



Policy Brief

High School – Advanced Placement

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Advanced Placement

By Jennifer Dounay

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Introduction

Advanced Placement (AP), launched in 1955 by the College Board as a program to offer gifted high school students the opportunity to complete entry-level college coursework, has since expanded to encourage a broader array of students to tackle challenging content. At the end of the year-long course, students may opt to sit for the course-related exam, or may take the exam without having completed the related course. For a score of 3 or higher (out of 5) on an AP exam, most colleges and universities will award college credit for an entry-level course in that discipline, though policies vary from institution to institution.

Why AP?

Since the late 1990s, many states and districts have launched or enhanced policies to expand AP course offerings. Why? Simply put, advocates feel AP:

- Increases the level of rigor in high school coursework
- Prepares students for entry-level college coursework expectations (although some critics contend the AP curriculum lacks depth and is not universally implemented with fidelity)
- Helps students and parents save on postsecondary tuition by earning college credit while still in high school
- Boosts postsecondary enrollment and completion.

A [comprehensive state AP policy](#) can help ensure that the program lives up to its potential to positively impact student achievement and increase postsecondary access and success.

Impact of AP on Postsecondary Enrollment and Completion

Research suggests that students who score a 3 or higher on an AP exam are more likely than their peers to enter and complete a baccalaureate program. However a recent – and controversial – study also proposed that students who completed an AP course but did not take the exam did not, as a group, see as strong positive outcomes ascribed to students who had sat for the exam and earned a 3 or above.¹

AP Expansion

The AP program has seen tremendous growth in recent years. During the 2002-03 school year, 67% of public high schools offered AP courses, with a total of 1.8 million enrollments.² This growth is likely spurred by a combination of factors – such as the nexus between an increasing proportion of high school students applying to four-year institutions and students' and parents' growing awareness of use of AP course- and exam-taking in college admissions decisions (and credit awarded for sufficiently high scores). State policies allowing weighted grades to be awarded students in AP courses (as is the case in Georgia), offering scholarship monies for students who earn high enough scores on AP exams (for example, West Virginia), and providing honors diplomas/endorsements to students who complete AP courses and exams (Kentucky) have likewise spurred the program's substantial expansion.

As of February 2006, 38 courses in 20 subject areas are offered in a wide variety of disciplines in all the core academic subjects:

Art History	Biology	Calculus AB	Calculus BC	Chemistry
Computer Science A	Computer Science AB	Economics: Macro	Economics: Micro	English Language and Composition
English Literature and Composition	Environmental Science	European History	French Language	French Literature
German Language	Government and Politics: Comparative	Government and Politics: United States	Human Geography	Italian Language and Culture
Latin Literature	Latin: Vergil	Music Theory	Physics B	Physics C: Electricity and Magnetism
Physics C: Mechanics	Psychology	Spanish Language	Spanish Literature	Statistics
Studio Art: 2-D Design	Studio Art: 3-D Design	Studio Art: Drawing	U.S. History	World History

(From <http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/courses/descriptions/1,3061,151-162-0-4544,00.html>)

Federal AP grant programs have additionally supported AP program growth in the states. The [Incentive Program Grants](#) provide districts, states and national nonprofit entities with funds to expand AP offerings to low-income students. According to the department Web site, funds may be used for “teacher training, development of pre-Advanced Placement courses, coordination and articulation between grade levels to prepare students for academic achievement in Advanced Placement classes, books and supplies, and participation in online Advanced Placement courses.” The [Test Fee Program](#) provides funds to state departments of education to cover all or a portion of low-income students’ test fees. In fiscal year 2005, the U.S. Department of Education awarded 51 grants to 39 states, the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands through the AP test fee program.

