

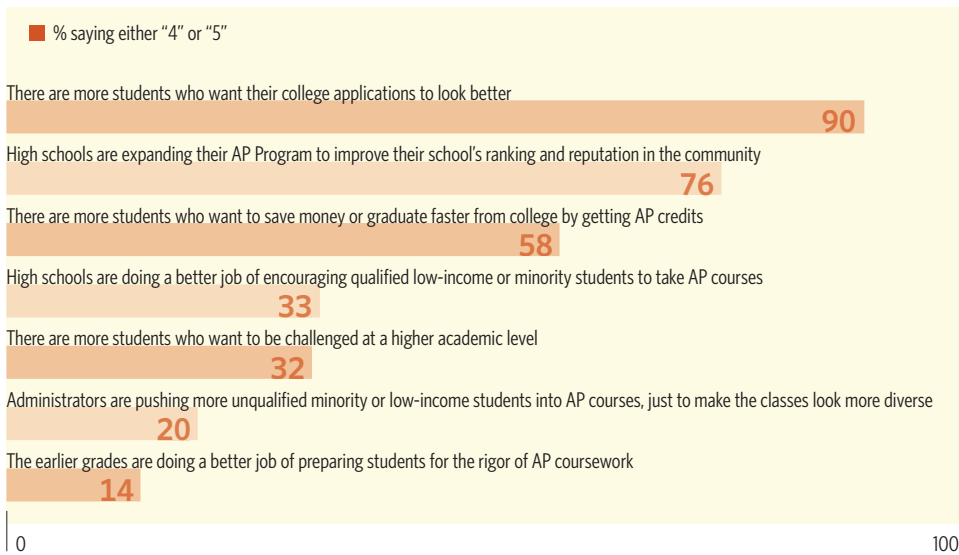
What's Driving Growth in AP?

The Advanced Placement (AP) Program has experienced tremendous growth in recent years. For example, from 2003 to 2008, the total number of high school graduates who had taken an AP exam rose from 516,260 to 757,932 students (i.e., from 19% to 25% of all high school graduates).¹ The AP teachers surveyed for *Growing Pains in the Advanced Placement Program: Do Tough Trade-offs Lie Ahead?* attest to this growth. Almost two of three AP teachers (65%) say that the number of students in their high school taking AP classes has grown, with 21% saying it has grown dramatically. And 41% report that the number of students in their own AP courses has increased in recent years; only 16% say that it has gone down. A plurality (43%) says that it has stayed about the same. “The number of students taking AP is mushrooming,” said one teacher in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, focus group. “It just keeps growing and growing and growing.”

The Demand Side — More Students Want AP

Most AP teachers believe that demand by students and their families is a critical driver of this growth, but they're quick to note that the demand is motivated by utilitarian reasons and pragmatic benefits, not intellectual aspirations. Nine of ten (90%) believe that the program is expanding because there are more students who want their college applications to look better. Almost six in ten (58%) think that expansion is driven by more students who want to save money or graduate faster from college by getting AP credits.

Question 13-19 » Across the nation, the AP Program has been growing steadily in recent years. Here are some possible explanations for why this is happening. How convincing is each explanation to you? Please answer on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not convincing at all and 5 is extremely convincing.

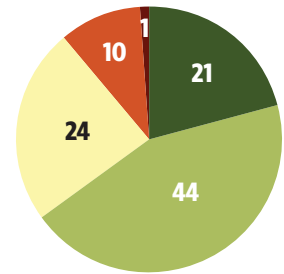


Pupil Pragmatism

These are instrumental motives. Teachers don't appear to think that more students are pursuing AP because they're interested in learning for the sake of intellectual enrichment; only 32% believe that the AP Program's growth is driven by larger numbers of students who want to be challenged at higher levels. It's even less likely in the minds of teachers that AP is growing because students have been prepared better during their earlier years. Just one in seven (14%) believe that the pool

Question 2 » Number of students taking AP classes at your high school:

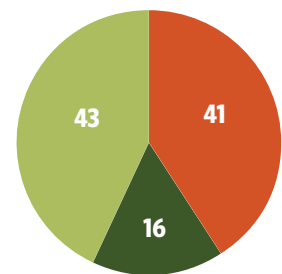
- 21 Grown dramatically
- 44 Grown somewhat
- 24 Stayed about the same
- 10 Declined dramatically or somewhat
- 1 Not sure



Question wording may be edited due to space. Totals may not add to 100% due to rounding or the omission of answer categories. Respondents were asked to think in terms of their experiences over the past 5 years.

Question 4 » In the past 5 years, class size of the AP classes you teach:

- 41 Increased
- 16 Decreased
- 43 Stayed about the same



¹ College Board. 2009. *The 5th Annual AP Report to the Nation*. "Appendix A: AP data at a glance." New York: College Board. http://www.collegeboard.com/html/aprtn/pdf/ap_report_to_the_nation.pdf (accessed April 3, 2009).

of qualified students has grown because “the earlier grades are doing a better job of preparing students for the rigor of AP coursework.”

In fact, teachers believe that there are still many students who could thrive in AP but avoid it because they don't want to make the effort — more than one focus group participant described these students as “too lazy.” Asked to choose the most likely explanation for why skilled students end up not taking AP, 56% say it's because they don't want the hard work and pressure — not because they're afraid of getting lower grades (30%), because the school has failed to appropriately encourage them (4%), or because their friends and peers aren't in these courses (2%).

Question 32 » There may be some students who could thrive in AP but do not end up taking these classes. Which of these comes closest to the most likely explanation for this?

56	They don't want the hard work and pressure
30	They're afraid of getting lower grades
4	The school fails to appropriately encourage them
2	Their friends or peers aren't in these courses

Observations

Those who place love of learning at the pinnacle of education values might be disheartened by AP teachers' explanations for student enrollment in AP. To hear teachers tell it, students' motives are predominantly utilitarian — to improve their transcripts to get ahead in the college admissions process or to lower college tuition costs once they get in. For some, this information is worrisome: If AP students are among the nation's best and brightest, what does it mean that love of subject matter and deep interest in content is secondary to them? Others — perhaps mindful of their own teenage years — find it unsurprising.

The proliferation of the number of kids taking these courses is not because they love the courses. I would like to see the emphasis go back to, “I'm taking Psych because I'm interested in the course.” Kids are taking them now because they think they have to.

— ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

I discovered that a lot of those kids were taking it just because it had AP on its name and it would look good on their transcripts.

— RIVERTON, UTAH

A lot of the kids that I get have figured out that by the time they're seniors, if they get that 3 score or higher, then they don't have to spend that money on tuition. Their parents like that, obviously.

— FRISCO, TEXAS

Still, the growth of the AP Program can be interpreted positively. Given a set of real-world incentives, many more students are choosing a course of study that means working harder, taking an extra test, and challenging themselves more. Their motives may be less than pure, but the outcome — increased effort — is constructive. In the same vein, it's highly likely that student participation in AP is on the rise because young people who were previously overlooked as AP material are now being encouraged to take AP courses.

High School Policy: Encourage as Many as Possible

More than student demand is at play. AP teachers firmly believe that their high schools are actively pursuing policies to expand their AP programs and fill as many seats as possible. In fact, 65% say their own high school's policy is to encourage as many youngsters as possible to take AP courses.

