

# ADVANCED COURSEWORK

## An Overview

Advanced coursework refers to classes that provide students the opportunity to earn college credit in high school. Such courses include, but are not limited to, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and dual enrollment.

Research shows that rigorous high school courses contribute to postsecondary success. And students who enter college with six or more credits are more likely to earn a degree.<sup>1</sup>

## How is it measured?

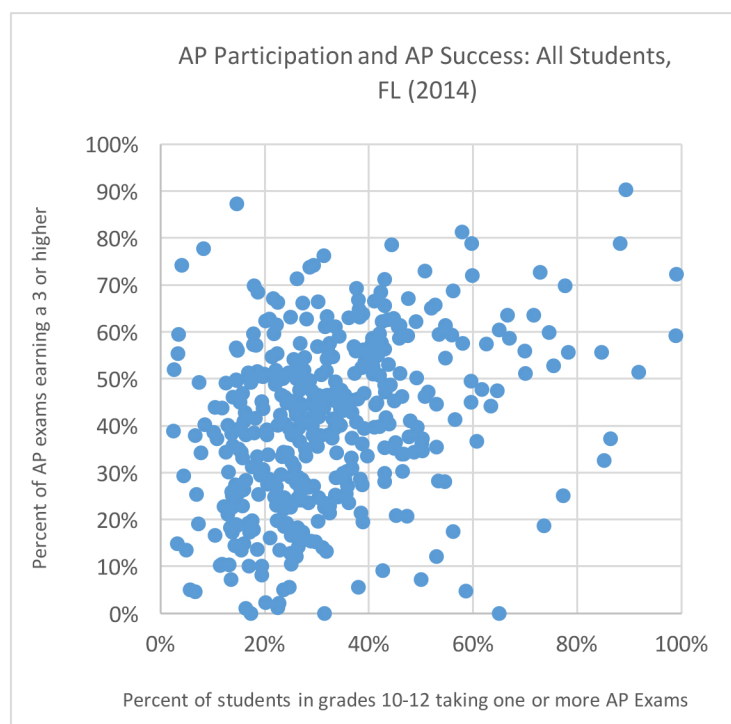
There are two things that are important to measure when it comes to advanced coursework:

1. Participation: The percentage of students enrolling in the courses; and
2. Success: The percentage of students successfully completing the courses.

All school districts are required to report certain advanced coursework data to the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) for each school. The CRDC collects data on the number of students (by race and disability status, as well as for English learners) enrolled in AP and dual enrollment courses, as well as the number of students enrolled in the IB Diploma Programme. The CRDC breaks out separately data regarding student enrollment for AP science, math, and other courses. The CRDC also collects data on the number of students who take AP exams and the number of students who receive a passing score.

## What do the research/data tell us?

1. On average, schools show lower participation and success rates for students of color, low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities.<sup>2</sup>
2. Schools with higher proficiency rates on state assessments tend to show higher rates of participation and success in advanced coursework. This holds true for all students and for most student groups, but some higher performing schools still have low participation and success in advanced courses, especially for historically underserved students.<sup>3</sup>
3. While generally, schools with higher participation rates in advanced courses also have higher success rates, the data show that some schools with high participation rates have low success rates, and vice versa. This suggests that some schools are placing students into advanced courses without sufficient preparation and support, while other schools may be restricting access for all but the perceived highest performers.



Source: Preliminary Ed Trust analysis of Florida Department of Education Data

<sup>1</sup> Clifford Adelman, "The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School to College," (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2006), <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/toolboxrevisit/toolbox.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> College Board, 2014, The 10th Annual AP Report to the Nation, <http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/ap/rtn/10th-annual/10th-annual-ap-report-to-the-nation-single-page.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Based on an Education Trust analysis of Florida Department of Education and Massachusetts Department of Education data.

## What are the benefits and risks of including this measure in a school rating system?

### Benefits

- Including measures of participation and success in advanced coursework in school ratings may incentivize schools to offer students more advanced opportunities.
- Inclusion in accountability may highlight access and success gaps in advanced classes.
- Access to and success in advanced coursework matters to students and parents.
- Information provided by these indicators may not be captured by other measures in the accountability system — e.g., some high-performing schools (based on proficiency) may be doing a better job of giving students the opportunity to take these classes than others.

### Considerations/Warnings

- These courses — and exams that go with them — cost money. If states do not subsidize these costs, holding schools accountable for advanced coursework measures may be unfair to high-poverty schools and low-income students.
- Some schools — especially those that are small, or in rural areas — may have a harder time offering advanced courses.
- Incentivizing participation and success in these courses could encourage schools toward courses that are “advanced” in name only (a problem with some dual enrollment courses), instead of those — like AP or IB — that have stronger quality control measures.

## If your state is considering including advanced coursework measures in school ratings, what questions should you ask? What should you watch out for?

### Will the state look at participation in advanced coursework, success in the courses, or both?

If including something about advanced coursework in accountability, both participation and success need to count. Including only participation rates will create incentives to enroll all students without providing the necessary supports for success, while including only success rates will incentivize schools to make access available only to the perceived highest performers.

### What types of advanced courses will the state include, and how will it ensure that the courses are truly rigorous?

Advanced course options typically include AP, IB, and dual enrollment classes. For AP and IB, end-of-course exams provide a check on the rigor of the class. Dual enrollment courses, however, often don't have a similar quality check. To ensure that the classes provide students meaningful advanced opportunities, states need to at minimum ensure that schools only receive credit for dual enrollment courses that earn students credit accepted by the state's institutions of higher education.

### How will the state measure participation and success?

**Questions to ask about participation rates:** Ask who qualifies as a participant: Any student who enrolls in a course, or (in the case of AP or IB classes) only a student who takes the exam? Will schools receive more credit for students who take multiple advanced courses? Who will count in the participation rate denominator — all students in the school, students in the graduating cohort, or students in certain grades such as grades 10 to 12?

- **Tip:** Watch out for attempts to only include “eligible” students in participation rate calculations. Depending on the definition of “eligible,” your state may be limiting access only to the highest performing students. Be wary, too, of including only graduates in the participation rate denominator: Doing so could increase the incentive to push lower performing students out of school entirely.

**Questions to ask about success rates:** Ask who counts as a successful completer: A student who got a passing grade? One who passed the end-of-course exam? One who earned credit for a dual enrollment course? Who will count in the success rate denominator — all students who enrolled in the course, just those who completed it, or just those who took the exam?

- **Tip:** All students who count as participants should be in the success rate denominator. And to the extent possible, make sure the definition of success is tied to something meaningful for students, such as a score of 3 or higher on an AP exam, or the grade needed to earn college credit in a dual enrollment course.