Ensuring Quality and Equitable AP Programs: Audits, Pre-AP and a Comprehensive State AP Policy

This expansion of the AP program, while an encouraging trend, has not been universally accompanied by policies to evaluate the quality of courses labeled “AP” or ensure that students – advantaged and disadvantaged alike – are prepared in the middle and early high school grades for the challenging content of AP courses. The College Board’s audit process and the pre-AP program described below are responses to these concerns. The [comprehensive state AP policy](#) described below provides states with a blueprint in developing or fine-tuning their AP policies and programs to ensure program quality and equitable access.

Audit Process

To address concerns that courses labeled as “AP” were not providing the rigorous content and skills considered hallmarks of the program in 2005, the College Board announced the AP Audit program, to be fully implemented in the 2007-08 school year. Under the audit system, schools offering any course identified as “AP” must verify that the course in question meets course-specific requirements related to the following areas (all text refers to the drafts available on the [College Board Web site](#) as of February 14, 2006):

Curriculum: Course content must meet specified expectations and include certain content. For example, the AP Art History course must “examine works of art using a variety of methodologies...”, cover content through the modern/postmodern period, and incorporate a portion (about 20%) of course content devoted to work beyond the European tradition. One of the requirements of the AP computer programming course is that the curriculum teach students to “code fluently in an object-oriented paradigm” using the Java programming language.

Student resources: Students must have access to specific resources related to the course content. For AP Calculus AB, every student must have access to a graphing calculator. In many AP classes, to meet

audit requirements, every student must have access to his/her own copy of a recently published college-level textbook or another specified resource book on the subject.

School resources: Students must have access to specific school resources related to the course content. For AP Music Theory, the classroom must contain a piano, electronic keyboard, or quality sound-reproduction equipment. Some courses, such as Calculus AB, do not require specific school resources.

Exam administration resources: Students must have access to specific equipment or resources in order to take the AP course exam. For instance, a school offering the AP Art History exam must have at least two slide or digital projectors and screens, as well as a room in which lighting can be controlled and the projected image is large enough for every student to see the works of art sufficiently well.

Schools must send the College Board a syllabus, sample assignment and sample exam for the course. The audit process likewise asks whether teachers have completed AP-related preparation and professional development, and encourages teachers to have done so. Teachers are additionally required to provide information on their educational background and professional development experiences. Courses whose content does not meet the College Board's benchmarks may not advertise the course as "AP".

The Pre-AP Program

The pre-AP program is a teacher professional-development program developed in recent years to provide teachers at both the middle and high school levels with the knowledge and skills needed to bring students to the level necessary to successfully complete AP coursework and exams during their high school careers. One component of this professional development is the creation of "vertical teams" of teachers, across grades 6-12, to align content and skills from one year to the next, to ensure students will be ready for AP-level work during their high school years. According to the College Board Web site, "district administrators, principals, curriculum coordinators, and guidance counselors" also participate in some vertical teams. Unlike regular AP courses, however, the College Board has no mechanism in place to design or audit courses labeled as "pre-AP."

A Comprehensive State AP Policy

A state policy framework on AP would set uniform expectations for the offering and provision of AP courses and test taking opportunities/requirements and makes it possible for all students to reap the full benefits of the AP program – rigorous curriculum, preparation for postsecondary coursework, and a better chance of entering and completing postsecondary education. ECS suggests a comprehensive state AP policy would include the following elements and provides the rationale for each:

- [Requires all high schools to offer a minimum number of AP courses](#)
OR
- [Offers financial incentives for districts and schools to provide AP courses](#) (such as additional funding weights for students attaining minimum scores on AP exams, funding to cover course materials and equipment, etc.)

AP courses often are less plentiful in low-income and high-minority schools and districts. Requiring all high schools to offer a minimum number of AP courses or providing the funding necessary to acquire the additional equipment and materials needed to offer AP courses ensures greater equality of AP course availability between higher-income and lower-income schools.

- [Offers accountability incentives for districts and schools to provide AP courses](#) (such as tying AP offerings to school accreditation, including AP course taking and test taking data on school accountability report cards, etc.)

