention strategies to catch students up and figure out the best strategies for enhancing their achievement; then, by getting all of her teachers to home in on the importance of reading and vocabulary. The command of the English language has to include vocabulary knowledge from across a number of subjects, she said. That is the only way students will have the context needed to be successful.

"I'm really lucky to have a co-teaching dynamic with someone who has taught the course for multiple years. So, it would be ideal for everyone [to have that opportunity]."

– AP teacher, YES Prep Southwest



ENDNOTES

1. For more information on the success of national efforts to get more students of color and low-income students to enroll in Advanced Placement courses, see Christina Theokas and Reid Saaris, "Finding America's Missing AP and IB students," (Washington, DC: The Education Trust, June 2013).
2. College Board, 10th Annual Report to the Nation, <http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/ap/rtn/10th-annual/10th-annual-ap-report-to-the-nation-single-page.pdf>.
3. College Board, Advanced Placement Report to the Nation, http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/ap/rtn/ap-report-nation_2005.pdf
4. College Board, The Relationship Between AP Exam Performance and College Outcomes, <https://research.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/publications/2012/7/researchreport-2009-4-relationship-between-ap-exam-performance-college-outcomes.pdf>.
5. College Board, AP Data-Archived Data 2013, <https://research.collegeboard.org/programs/ap/data/archived/2013>
6. AP potential is determined by using a tool from the College Board that uses PSAT and SAT scores to determine if a student is likely to pass an AP exam.
7. Philip Sadler, Gerhard Sonnet, Harold Coyle, Nancy Cook-Smith, and Jaimie Miller, "The Influence of Teacher's Knowledge on Student Learning in Middle School Physical Science Classrooms," *American Educational Research Journal* 50 (5) (2013).

ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels – pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people – especially those who are Black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families – to lives on the margins of the American mainstream.

SHATTERING EXPECTATIONS

ABOUT THIS SERIES

In this series, we produce reports focused on shattering the glass ceiling of achievement that has existed for far too long for our low-income students and students of color. In general, papers in this series will focus on strategies for increasing excellence and rigor in our schools, while also attending to equity.



The Education Trust

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