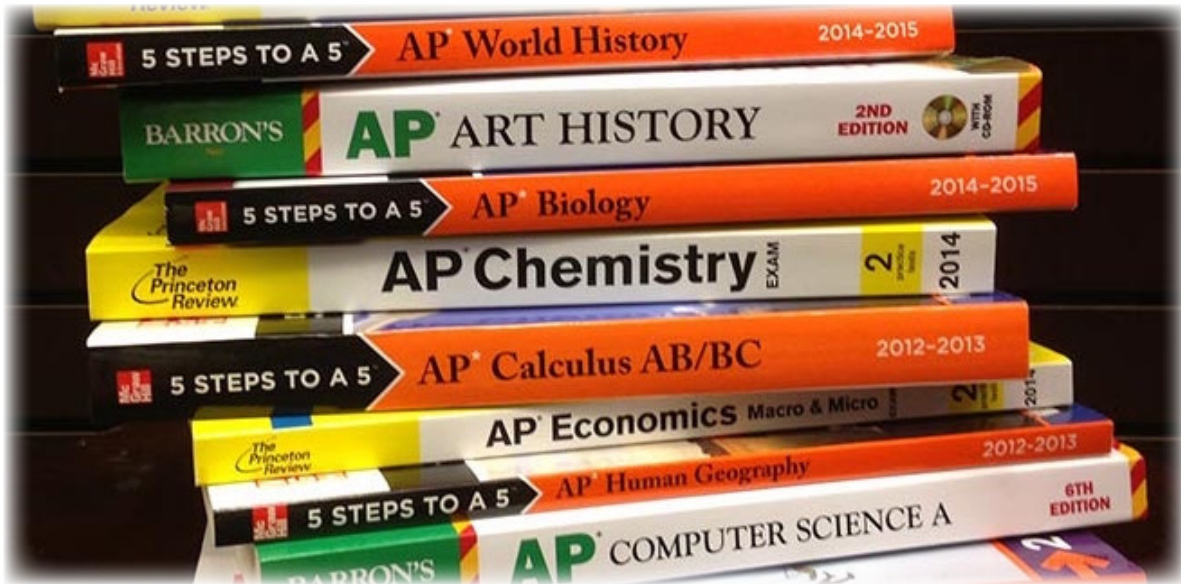


NEPC REVIEW: SYSTEMS FOR SUCCESS: THINKING BEYOND ACCESS TO AP (THE EDUCATION TRUST, JULY 2017)



Reviewed by:

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September 2018

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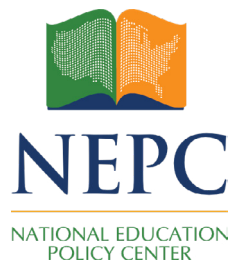
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Executive Summary

Amid burgeoning participation in AP coursework, a recent report by the Education Trust uses a case study of two exemplary high schools to address the question of how schools might support access to and success in AP programs by low-income students and students of color. It contends that a variety of interventions help promote access and success, including teacher support and development, analysis of class composition, careful scheduling, and provision of during- and after-school academic support. The report's qualitative approach is well-suited to describing ways that schools can address the complex and deeply rooted problem of inequitable access to academic opportunity within secondary education. Encouraging underrepresented students to enroll in AP courses and then helping them succeed requires schools to engage in multilevel, holistic interventions that are not easily analyzed or described quantitatively. The report suffers, however, from lack of rigor in its description of methods and analysis. The scant detail on participants and data collection methods and the lack of discussion of how data were analyzed and used in the report weaken links between claims and evidence. The report, which focuses on two schools that enroll primarily Latinx students, would have also benefited from case studies of schools enrolling Black and Native American students—the groups that are most underrepresented in national AP enrollment and success rates.

Overall, while the report provides some inspiring examples, more detailed and rigorous description of methods and analysis would make a stronger case for the highlighted interventions.