Schools need to be held publicly accountable for providing AP courses. Requiring schools and districts to publish disaggregated data on course taking and AP test results will achieve this goal.

- [Includes a virtual school component to assist rural and small schools](#)
Rural and small schools do not have the numbers of students enrolling in AP courses to afford to hire teachers to teach these courses in a variety of subjects. However, providing a set of online courses to students statewide can help students, regardless of location or school size, to have the availability and diversity of AP offerings enjoyed by their peers in larger and urban/suburban schools.
- [Establishes programs and provides funding for AP teacher training and professional development](#)
AP teachers need to be trained in the content and skills tested on AP exams to help them prepare their students for these assessments. State programs – and dedicated funding – for teacher preparation and professional development can ensure that the course content lives up to the expectations of the AP program and adequately prepares students for AP exams.
- [Provides for Pre-AP courses and training](#) (to help non-AP teachers in middle and high schools prepare students for AP-level content)
When students arrive at their junior or senior year of high school far behind in the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in AP courses, it's often too late to catch up. Pre-AP courses and training align course expectations from grades six through 12 so that students are ready to succeed in AP courses in high school.
- [Subsidizes student test fees, at a minimum for low-income students](#)
Low-income families often can't afford the testing fee – \$82 per exam in 2006. Subsidizing student test fees helps ensure low-income students' participation in AP exams – and is also a boost to middle-income families with a student taking multiple exams or with more than one child taking AP exams at the same time.
- [Requires students to take the AP exam to receive AP course credit](#)
If a student doesn't take the exam, it's not possible to tell if he/she learned the content one would expect of an AP course. Requiring a student to take the exam ensures that the grade in the class is aligned with the student's mastery of the course content knowledge.
- [Creates a mechanism to \(1\) identify schools in which low-income and Latino/African-American students are substantially underrepresented in AP courses \(as a proportion of enrollment in the building\) and \(2\) requires programs to increase AP enrollment](#)
Studies suggest that even within low-income and high-Latino/African-American schools, students in many AP classes are disproportionately higher-income and white or Asian, and that schools face no sanctions for this blatant disparity in student outcomes. Creating a mechanism to identify and address such underrepresentation will benefit all students and their families.
- [Requires public postsecondary institutions in the state to award students credit based on minimum AP exam scores](#) (such as a 3 or above out of 5)
Public universities within the same state are often not required to award postsecondary credit on the basis of AP scores, or may vary in the amount of credit awarded, creating complications when a student transfers from one institution to another within a state. Having uniform requirements in the state sets clear expectations for high school students and eliminates the need to complete additional coursework if transferring to another institution that does not recognize or provides fewer credit hours for minimum AP exam scores.

Arkansas – A Model for Other States

Arkansas is the only state to have enacted policies addressing each of the above components (with the exception of a uniform system of awarding college credit for minimum AP exam scores). Arkansas statutes related to each of the aforementioned categories are summarized below, as are a handful of related policies of interest in other states. "Other" policies that do not fall into any of the above categories but may be of interest to state policymakers are identified at the end of this report.

Many of Arkansas' Advanced Placement policies are included in the "Arkansas Advanced Placement Incentive Program Act of 1995," expanded by 2005 legislation to become the "Arkansas Advanced

Placement and International Baccalaureate Diploma Incentive Program Act of 1995", ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-16-801 and seq. This legislation likewise addresses "preadvanced placement courses."

Mandated offering of AP courses

ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-16-1204 mandates that districts begin phasing in Advanced Placement courses in the 2005-06 school year so that, effective with the 2008-09 school year, all districts offer at least one advanced placement course in each of the four "core areas of math, English, science, and social studies for a total of four courses." Additionally, all Arkansas high schools, effective with the 2008-09 school year, must "offer a minimum of four advanced placement courses by adding at least one core course each year to the list of courses available to high school students." Alternative high schools, dropout recovery programs, and high schools offering the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, another rigorous curriculum with end-of-course subject exams, are exempted from this provision.

