FACTSheet

REL MID-ATLANTIC Regional Educational Laboratory at Mathematica

Serving the education community in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania

Expanding Access to Advanced Placement Courses

In the most recent AP Report to the Nation, the College Board reported that the number of students taking Advanced Placement (AP) exams increased 95 percent in the past 10 years. In addition, the number of students from families with low incomes taking exams nearly quadrupled.[1] These increases reflect efforts by the College Board, the federal government, states, districts, and foundations to increase access to AP courses, particularly for historically disadvantaged groups of students. This fact sheet looks at strategies that schools and districts use to expand students' access to AP courses and exams as well as the results of a new study on policies to promote AP participation in the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS).[2]

HOW TO EXPAND ACCESS?

Strategies used to expand access to AP courses and exams include the following:

- Open enrollment: Allow any student to enroll, regardless of prior test scores or grades.
- Personal recruiting: Teachers, counselors, and administrators talk to students and parents about the benefits of AP and encourage them to enroll.[3]
- Incentives for teachers: Expand the number of teachers who want to teach AP by providing subsidies or bonuses.[4]
- Incentives for students: Subsidize exam fees through initiatives such as the national Advanced Placement Test Fee program.[5] Provide cash bonuses for students who achieve certain scores. Waive the course's final exam for students who take the AP exam.[6]
- Requirements for schools: States or districts mandate AP course offerings.
- Requirements for students: Require students to take certain AP courses or a course of their choice.
- College readiness programming: Implement a college readiness program that encourages AP participation. For example, evidence suggests that the National Math + Science Initiative's College Readiness Program, which includes open enrollment for AP courses, cash incentives for students, and teacher and student supports, can increase AP exam passing rates.[7]

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN DCPS SCHOOLS MANDATED AP COURSE TAKING?

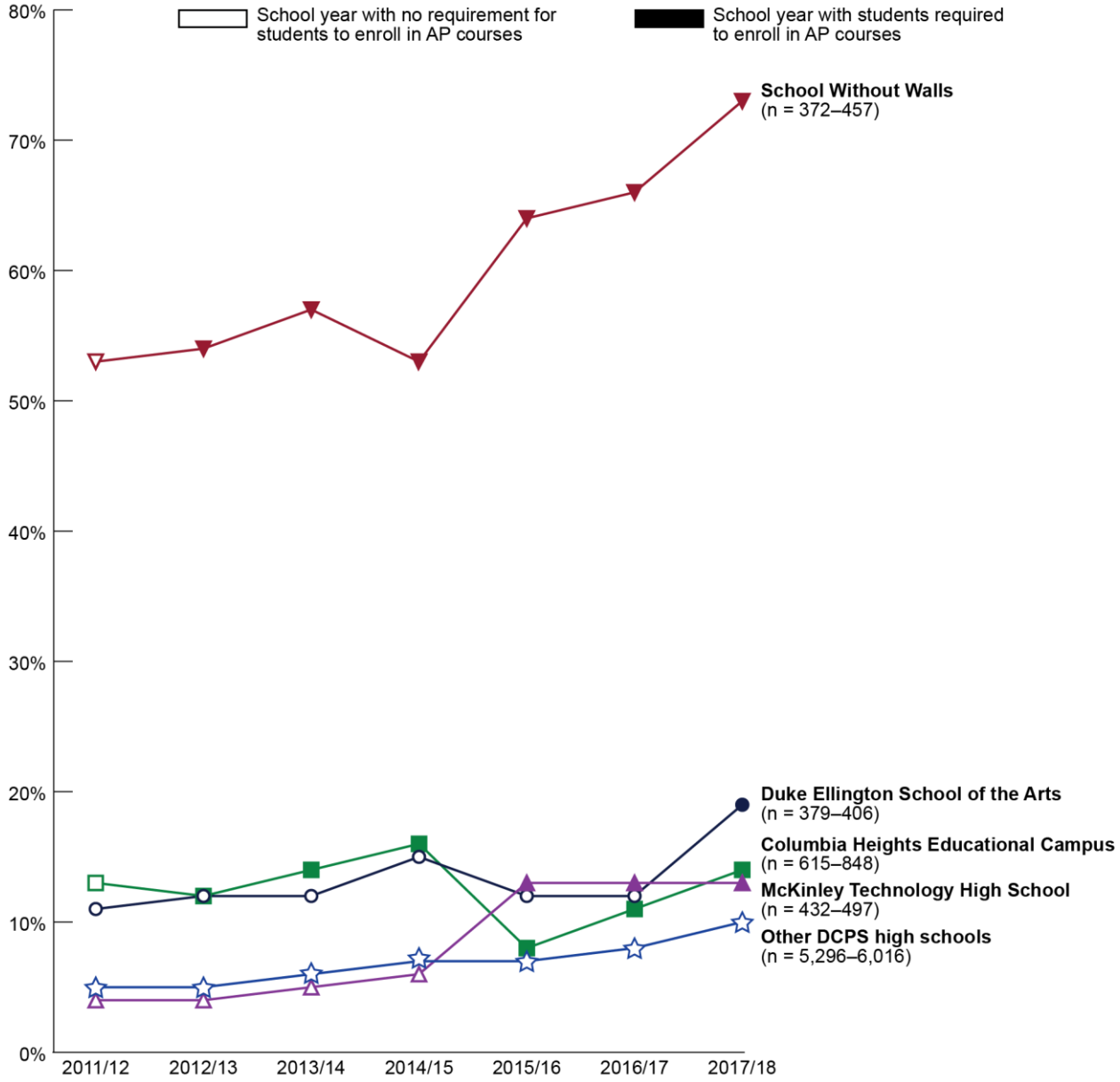
A new REL study examined policies in four DCPS high schools that began requiring students to take AP courses between 2012 and 2018.[8]