If student access to AP was once widely controlled,² the findings from *Growing Pains* document a remarkable shift: The vast majority of teachers (69%) say that AP classes at their high schools are generally open to all students; only 29% say there are limits on access such as GPA or teacher approval. Gatekeeping — where school personnel recruit some students into AP and discourage or ignore others — has apparently diminished. (Access to traditionally challenging courses such as AP Calculus and AP Physics, however, is typically limited to students who have taken prerequisites.)

Observations

Focus group discussions also suggested that guidance counselors, administrators, and teachers have generally stopped recruiting or discouraging students based on their perceived readiness for AP. Gatekeeping has come to be seen as unwieldy, bias-prone, or too hard to maintain in the face of student appeals and the mounting importance of AP in college admissions. The redress has been to reduce it substantially. A few teachers in the focus groups told us that they still try to give students a (discreet) signal that they may be in over their heads by showing them the textbook or making sure the first exam is a tough one. But for the most part, pretty much all that's necessary now for students to take AP classes is the desire and will to do so.

[Our district] has open enrollment, so any kid that wants to take an Advanced Placement class can take them here. You will get some that are probably in over their heads... I know I try to make that first test pretty difficult so they understand that it won't get any better than that.

— FRISCO, TEXAS

At our school we don't stop kids from coming in, so our classes are mixed. I have students that are really kind of not that great. And the policy at our school and the English department is if students want to take it they can take the class and whatever they learn they're going to improve their skills.

— RIVERTON, UTAH

An Eye on Reputation

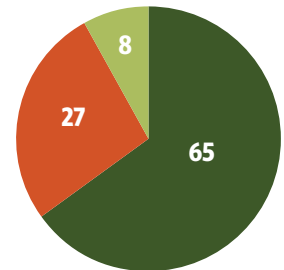
Teachers think that efforts to broaden AP are also a way for America's high schools to enhance their outside reputation, making a strong marketing statement to their communities. The vast majority of AP teachers (75%) believe that high schools across the nation are expanding their AP programs to improve their school's ranking and reputation in the community.

But when AP teachers talk about their *own* high school's motives for expanding the program — as opposed to high schools around the country — they're far less likely to point to a marketing ethos. Fully 64% reject the statement: "My school is too eager to expand AP participation just to improve its ranking and reputation." Teachers may be reacting defensively against a cynical read of their own school's motives and thinking that "others may be doing it, but we're different." There's a well-known tendency, for example, among respondents to public opinion surveys to give better marks to their own schools than to their national counterparts. Or it may be that the survey question's absolutist tone — "...to expand participation *just* to improve its ranking and reputation" (emphasis added) — triggered in teachers' minds a host of other reasons that they feel are also driving growth.

2 Observers have noted that the trend in the nation's high schools has shifted toward expanding AP access to all students, and away from gearing it to the best-prepared. See Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). 2006. *Accelerated Learning Options: Moving the Needle on Access and Success*. Boulder, CO: WICHE, p. 5, 9. See also Winebrenner, Susan. 2006. Effective teaching strategies for open enrollment Honors and AP classes. *The Journal of Secondary Gifted Education* XVII(3): 31-49.

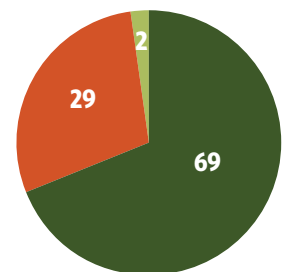
Question 8 » Does your high school have a policy — whether formal or informal — of encouraging as many students as possible to take AP classes?

- 65 ● Yes
- 27 ● No
- 8 ● Not sure



Question 10 » Other than expecting students to fulfill prerequisites, are your high school's AP classes:

- 69 ● Generally open to any student who wants to take them
- 29 ● There are limits on access (such as GPA or teacher approval)
- 2 ● Not sure



The Challenge Index

Perhaps the most obvious example of how a high school's AP Program might drive its reputation is via *Washington Post* journalist Jay Mathews's Challenge Index.³ Published annually in *Newsweek*, the index ranks the country's high schools according to a ratio (i.e., the number of AP tests taken divided by the number of graduating seniors in a high school). Half of AP teachers (52%) are somewhat or very familiar with the index. And although most of those familiar with the index (56%) say that it's had only a little or no impact on their school's approach to AP, as many as four in ten (40%) report that it's had at least some impact. Overall, AP teachers are not big fans of the concept of ranking the quality of high schools by using the ratio of students taking the exams, with 58% saying that it's mostly a bad idea and just 17% believing that it's a good one.

Interestingly, AP teachers working in rural school districts appear to be more removed from the spotlight of the index, perhaps because scrutiny and competition are more diffuse in their communities. Only 35% of rural AP teachers are familiar with the Challenge Index, compared with larger proportions of their urban (60%) or suburban (62%) counterparts. And although 71% of rural AP teachers who are familiar with the index believe that it's had little or no impact on how their high school approaches AP, only 48% of urban and 52% of suburban teachers say the same.

Observations

The Challenge Index has its critics and many AP teachers can be counted among them. But, like other ratings such as the ranking of U.S. colleges that appears each year in *U.S. News and World Report*, it has had impact. Teachers in the focus groups report that administrators within local school systems, as well as critical consumers and outside observers, pay attention and respond to the rankings. Many teachers feel that parents, local newspapers, and attentive elites in their communities use a high school's AP Program as an indicator of its quality — even if they've never heard of the index. And in many communities, high schools vie to be the preferred destination for promising students.

Because of the Challenge Index of Jay Mathews, who is pushing everyone to take AP, what's happening is that schools, principals, are very concerned, even though it's a totally artificial thing. They're very concerned about whether they look better than their neighborhood high school. That piece does create something where we all maybe feel like a spotlight is on us.

— **ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND**

The parents are making the most noise. Your standing in the community will go up because you're offering more AP classes and you might end up on the Newsweek top 100 because of all the students taking the thing.

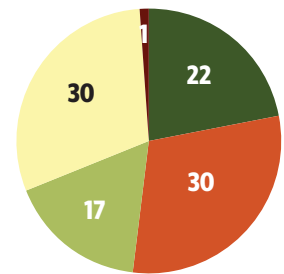
— **MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN**

The principals talk to each other. They're pushing. We have a vice principal who just got an AP award for getting more kids this last year to sign up; he was nominated by our principal. And so there's this big push in our school system to get as many kids as possible taking AP. Our superintendent views this as one of the ways that makes our school system look superior.

— **ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND**

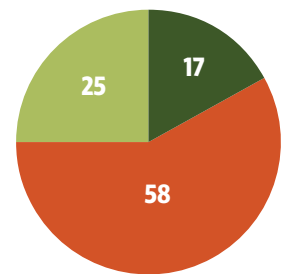
Question 40 » Each year, Newsweek publishes a nationwide rating system of high schools that uses the ratio of students taking AP exams to rank high schools by quality. How familiar are you with this rating system?

- 22 ● Very familiar
- 30 ● Somewhat familiar
- 17 ● Not too familiar
- 30 ● Not at all familiar
- 1 ● Not sure



Question 42 » Generally speaking, do you think that ranking the quality of high schools by using the ratio of students taking AP exams is:

- 17 ● Mostly a good idea
- 58 ● Mostly a bad idea
- 25 ● Not sure



³ The Challenge Index is devised as follows: Public high schools across the country are ranked according to a ratio of the number of AP, International Baccalaureate (IB), and/or Cambridge General Certificate of Education A-level tests taken by all students at a school divided by the number of graduating seniors. To make the list, the high school must have an index of at least 1.000. Jay Mathews recently modified the methodology so that a high school's AP test-passing rate is also factored into its rating.