Financial incentives for districts and schools

ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-16-804 authorizes the department to award schools participating in the AP incentive program to "be awarded a one-time equipment and instructional materials grant for providing an advanced placement course..."

Alternatively, Florida mandates that a "value of 0.24 full-time equivalent student membership shall be calculated for each student in each advanced placement course who receives a score of 3 or higher on the College Board Advanced Placement Examination for the prior year and added to the total full-time equivalent student membership in basic programs for grades 9 through 12 in the subsequent fiscal year." (FLA. STAT. ANN. § 1011.62)

Accountability/reporting incentives

ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-15-202 on school accreditation authorizes the Commissioner of Education to require each local superintendent to verify that the district is in compliance with state laws related to Advanced Placement offerings. ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-15-2006 requires districts to include in an annual report to the state board, the number of students taking AP courses and exams, and the percent of students scoring a 3, 4 or 5 on an Advanced Placement exam, disaggregated by grade level, economic status and ethnicity. In addition, Arkansas regulations provide that schools be awarded \$50 for every score of 3 or higher on an Advanced Placement exam. Schools must use these funds in the schools' advanced placement program.

Virtual school component to assist rural and small schools

ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-47-501 establishes that the purpose of the state's distance learning grants program is "to make available distance learning in every school district in the state," and that the primary purpose of distance learning, in turn, is to assist districts in offering AP courses "or other academic courses not otherwise available in the school district."

Teacher training and professional development

ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-16-1203 mandates that a teacher of an AP course "obtain appropriate training" and requires the state board to "establish clear, specific, and challenging training guidelines that require teachers of College Board advanced placement courses and teachers of pre-advanced placement courses to obtain College Board sponsored or endorsed training," which may include vertical team training. ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-16-804 provides that, subject to legislative appropriation, "a teacher participating in the advanced placement program...or in the preadvanced placement program may be awarded subsidized teacher training for advanced placement courses" for up to \$650 per teacher. State board rules add that a teacher teaching an AP course in more than one subject area is eligible to apply for more than one teacher training stipend.

Pre-AP courses and training

Coursework: ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-16-1202 provides a statutory definition of "pre-advanced placement course" – namely, "a middle school, junior high school, or high school level course that specifically prepares students to enroll and to participate in an advanced course..." Additionally, ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-16-1204 requires all districts to offer pre-AP courses and directs the state board to approve all courses designated as pre-advanced placement. State board policy adds that "If a district offers a pre-

advanced placement program, the courses must follow a clearly recognizable sequence, that is, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th grade pre-advanced placement English; 11th grade AP English Language and Composition; and 12th grade English Literature and Composition.

Training: ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-16-1203 goes on to mandate that the state board “establish clear, specific, and challenging training guidelines that require teachers of College Board...pre-advanced placement courses to obtain College Board sponsored or endorsed training.” State board regulations treat AP and pre-AP teachers equally in allowing both to “apply to the State Advanced Placement Committee for a grant to cover cost of tuition, expenses and materials of approved training programs.”

Very few other state policies currently address pre-AP. One exception, however, is New Mexico. N.M. STAT. ANN. § 22-13-1.5 authorizes districts and charter schools to “create core curriculum frameworks to provide high quality curricula in kindergarten through grade six to prepare students for pre-advanced placement and advanced placement coursework in grades seven through 12,” while N.M. STAT. ANN. § 22-23A-5 orders the Indian education division within the state department of education to “develop or select for implementation a challenging, sequential, culturally relevant curriculum to provide instruction to American Indian students in kindergarten through sixth grade to prepare them for pre-advanced placement and advanced placement coursework in grades seven through 12.” Another exception, Oklahoma, includes in the Oklahoma Advanced Placement Incentive Program a definition of “advanced placement vertical team” and authorizes the state board, depending on appropriations, to award local grants to develop advanced placement vertical teams based on state board-established criteria.