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I. Introduction

Longstanding gaps in AP participation rates by race and social class impact the ability of students from these historically educationally underserved groups to gain access to high-level coursework that can both prepare them for college and ease the financial burdens of higher education.¹ As a result of calls to expand access to AP courses over the past decade, the number of AP examinees nearly doubled between 2003 and 2013, from 514,163 to 1,003,430. Along with this general increase, the percentage of Black, Latinx and low-income students in the population of students who took AP exams increased from 9.2% to 27.5% between 2003 and 2013.² However, concerns about access to AP classes and performance on the exams remain.

*Systems for Success: Thinking Beyond Access to AP*³ examines two schools, each with a majority of low-income students and students of color, that provided those students both high access to AP coursework and academic support for their eventual success. The report profiles Alhambra Academy in Alhambra, California and YES Prep Southwest in Houston, Texas. These schools were selected statistically based on two criteria. First, students of color and low-income students had to have high access to AP courses; specifically, the percentage of those populations taking at least one AP course had to rank in the top 15% nationally. And second, at least 66% of those students had to earn an AP passing score (3 or higher). The report presents an analysis, based on interviews, observations, and focus groups, of the factors leading to the schools' success in supporting their underrepresented students, drawing suggestions from each case study for interventions that other school leaders might be able to use in their own settings.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

Alhambra High School, a district public school in Alhambra, California, serves 2,512 students, 1% of whom are Black, 51% Latinx and 72% low-income. In 2014, the school had a 35% AP access rate, outperforming the national average of 25%. That same year, it had a 68% AP success rate, higher than the 57% national AP test success rate. At Alhambra, 100% of Black students who took an AP test passed, as opposed to 29% nationally; 50% of Latinx students passed, higher than the 43% national pass rate. The report does not provide disaggregated numbers of students by group, although the numbers of Black students, particularly at Alhambra High School, are quite small and there are no Native Americans.

The report's authors attribute the school's success to a variety of factors. At Alhambra, students elect AP courses, and the school prioritizes access to them, along with during- and after-school tutoring, in its master schedule. Administrators review demographic composition of the AP population, and they act on that information when AP enrollment does not reflect the makeup of the school.

The school also provides teacher development as a means of improving AP access and success. Teachers participate in discussions about "the value of high expectations," and administrators state their expectations that teachers will hold them for all students. All AP teachers receive AP training, new AP teachers are coached by more experienced AP teachers, and AP teachers have opportunities to collaborate with and observe each other. Department chairs review achievement data from the previous year and discuss areas for improvement.

Students are also directly supported by changes to policy, such as the elimination of summer assignments for AP students, which interviewees say were once a barrier to AP enrollment.

YES Prep Southwest in Houston, Texas is a charter school of 926 students. The student body is 10% Black, 89.5% Latinx, and 87% low income. In 2014, the school had a 40% AP access rate, higher than the national average of 25%. The same year, it had a 68% AP success rate, significantly higher than the 57% national average. At YES Prep, 65% of Black students who took an AP test passed, as opposed to 29% nationally, and 69% of Latinx students passed, higher than the national rate of 43%. As in the Alhambra case, the report does not provide disaggregated numbers of students by group and there were no Native American students.

Also as in the Alhambra High School case, the report attributes YES Prep's success to an interwoven mesh of supports, including shifts in hiring practices, teacher development and support, school-wide high expectations and academic support for students.

At YES Prep, the director of academics spoke of recruiting and hiring teachers with expertise and commitment; supporting those teachers with training at the College Board's AP Summer Institute; mentoring from and co-teaching with experienced AP teachers; and collaboration with other AP teachers in the YES Prep charter school network.

Students are supported with after-school and weekend tutorials. In English, they benefit from the cross-grade alignment arising from the school's mandate that all YES Prep students must pass the AP English Language exam to graduate. Student AP success is also supported

by intervention programs and twice yearly AP-aligned common assessments.