I know that we've had a huge push on it because we had declining enrollment, so we've tried to come up with ways that more people will actually want to come here.

— MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

Is Growth Driven by Increased Numbers of Minority and Low-Income Students?

The underrepresentation of minority or low-income students in AP has been a persistent issue, as it has for America's achievement gap writ large. According to the College Board, AP participation among traditionally underserved students is increasing but these students remain underrepresented.⁴ To what extent do AP teachers report that this is prevalent in their own schools? (The underrepresentation issue is more fully discussed later in this report.)

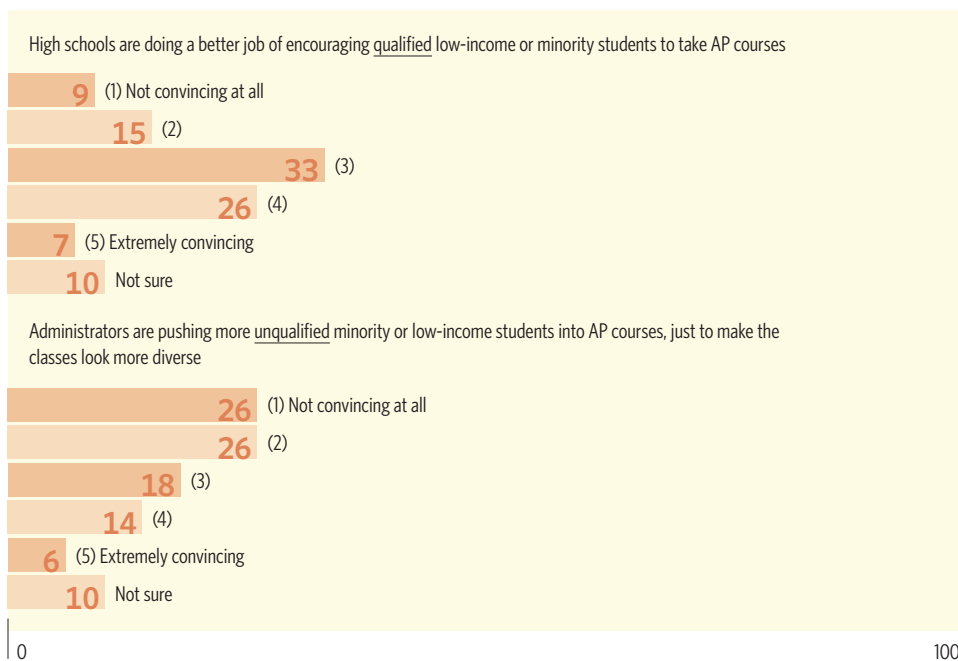
There is little support among AP teachers for the notion that AP growth is largely attributable to change in low-income or minority student participation. For example, among teachers who say their schools have a policy of encouraging as many students as possible to take AP, just 12% say the main reason is to increase opportunity for historically neglected students.

Question 9 » Main reason high school has a policy of encouraging as many students as possible to take AP classes:

48	To better prepare students for college level work
36	To improve the high school's reputation or standing
12	To increase opportunity for historically neglected students
Limited Base: AP teachers who say their high school has a policy of encouraging as many students as possible to take AP classes (n=642)	

Roughly one-third of AP teachers (32%) believe strongly that program growth can be explained by administrators doing a better job of encouraging *qualified* low-income or minority students to take AP courses. And an even smaller proportion (20%) believes strongly that growth can be explained by high schools pushing more *unqualified* minority or low-income students into AP classes.

Questions 18-19 » Across the nation, the AP Program has been growing steadily in recent years. Here are some possible explanations for why this is happening. How convincing is each explanation to you? Please answer on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not convincing at all and 5 is extremely convincing.



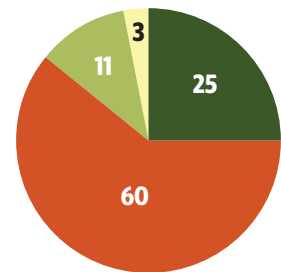
⁴ Hispanic students went from 14.0% of the AP examinee population in 2007 to 14.8% in 2008 (and represented 15.4% of the graduating class of 2008). African American students went from 7.4% of the AP examinee population in 2007 to 7.8% in 2008 (and represented 14.4% of the graduating class of 2008). College Board, *5th Annual AP Report to the Nation*, p. 2.

Are the Students or the Schools Most Responsible for Growth?

AP teachers believe that their schools are experiencing substantial program growth — one focus group participant used the word “mushrooming.” The reasons are wide-ranging, from the demand side (e.g., students trying to bulk up their transcripts as they prepare to apply for college), to the supply side (e.g., high schools trying to build strong reputations in their communities). In any case, AP teachers are more than twice as likely to believe that the size of their own school’s AP Program is determined by the level of demand and abilities of the students (60%) than by the policies of the school system and administrators (25%). The question of whether the customers or the system are most responsible for growth may not be as important as the quality question we address in the next section. But it could add focus to any effort to make adjustments to the nation’s most prominent way of teaching high-achieving children at the high school level.

Question 11 » At your school, which do you think plays a bigger role in determining the size of the AP Program?

- 25 ● The policies of the school system and administrators
- 60 ● The level of demand and abilities of the students
- 11 ● Neither/Something else
- 3 ● Not sure



What's Happening to Quality?

AP has long enjoyed a glowing reputation for the quality of its teachers, students, and curriculum, and a recent Thomas B. Fordham Institute report concluded that this reputation for excellence is mostly warranted.⁵ In the current survey, AP teachers also show enthusiasm for the program's educational merit. A full 80% call it the single most important way for high schools to serve and challenge advanced students in key subjects. Many report, too, that course content, quality of instruction, and student performance on AP exams are holding up well. But teachers also see signs of trouble when it comes to the abilities of the students turning up in their classrooms.

Course Content and Quality of Instruction Remain Strong

AP teachers are broadly satisfied with the program's quality. Overall, more than three in four (77%) rate their own high school's AP Program as good (52%) or excellent (25%).

And they continue to respond with positive evaluations when asked about specific aspects of AP. Theirs is not merely a hazy optimism. For example, when asked about the level of difficulty and complexity of the material covered in the AP courses they teach, 59% say that it's stayed about the same over the past five years and another 27% say it's gotten more difficult. Only 13% say the material has gotten easier.

AP teachers also believe that quality of instruction is high, driven in part by informal self-selection among teachers. Almost two in three — 65% — believe that many of their colleagues avoid teaching AP classes because the work is too demanding.

Observations

In the focus groups, it was clear that AP teachers often had specialized content expertise and interest — even love — for their subjects. But they clearly felt that, as AP teachers, more effort was expected and required of them. Several also said their courses were becoming more difficult, not less. In fields such as science and history, there's more to know and the information is becoming increasingly complex.

The field of biology is exploding in the past 15 years, so what you have is this breadth of knowledge, and there's nothing they take away from the content in our AP curriculum.

— MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

The time factor involved is incredible... You can't wing it in an AP class because the kids will know... To go in unprepared and have the fear of looking like an idiot is a big motivator. Some of these kids are just beyond smart, and they'll know if you're not prepared.

— FRISCO, TEXAS

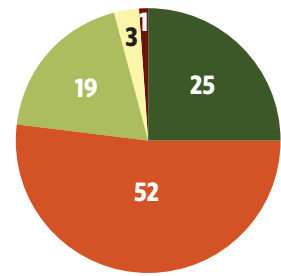
Yet AP teachers were careful to make a distinction: On the one hand, they said they had to teach course content that was deeper and more challenging; on the other hand, they felt their jobs were made easier because AP students were better behaved and motivated.

I think you have kids that are a little more motivated academically. You don't always have the discipline issues you have in a regular classroom. But the grading and the writing portion — especially in the social studies — the time demand is unbelievable, just staying on top of the content. The depth of what you have to know is so great.

— FRISCO, TEXAS

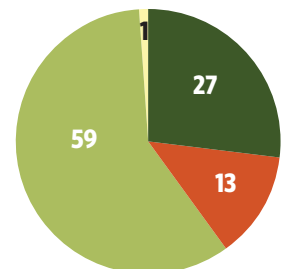
Question 1 » When it comes to how well the AP Program is working at your high school, what kind of overall rating would you give it?

- 25 ● Excellent
- 52 ● Good
- 19 ● Fair
- 3 ● Poor
- 1 ● Not sure (less than 1%)



Question 7 » When it comes to the level of difficulty and complexity of the material covered in the AP courses that you teach, has it:

- 27 ● Become more difficult
- 13 ● Become less difficult
- 59 ● Stayed about the same
- 1 ● Not sure



⁵ Byrd, Sheila, Lucien Ellington, Paul Gross, Carol Jago, and Sheldon Stern. 2007. *Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate: Do They Deserve Gold Star Status?* Washington, DC: The Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

AP Test Scores Are Holding Up

There's also a bottom line question about the relationship between expanding AP enrollment and performance on AP measures. Given their growing numbers, do teachers believe that their students are less likely these days to succeed on the AP exam? The quick answer is no. Only 18% say their students' AP exam scores have been declining in the past five years. The plurality (43%) say test scores have remained about the same and 32% say scores have been improving. More than six in ten AP teachers (62%) report that most of their students score 3 or better on the exam (the traditional cutoff score that determines whether students are eligible for college credit).⁶

The statistics released by the College Board are mixed: The percentage of the 2008 high school graduating class scoring at least one 3 on an AP test rose to 15.2%, up from 12.2% in 2003.⁷ But over the same time period, the percentage of all exams receiving at least a 3 declined from 61.6% to 57.7%, and the mean scores slipped from 2.96 to 2.85.⁸

We might wonder whether attrition in test taking is cloaking a decline in quality. In other words, if less qualified students skip the test, scores will hold steady because only the more capable pupils are assessed. But teachers say they don't see fewer of their students taking the AP exams. In fact, only 18% report that the percentage taking the exam has decreased over the past five years; 26% say that it's increased and 53% say that it's stayed about the same.

Nor do AP teachers detect a softening in how the College Board scores these tests. Seven in ten (70%) believe that the standards for grading AP exams have not been watered down and that a score of 3 means the same thing today as it did five years ago. Experienced teachers are even more likely to feel this way than those with less experience (75% versus 62%, respectively).

Observations

In discussing student quality and open enrollment, AP teachers would inevitably bring the discussion back to the question of student performance on the exams. Vested interest in the program aside, most rejected the idea that open enrollment had taken a visible toll on scores.

One year I had 296 apply and 295 of them got in [to AP]. In the years that we have pushed those kids, our scores have not changed percentage-wise. We have doubled the number of kids who are taking AP classes and the number of kids passing those tests has not declined.

— ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

The number of kids that are not doing well or that are not measuring up is so negligible, at least in my class. In the sessions that I'm teaching, only one is not doing well.

— ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

Good News and Bad News

This is surely good news — but there are also signs of trouble. According to AP teachers, overly ambitious parents and overly optimistic students are putting a strain on the quality of the program. Well over half (56%) say that too many students overestimate their abilities and are in over their heads. Six in ten (60%) believe that many parents push their children into AP classes when they really don't belong there.

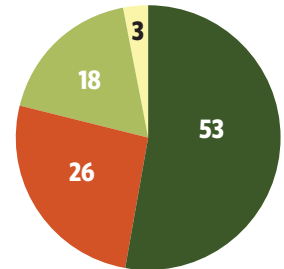
6 According to the American Council on Education (ACE), participating colleges normally honor scores of 3 or higher. See The College Board Advanced Placement (AP) Examinations. 2008. <http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Learners&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=6957> (accessed April 7, 2009).

7 College Board, *5th Annual AP Report to the Nation*, p. 2.

8 College Board. 2008. *AP Grade Distributions — All Subjects 1988-2008*. New York: College Board. <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/ap-data-2008-Grade-Dist-All.pdf> (accessed April 7, 2009).

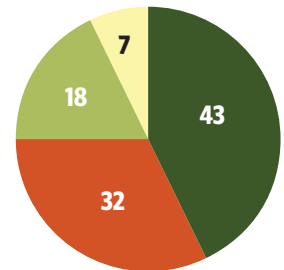
Question 55 » In the past 5 years, the percentage of your students taking the AP exam has:

- 53 ● Stayed about the same
- 26 ● Increased
- 18 ● Decreased
- 3 ● Not sure



Question 57 » In the past 5 years, your students' AP exam scores have been:

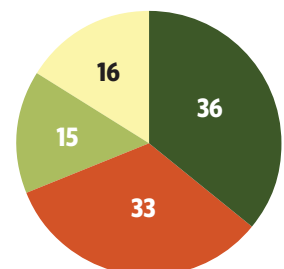
- 43 ● Staying about the same
- 32 ● Been improving
- 18 ● Been declining
- 7 ● Not sure



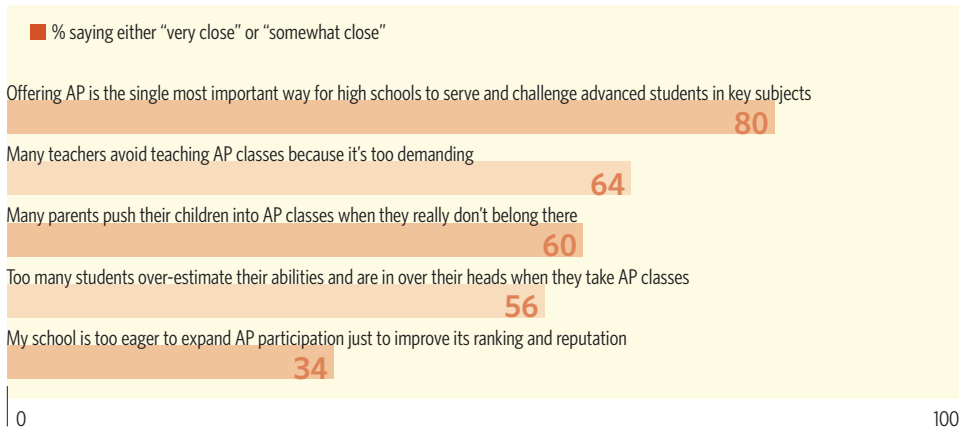
Question 28 » Thinking about the AP exams you are familiar with, how close does this statement come to your own view?