Student test fee subsidies

ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-16-804 provides that, subject to legislative appropriation, “the state may pay in full, or on a pro rata basis as determined [in statute], the cost of the advanced placement test fee” and allows the state board to create a sliding scale based on household income. (The scale is described in 005 22 CARR 005.)

Requiring students to take the AP exam to receive AP course credit

Students completing AP courses are commonly awarded weighted credit. Arkansas law stipulates, however, that students may earn weighted credit only if the student takes the entire AP course *and* takes the applicable test at the end of the course (and the student’s teacher is certified and has completed AP or other specified training). (ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-15-902)

Identifying and rectifying underrepresentation of historically underserved students

ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-15-2006 does not require schools or districts to address or tying accountability sanctions to underrepresentation of low-income and Latino/African-American students in AP courses, but it does require every district to annually report to the state board – by grade level, economic status, and ethnicity – the number of students taking advanced placement courses and exams, and the percent of students scoring 3, 4 or 5 on advanced placement exams.

Awarding college credit based on minimum AP exam scores

At this time, Arkansas does not mandate that public postsecondary institutions award college credit for minimum AP exam scores, or that they maintain a uniform system for awarding credit from one institution to the next. Rather, the State Board of Higher Education Policy Manual states, “Students should be aware that score requirements for credit by examination on such tests as CLEP or Advanced Placement vary among institutions and that institutions to which they transfer may have different requirements than the requirements of the institution previously attended. Institutions are requested to show on their transcripts the test scores utilized for awarding credit by examination.” (008 00 CARR 001)

However, there are states that require all public postsecondary institutions to adhere to the same policy when awarding college credit for AP exam scores. FLA. STAT. ANN. § 1007.27 states that college credit for an AP course must be limited to students who score a minimum of 3 (out of 5) on the corresponding AP exam, and directs the department of education to identify the specific courses and maximum credit students may receive through AP exam scores. The statute likewise dictates that all public community colleges and state universities “must award credit for specific courses for which

competency has been demonstrated” by passing an AP exam unless the student has already earned credit for that course. Alternatively, Virginia’s [Early College Scholars Program](#) allows eligible high school students to earn at least 15 hours of transferable college credit while completing credits toward the state’s Advanced Studies Diploma. Advanced Placement is one of the means by which students may earn this transferable credit. The [Virginia Virtual Advanced Placement School](#) provides high school students across the state the opportunity to take AP courses and participate in the Early College Scholars Program.

Other policy of note

ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-16-1205 establishes a state-level "Concurrent Enrollment Course Approval Panel" charged with making recommendations to the Department of Education and the Department of Higher Education on the rules for offering AP and/or concurrent enrollment courses. The statute calls for panel members to be knowledgeable about AP or concurrent enrollment coursework, among other requirements.

With recent federal action relating to AP adding to the current momentum at the state level, it is likely that more state legislation will be introduced in 2006 to either add new AP policies or amend existing ones. States are seeking to improve student performance at the high school level, and AP policies provide a proven path to both enhance achievement and boost postsecondary education attainment levels. While the AP program holds much potential for good, policies should be fair and equitable – offering the greatest number of qualified students the opportunity to take advantage of the program – while retaining the rigor that is at the heart of the promise of AP. In Arkansas, states have an example of a successful, well designed AP policy, balancing competing needs, that policymakers may learn from as they implement AP programs to meet the unique needs of their state.

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Endnotes

¹ Saul Geiser and Veronica Santelices. *The Role of Advanced Placement and Honors Courses in College Admissions*. Berkeley: University of California, 2004. <http://repositories.cdlib.org/cshe/CSHE-4-04/>

² National Center for Education Statistics, [Dual Credit and Exam-Based Courses in U.S. Public High Schools: 2002-03](#). Washington, DC: NCES, April 2005, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005009.pdf>.