Schools requiring students to enroll in AP courses generally had higher AP exam passing rates after their requirements went into place, but passing rates were still low in three of the four schools. As the figure on the next page shows, three schools saw increases in the percentage of their students that passed at least one AP exam. The passing rate, however, remained below 20 percent at three of the four schools.

Exam passing rates also increased in DCPS schools that did not require AP enrollment, from 5 percent in 2012 to 10 percent in 2018. This could reflect other efforts to expand AP courses districtwide. For example, DCPS began requiring all high schools to offer at least one AP course in each core subject area in 2011–2012 and gradually increased this requirement over time.

The four schools requiring students to take AP courses were different from typical DCPS high schools because they each had a special curricular focus and required applications to enroll. **Therefore, it is unclear whether the trends observed for these schools would occur in other DCPS high schools or schools in other districts if they implement similar policies.**

Figure 1. Percent of students in grades 10–12 passing at least one AP exam, by school year



WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS?

Three of the four schools that required students to take AP courses saw increases in the percentage of students passing at least one exam, but only one school had passing rates above 20 percent. The low passing rates suggest that for DCPS and other districts to be successful with AP course requirements, they might consider additional teacher and student supports, which may include:

- Teacher training: DCPS recommends that AP teachers participate in the College Board's AP Summer Institute, but our study found that fewer than 20 percent of teachers participated over three years.[9] Participation was lower among new AP teachers, who might require more support.
- Teacher mentoring: New AP teachers may benefit from a mentor who can answer their questions or provide constructive feedback.
- Teacher resources: The What Works Clearinghouse practice guide Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively provides strategies that teachers can use to help students prepare for the written portions of their AP exams.[10] For example, it recommends ways to integrate reading and writing.
- Direct student supports: Students may benefit from homework help, tutoring, or AP exam practice outside of class.

ENDNOTES

[1] College Board (2014). *The 10th AP annual report to the nation*. https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/ap/rtn/10th-annual/10th-annual-ap-report-to-the-nation-single-page.pdf

[2] Burnett, A., & Burkander, P. (2021). *Advanced Placement participation, staffing, and staff training in the District of Columbia Public Schools* (REL 2021–077). Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4640

[3] Judson, E., Bowers, N. L., & Glassmeyer, K. (2019). Recruiting and encouraging students to complete Advanced Placement science and math courses and exams: Policies and practices. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 42*(3), 243–265. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0162353219855679

[4] Jackson, C. K. (2010). A little now for a lot later: A look at a Texas Advanced Placement incentive program. *Journal of Human Resources, 45*(3), 591–639. http://jhr.uwpress.org/content/45/3/591

[5] U.S. Department of Education. (2016). Advanced Placement Test Fee program. https://www2.ed.gov/programs/apfee/index.html

[6] Judson et al. (2019).

[7] Sherman, D., Li, Y., Darwin, M., Taylor, S., & Song, M. (2017). *Final report of the impacts of the National Math + Science Initiative's (NMSI's) College Readiness Program on high school students' outcomes.* American Institutes for Research. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED577450.pdf

What Works Clearinghouse. (2018). *WWC review of Final report of the impacts of the National Math + Science Initiative's (NMSI's) College Readiness Program on high school students' outcomes.* https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Study/86107

[8] One additional high school required students to take AP courses, but we do not include results from this school because we do not have data from before the requirement went into place. This makes a before and after comparison impossible.

[9] Burnett & Burkander (2021).

[10] Graham, S., Bruch, J., Fitzgerald, J., Friedrich, L., Furgeson, J., Greene, K., Kim, J., Lyskawa, J., Olson, C.B., & Smither Wulsin, C. (2016). *Teaching secondary students to write effectively* (NCEE 2017-4002). National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_secondary_writing_110116.pdf

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