The standards for grading AP exams have not been watered down — for example, a score of 3 means the same thing today as it did five years ago.

- 36 ● Very close
- 33 ● Somewhat close
- 15 ● Not too close/Not close at all
- 16 ● Not sure



Questions 20-24 » How close does each of the following statements about AP come to your own view?



AP course quality may not have declined, according to teachers, but nearly two in five (39%) report that the quality of their AP students in terms of their aptitude and capacity to do the work has gone down. This isn't a majority, but it is virtually tied with the percentage (43%) who say the quality of students has stayed the same. Only 16% believe that student quality has improved.

Observations

The signals are crossing. Even as most teachers report that course quality and student achievement on AP exams are holding steady, many also say that the overall ability of their students is trending down and that too many pupils may be in over their heads. Contradictory responses in survey data are nothing new and sometimes cannot be reconciled. Our focus group data, however, open an additional window into how teachers struggled with this seeming paradox.

One possibility is that situations are worsening but that AP teachers are optimistic partisans of the program, prone to overestimate its quality because they're so invested in it. Yet the same point can lead to the opposite conclusion — because they're fans of the program, they're arguably more likely to be upset if they see its quality watered down. In fact, teachers readily acknowledged weaknesses in the program. During focus group discussions, they openly discussed their concerns and wrestled with how real they were. For example, they mulled over questions like the following: Do kids write as well as they used to? Are they as motivated? Are the scores declining?

I see people failing AP now and you wouldn't see failing five years ago. That's because they don't have the basic skills to write a sentence.

— ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

I understand my scores are going to come down [if all the students in his AP class take the AP exam]... I could hand pick tomorrow and have scores that would make somebody do back flips... Instead, I'm like, "I expect you to take it." I understand that means little Johnny No-Read back there is going to take the test too, and it's going to be ugly.

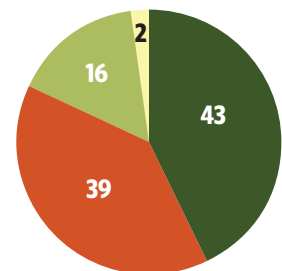
— FRISCO, TEXAS

Another possibility is that some of the negative trends reported by AP teachers have yet to manifest in declining test scores. This implies that the perceptions reported here may forecast future weakening of the AP system. And as we noted earlier, nationwide AP test scores have declined, albeit modestly.

Finally, as student demand for AP has increased and gatekeeping has decreased (or vanished), a different dynamic may be at play. Many of the students gaining access to AP may be weaker but not truly weak. Assuming that these students come to class with core skills and motivation — and

Question 6 » In the past 5 years, the quality of your AP students in terms of their aptitude and capacity to do the work has:

- 43 ● Stayed about the same
- 39 ● Declined
- 16 ● Improved
- 2 ● Not sure



are taught by skilled teachers — they may simply be living up to higher expectations and challenges that they would have avoided in another era.

Ten years ago, nothing but a bright kid would take this course. Kids are challenging themselves now to take this course. I feel, as an educator, it's your job to take those kids. Yeah, we gripe about the fact that some of them are failing... If that kid's willing to challenge himself with that course, as a teacher, I'm going to try to teach that child.

— **ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND**

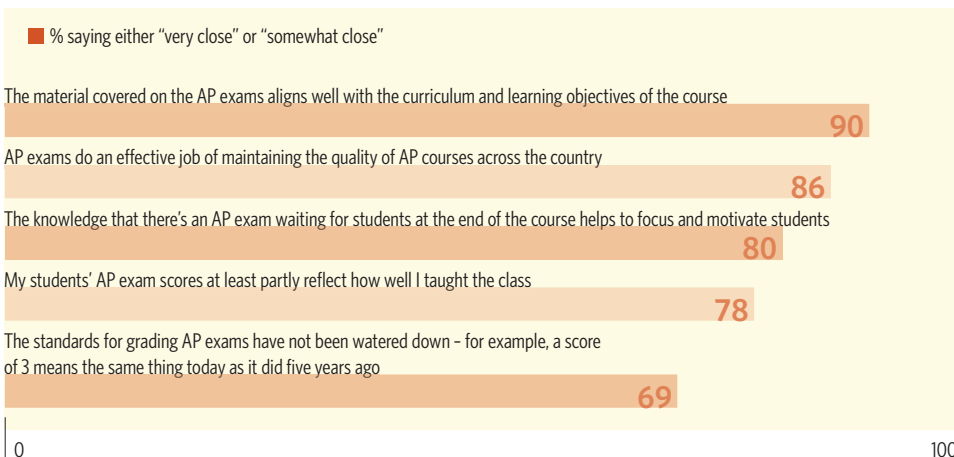
Any kid that you would classify as one that would fall between AP and regular, if that kid chose to take the AP, he's better for it, because he's now pushed himself past what he's going to get in an on-level class.... He goes to AP, he beats himself up to get an A. They're better for it college-prep wise. They're better for it material-wise, and they're better for it study skills-wise.

— **FRISCO, TEXAS**

The AP Exam as a Guardian of Quality

AP teachers think of AP exams as legitimate assessments of learning that safeguard quality — a sharp and intriguing contrast to K-12 teachers' unenthusiastic attitudes toward standardized tests and assessment-based education quality control in general. The vast majority of AP teachers (86%) believe that the exams effectively maintain the quality of AP courses across the country, another 90% think the tests are well aligned with the curriculum and course objectives, and 80% say the exam helps to motivate and focus students.

Questions 25-29 » Here are some statements about AP exams. Thinking about the AP exams you are familiar with, how close does each of the following come to your own view?



AP exams enjoy such credibility among teachers that 78% of AP teachers say their students' scores "at least partly reflect how well I taught the class." Again, it's tempting to compare this to teachers' historical reluctance to attribute student achievement to their own teaching effectiveness. Many teachers attribute student achievement to student effort (or lack of it) and the socio-economic status of their families.⁹ The sentiment is even more pervasive among teachers in focus groups when the discussion is about standardized test scores.

⁹ For example, 42% of new teachers say student achievement is mostly determined by parental involvement and socio-economic status, compared with 54% who say teacher quality is just as important. See Farkas, Steve, Jean Johnson, Tony Foleno, Ann Duffett, and Patrick Foley. 2000. *A Sense of Calling: Who Teaches and Why*. New York: Public Agenda. http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/sense_of_calling.pdf (accessed April 8, 2009).

Observations

The standards era has created — or perhaps revealed — a persistent aversion among teachers to using student test scores as a measure of teacher performance. They also reject setting accountability measures based on those tests. Yet here we have teachers extolling the virtues of AP exams. The exams do an effective job of maintaining the quality of AP courses across the country, say 86% of teachers; my students' AP exam scores at least partly reflect how well I taught the class, say 78%. And here we have the schools and the teachers encouraging, if not requiring, students to take national tests that very often ask fact-based, multiple choice questions. What explains this apparent paradox?

One explanation is that teachers perceive AP exams to be well aligned with the curriculum. AP teachers ascribe more credibility to the exams because the content of the teaching agenda is clear and connects directly to what is tested. If students do well in my class, an AP teacher reasons, they should do well on the exam. By contrast, the perennial complaint of teachers in general about the state-level standardized assessments associated with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is that the tests often ask about material divorced from what they were teaching that year. AP manages to transform the concept of “teaching to the test” from a derogatory exercise to an aspirational one.