The report describes the importance in both schools of changing student and teacher expectations about who is “fit” for AP coursework and what sort of supports should be provided to students to succeed in these challenging classes and exams.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report’s findings and conclusions about the schools’ successes are based on interviews with school administrators and AP coordinators, focus groups with AP students of color and AP teachers, and observations of AP and non-AP classes.

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

There is very little research referenced in this report. The authors cite five College Board reports on the AP exam, another Education Trust report on national efforts to enroll low-income and students of color in AP and IB, and one research article on teacher knowledge and student learning in middle school physical science classrooms.

No additional empirical or theoretical research is cited to contextualize or support any of the claims made in the report related to school culture, teacher expectations, academic support or teacher development.

V. Review of the Report’s Methods

The report’s methods have both strengths and weaknesses. Using a case study approach to analyze the complex factors leading to the success of these two schools showcases the interwoven nature of these successful efforts. And, it does provide some compelling examples of the multifaceted support necessary for students’ AP success. In addition, the qualitative approach highlights the experiences and opinions of the administrators, teachers and students participating in these efforts, providing readers a window into the intricacies of providing access to and support for underrepresented students in AP.

At the same time, the report lacks detail in its methodology and analysis and it is difficult to tell how successful the schools were with students from groups most underrepresented in AP classes. Overall, the study’s methods are not rigorously or specifically described. For example, there is no information about how many administrators, teachers and students participated in the study, or how many interviews, focus groups and observations took place. There is also no information on the specific aspects of curriculum and instruction that were the focus of classroom observations, or how this observational data was used.

Similarly, there are no details on how the qualitative data set was analyzed and particular themes selected as important; on what analytical process led to claims about specific practices promoting AP access and success; or, on how particular quotes were chosen to include and whether those quotes represent the opinions of multiple participants or one individual.

Finally, because student populations were not fully disaggregated by race and socioeconomic status, the reader cannot discern the extent and distribution of access and success, which nationally is quite unevenly distributed among the groups central to this report. In 2013, although Black students made up 14.5% of the graduating class, they made up only 9.2% of the AP exam taking population, 4.6% successfully. Latinx students, 18.8% of the graduating student population, were evenly represented, at 18.8% of AP examinees.⁴

But at Alhambra High School, we know only that 100% of Black students taking an AP exam passed. Because the school's Black student population is only 1% and the racial breakdown of Alhambra students taking the AP is not provided, it is possible that only a very small number of Black Alhambra students, a group that nationally is far more proportionally underrepresented in AP access and success than Latinx students, took AP exams. The same methodological critique applies to YELL Prep as well. The numbers or proportions of students taking the exam by racial and socioeconomic group is not included, and therefore the picture of access and success for students from different demographic groups is incomplete and indeterminate.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

These case studies do provide inspiring examples of schools successfully providing underrepresented students access to and success in AP courses and exams.

However, absent a more rigorous description of methodological and analytical approaches, the findings and conclusions of the report serve more as suggestions to consider than as vigorously substantiated claims for schools seeking to improve AP access and success for underrepresented students.

Because it focuses on schools with majority Latinx student populations (Alhambra at 51%, YES Prep at 89.5%), a group with more AP success nationwide than Black and Native American students, the report does not contribute specifically to our understanding of how to best support students from the most underrepresented groups.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

In conclusion, these reports contribute readable and nicely described examples of schools that are doing well in offering a supportive and accessible AP experience to low-income stu-

dents and students of color. In highlighting the multi-level, interwoven nature of providing AP experiences and supporting AP achievement for students from underrepresented groups, the report provides a helpful lens for policymakers and practitioners, facilitating their development of school-specific and multifaceted approaches to this complex issue.

However, by not including discussion of such related topics as research on learning, the impact of AP coursework on the secondary school experience, or the influence of larger, inequitable social structures that give rise to AP disparities, the report misses an opportunity to address key educational justice issues. Understanding these issues at a deeper level could contribute to policy and practice that more effectively address the intractable issue of educational inequality.

Notes and References

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