A kid making a 95 in my class, they should be making a 5 on the AP exam.

— FRISCO, TEXAS

That's your barometer, that's your report card, and that tells you how you're doing every year.

— RIVERTON, UTAH

The difference in the standardized test of the AP is that we did submit an audit. We know the curriculum. We know the time line to teach it. When you throw a random standardized test like the WKCE [the Wisconsin state-wide standardized test], which is what our tenth grade kids take, it's just like, “Well, good luck. I hope you learned something in the eighth grade level.” That kind of standardized test, no. This kind of standardized test we bought into. We know what we're teaching the kids. We prepped them for it.

— MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

Underlying teachers' acceptance of AP testing might also be the fact that participation in the program is inherently voluntary. Schools decide to participate, teachers — by and large — choose to teach, and students elect to take the classes. That choice, along with sheer self-selection, means that participants are more likely to accept the credibility of the system's rules. Under these conditions, student attitudes become even more important.

You have to get the kids to believe that what you're asking them to do will pay off. They kind of sniff through a “BS” assignment. You've got to have them believe that, “Look, I'm going to give you this whole bunch of work. It's going to pay off in May” [test time]. They've got to believe in what you're doing.

— ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

In the end, the very system the standards era has been trying to build — consistent course content aligned with tests, transparency and accountability for teachers and students — appears to already have been built into this part of the system. AP teachers, for example, spoke freely about what happens to mediocre colleagues.

An AP teacher won't last too long in most communities if you're not good at what you do... Your scores and who you are go right out there to the community. There's a lot of people who won't teach AP because that's about as accountable as you're going to get.

— ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

In terms of test scores, we have a very active community that wants to know why their son or daughter is not doing as well as they should.

— RIVERTON, UTAH

There's some accountability there that motivates the teachers. Honestly, it's like if all my kids get 2s on this test, that's not a good thing. At this level it works with kids that kind of care.

— MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

With or Without Regard to Ability?

There's a built-in tension in the AP Program between two fundamental and competing values: granting access to all (or as many as possible) or making access conditional on demonstrated ability. The survey pits these priorities against each other. Forced to choose, 52% of AP teachers say only students who are deemed able to handle the material should take AP courses: "Otherwise it's not fair to them, their classmates, their teachers, and the quality of the program." But 38% say the more students taking AP courses the better: "Even when they do poorly in the course they benefit from the challenge and the experience." In a presidential election, a 52% to 38% margin might be considered a landslide; in an opinion survey, it's not. And it reveals that teachers are indeed grappling with these competing values.

Observations

The focus groups reflected tension and uncertainty surrounding these competing values. On one hand, some teachers shake their heads at the consequences of an AP-at-will policy and wonder where all this is headed.

There are kids who get dumped into AP Lit who don't know what they're doing. And that affects the way the class is taught when they don't have the writing skills.

— RIVERTON, UTAH

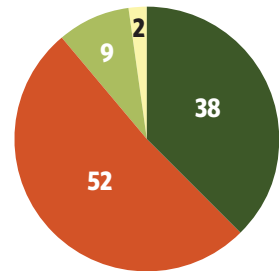
On the other hand, some AP teachers believe that the experience students gain and the effort they make are intrinsically valuable, regardless of what happens when they take the AP exam. These teachers rally behind and embrace open enrollment.

Personally, I don't care who comes into my AP class. I don't mind that people are not at grade-level reading. I don't care if they fail. I don't really care what they get on the AP exam... Maybe it'll trigger something in some of them one day. All of them are planning on going to college. I'll accept anybody. I really don't want to not let anybody try it. That's fine. Go ahead.

— ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

Question 12 » Which comes closer to your own view?

- 38 ● The more students taking AP courses the better — even when they do poorly in the course they benefit from the challenge and experience
- 52 ● Only students who can handle the material should take AP courses — otherwise it's not fair to them, their classmates, their teachers, and the quality of the program
- 9 ● Neither/Something else
- 2 ● Not sure



Proposals to Change AP— Will They Help or Hurt?

The survey asked AP teachers to consider various proposals for improving the national program. Of the eight proposals, only three gain majority support. This might reflect the present program’s general good standing in the minds of teachers who participate in it. Of the three, only one gains a strong (63%) majority. But that one proposal goes directly to the heart of the “access versus ability” question.

Support for Screening and Limits

More than six in ten AP teachers (63%) think that conducting more screening of students to ensure that they are ready to do AP-level work before they get in those classrooms would improve the program. This is the “winner” among the eight possible changes we asked them to consider. Only 12% think more screening would make the program worse.

This might be a signal that AP teachers believe the time has come to pull back somewhat on the all-access AP philosophy. Recall that 56% of those surveyed say that too many students overestimate their abilities and are in over their heads when they take AP classes and 39% report that the quality of their students—in terms of their aptitude and capacity to do the work—has declined.

Questions 43-50 » Here are some suggestions people have made to change the AP Program at the national level. For each, please indicate if you think it would generally improve the AP Program, make it worse, or have little impact?

	Improve	Make Worse	Have Little Impact
Conduct more screening of students to ensure that they are ready to do AP-level work before they get in those classrooms	63	12	19
Place firm limits on class size for AP, even if some students have to wait to take the course	56	18	19
Require all students in AP classes to take the AP exam, with financial aid provided for needy students	56	20	18
Change the AP curriculum so that courses are less broad and cover greater depth	40	21	22
Limit the number of AP classes that students can take in a given semester	39	19	32
Group students in AP sections by ability, so that, for example, the most advanced students learn together	30	36	25
Rely more on online AP courses when just a few students in a school want a course or when the school has trouble finding suitable teachers	25	39	16
Encourage more colleges to accept only high AP exam results (4 or 5) before granting college credit for AP courses	23	51	20

Two other proposals gain majority support from teachers. More than half (56%) say that placing firm limits on AP class size, even if some students have to wait to take the course will improve the program. The belief of teachers that smaller class size will improve AP instruction is hardly surprising; in virtually any context, teachers think that smaller classes are a key lever for success. According to a Rockville, Maryland teacher:

I had 37 kids in each section of my AP English classes until I got to the point of saying, “Look, I don’t even have enough desks in my room to accommodate this.” Class size getting bigger and bigger makes it harder, especially in an English-type class where you’re trying to do a lot of conversation and

discussion. The class sizes are recommended to be 25 or under. Yet we're not getting anywhere close to those class sizes.

Require Students to Take the AP Exam

Requiring all AP students to take the AP exam, with financial aid for the needy also garners the support of 56% of AP teachers. Teachers in the focus groups indicated that this policy is already in force in many high schools, and that sometimes the adults in the building collude to make it appear as if students don't have a choice about taking the exam even if they really do.

I tell my kids they have to take it. That doesn't mean they all do, but I tell them the first day of school, "I expect you to take it."

— FRISCO, TEXAS

Taking the test is not an option in our school. Every child who takes AP needs to take the test. [Moderator: Must take the test?] Yes. They have extreme pressure to take the test.

— ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

Administrators may partly regard test taking as a boon to their own school's reputation. To teachers, the exam is an important motivator of students, and lends credibility to the sometimes onerous academic work they assign. Apparently, even AP students sometimes need to hear the "this could be on the test" mantra.

Depth versus Breadth

In the focus groups, several teachers talked about the huge amount of material they're expected to cover in their courses and the negative impact that has had on their ability to cover any one topic in depth. A celebrated instance of the depth-not-breadth argument occurred in the Scarsdale public school district in Westchester County, New York. Many stakeholders there thought that the AP courses were too prescriptive. Based on this experience, district officials ultimately decided to phase out AP courses so as to add depth to their own advanced-level high school courses.¹⁰ The survey findings indicate that this approach has yet to gain majority support from AP teachers (40% think changing the curriculum so that courses are less broad and cover greater depth will improve the program). A similar proportion of AP teachers (39%) think that limiting the number of AP classes a student can take per semester would improve the program.

Other Proposals

Finally, two proposals that fail to resonate are grouping students in AP sections by ability (only 30% say this would improve the program), and relying more on online AP courses when just a few students in a school want a course or when the school has trouble finding suitable teachers (just 25% believe this would improve the program). In the focus groups, some teachers talked about the importance of a mixed-ability AP classroom.

I think the lower level kids that are in an AP class need a reality check that those other kids in there provide. They come in here and think that they're ready, they need to realize I better giddy-up here because there's people kicking my rear here.

— MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

A thin majority of AP teachers (51%) believe that encouraging more colleges to accept only 4 or 5 on the AP exam for course credit would actually make the program worse. Some teachers in the focus groups, though, said that this is already happening in certain schools.

¹⁰ Hu, Winnie. "Scarsdale Adjusts to Life without Advanced Placement Courses." *The New York Times*, December 7, 2008, New York edition, p.A45.

Five years ago, we were really telling kids, “If you make a 3 that’s probably going to get you credit at most major universities.” That’s not the case anymore. I mean, truly a 4 has become almost the minimum passing ... a lot of places are saying it’s 5 or nothing.

— FRISCO, TEXAS

Minority and Low-Income Students

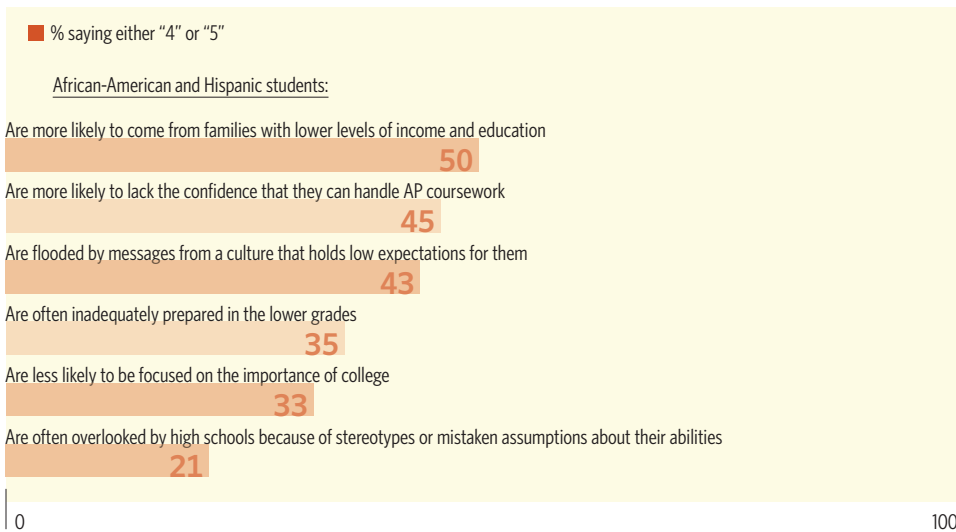
It's probably not surprising that the achievement gap problem facing American education is also at work in the AP Program, with minority and low-income students less likely to participate. The data suggest that this is especially true among the African American student population. For example, when the College Board analyzed data on the Class of 2008, it found that African American students made up 14.4% of graduating seniors in U.S. public high schools but just 7.8% of the AP examinee population.¹¹

AP teachers report that minorities are underrepresented in their schools' AP courses, though by thin margins. The plurality of teachers (43%) report that African American and Hispanic students are underrepresented in their own school's AP classes, relative to their share of the student population. But 37% say this is not the case and 19% aren't sure.

AP Teachers' Explanations for Underrepresentation

AP teachers do not offer any one dominant explanation for this proportionately lower participation. Teachers were asked to rate six potential reasons for why African American and Hispanic students are often underrepresented in AP classes. (To avoid asking teachers to castigate their own school, this battery of questions asked about high schools across the nation.)

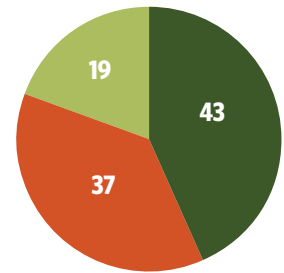
Questions 34–39 » Across the nation, African-American and Hispanic students are often under-represented in AP classes. Here are some possible explanations for why this is happening. How convincing is each explanation to you? Please answer on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not convincing at all and 5 is extremely convincing.



AP teachers appear to be at a loss to explain the problem — at least, no single explanation prevails. Fifty percent believe (either 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5) that minorities are underrepresented in AP nationally because they're more likely to come from families with lower levels of income and education. Another 45% say a convincing explanation is that minority students are more likely to lack the confidence that they can handle AP coursework. And 43% of AP teachers would point to messages from a culture that holds low expectations for them.

Question 33 » Relative to their numbers in the student population at your school, do you think that African-American and Hispanic students are under-represented in AP classes?

43 ● Yes
37 ● No
19 ● Not sure



¹¹ Hispanic students made up 15.4% of graduating seniors and 14.8% of the AP examinee population; Asian students were at 5.3% and 10.2%, respectively; and white students were at 62.8% and 61.0%, respectively. College Board, *5th Annual AP Report to the Nation*, p. 8.

AP teachers are even less likely to hold the schools themselves responsible for the underrepresentation of African Americans and Hispanics. Only 35% find the explanation that these students are often inadequately prepared in the lower grades convincing. One in three (33%) says that a persuasive explanation for their underrepresentation in AP is because African American and Hispanic students are less likely to be focused on the importance of college. AP teachers are least likely to blame institutional discrimination: Just one in five (21%) find credible the explanation that these students are often overlooked by high schools because of stereotypes or mistaken assumptions about their abilities.

Observations

We might be tempted to conclude that AP teachers are not focused on the underrepresentation problem or that they simply haven't given it much thought. But the focus group conversations suggest otherwise. AP teachers openly talked about efforts in their own districts to address the imbalance.

Race in this country is on the table. The push now is to push minority kids, Hispanic and African American, into Honor's and AP classes. It is that simple.

— ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

My push is to get the minority students involved with a lot of different programs. And from my viewpoint, I'm seeing more students from different ethnic groups taking more AP classes.

— RIVERTON, UTAH

In our district, internally, we have a huge push to get as many minority students into the APs [as possible]. It's a challenging issue because if the student isn't academically ready for the course, there's a limit to what you can do.

— MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

High-Poverty versus Low-Poverty Schools

It's worthwhile to examine the differences between AP teachers in high-poverty schools (where more than 75% of students are eligible for a free or reduced price lunch) and low-poverty schools (where no more than 50% of students are eligible for a free or reduced price lunch).

Compared to peers working in low-poverty schools, teachers in high-poverty schools are less likely to believe that a surge has taken place in AP course enrollment. So although 70% of teachers in low-poverty schools report an overall increase in the number of students taking AP classes, the percentage falls to 53% in high-poverty schools.

But high-poverty schools are more likely to consciously pursue policies to increase minority participation. Both of these findings make sense; after all, these schools are often exclusively serving disadvantaged pupils. In fact, AP teachers in high-poverty schools are more likely than those in low-poverty schools to do the following: (1) believe the main reason their school is encouraging as many students as possible to take AP is to increase opportunity for historically neglected students (25% versus 8%); (2) indicate that AP expansion is the result of their schools doing a better job of encouraging *qualified* minority or low-income students to take AP (45% versus 32%); (3) support the explanation that administrators are pushing *unqualified* minority or low-income students into AP (34% versus 18%); and (4) report that their African American and Hispanic students did not get adequate preparation in the lower grades (50% versus 33%).

One of the most dramatic indicators of AP students' steep path in high-poverty schools is the rate at which teachers report they are passing the AP exam. In high-poverty schools, only 25% of AP teachers say most of their students score a 3 or better; 70% of AP teachers in low-poverty schools report likewise.

One factor operating in high-poverty schools — in addition to the obvious hardships born of poverty at home — is that these schools are also less likely to field highly experienced AP teachers in their classrooms. For example, almost half (47%) of AP teachers in high-poverty high schools have less than six years of experience teaching AP, compared with 27% of AP teachers in low-poverty schools. Intuitively, we would expect experience to make a difference, and the survey data support this expectation. Across all schools, 74% of seasoned teachers (with more than ten years teaching AP courses) say that most of their students score 3 or better on the AP exam; the percentage drops to 48% among teachers with less than six years of experience in AP classrooms.¹² And, as one teacher from Texas explains, "You're not good at this until you've taught it for several years. I mean, you're going to get better. You're going to throw out things that don't work. You're going to bring in things that do. You're going to collaborate with people you think are way smarter than you. You're going to get better at it as time goes on."

12 These data are only suggestive. The researchers did not have access to students' actual AP exam scores.

Regional Differences: The Northeast Stands Out¹³

A comparison by region shows that high schools in the Northeast appear to offer less access to AP courses but have students who perform better on the AP exams. Northeastern high schools, by teachers' accounts, also appear to differ in terms of the objectives they set for their AP programs and their explanations for disproportionately low minority participation.

AP teachers in the Northeast, for example, are far less likely than those in other regions to say that their schools have a policy of encouraging students to take AP classes (56%) or to have open enrollment for AP courses (54%). (See the table below for complete regional data.) At the same time, AP teachers in the Northeast are more likely to say that their schools require students to take the AP exam (42%) and that the vast majority of students who take it typically score 3 or better (47%). The findings from AP teachers in the South show the opposite. These teachers report that their schools are more likely to encourage students to take AP (74%) and to have open enrollment (78%), but that the students are less likely to perform well (22%).

Comparison by Region

	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
High school has a policy (formal or informal) of encouraging as many students as possible to take AP classes	56	65	74	63
Other than expecting students to fulfill prerequisites, high school's AP classes are generally open to any student who wants to take them	54	69	78	75
High school requires AP students to take the AP exam	42	25	35	12
Estimates that 76%-to-100% of students score 3 or better on the AP exam	47	37	22	39
Main reason high school encourages as many students as possible to take AP classes is to improve the school's reputation or standing	52	41	28	29
Main reason high school encourages as many students as possible to take AP classes is to better prepare students for college level work	33	47	51	56
"There are more students who want their college applications to look better" is an extremely convincing explanation for the steady growth in the nation's AP Program (% who said "5" on scale of 1 to 5)	67	38	42	47

These findings also suggest that high schools in the Northeast may have different goals for the AP Program. Teachers report that the main reason their own high schools encourage as many students as possible to take AP classes is to improve the school's reputation or standing; for the other three regions, the main reason is more likely to better prepare students for college-level work. Similarly, AP teachers in the Northeast are more likely to point to students' desire to want their college applications to look better as an extremely convincing rationale for the recent growth in AP compared with AP teachers in other regions of the country.

Finally, AP teachers in the Northeast are — for the most part — less likely than their regional counterparts to find *any* of the six explanations offered for minority underrepresentation in AP convincing. And they're also far less likely to think that these students are actually underrepresented in AP

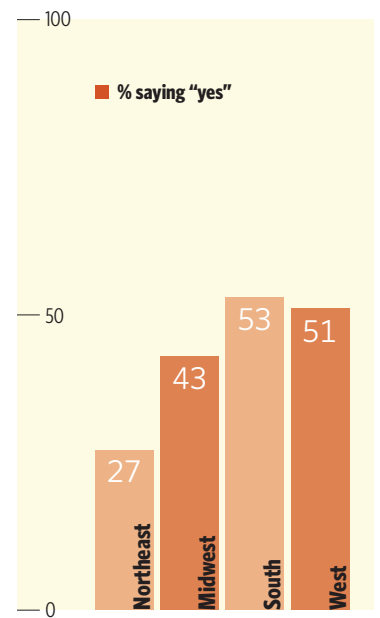
13 In this section, differences between the highest and lowest reported percentages are statistically significant at the .05 level.

classrooms. Approximately half of the AP teachers surveyed in the South (53%), the West (51%), and the Midwest (43%) think that African American and Hispanic students are underrepresented in AP courses, compared with 27% in the Northeast.

Questions 34-39 » % saying either “4” or “5” on a 1 to 5 scale where 1 is not convincing at all and 5 is extremely convincing

African-American and Hispanic students:	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
Are more likely to come from families with lower levels of income and education	40	47	56	53
Are more likely to lack the confidence that they can handle AP coursework	33	42	55	51
Are flooded by messages from a culture that holds low expectations for them	33	40	51	45
Are often inadequately prepared in the lower grades	25	34	42	37
Are less likely to be focused on the importance of college	19	31	39	40
Are often overlooked by high schools because of stereotypes or mistaken assumptions about their abilities	17	18	21	29

Question 33 » Relative to their numbers in the student population at your school, do you think that African American and Hispanic students are under-represented in AP classes?



Final Observations

When surveys are commissioned, a sort of self-selection is often at work. The policy or program in question is already “in play” in the political arena, undergoing scrutiny by the press and in policy-making circles. Respondents are asked for their views and to rate proposals for change or reform because the program is already facing controversy. Typically, such surveys end up showing recommendations that have already been approved receiving unrealistic levels of enthusiasm. Oftentimes, this is a sign that people are fed up with the politics surrounding a program and, simultaneously, not genuinely considering the costs and downsides of solutions.

But this isn't the case with AP—at least not yet. A full-scale national debate on AP has hardly begun, unless we count overattentive policy wonks and some education writers. Controversies that do break out are local in nature and capture the interest of specific communities. And although AP teachers in this nationwide survey point to some warning signs, they're still broadly satisfied and think highly of the AP Program's specific elements.

All of this implies that the only proposal for changing the AP program receiving more than 60% support—more screening of students to ensure that they are ready to do AP-level work—merits careful attention. Teachers are clearly starting to worry. And if AP is a program that matters to the nation in terms of how it educates its best and brightest high school students, perhaps it's time for all of us to pay attention, too.