

POLICY RESEARCH BRIEF



research • communication • advocacy • support

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ENLACE FLORIDA is a state-wide network promoting college-readiness, access, and success for underrepresented students in Florida.

The BIG PRIZE: A College Prep Curriculum

The Advanced Placement (AP) program, Florida's largest high school acceleration program, offers high school students the opportunity to earn college credits, gain skills that will help them succeed in college, and broaden their intellectual horizons. Unfortunately, too many people see the AP as a surrogate for a rigorous college prep curriculum in our high schools. It is designed to supplement, not supplant, regular high school course offerings, as are the other accelerator programs such as Dual Enrollment, International Baccalaureate (IB), and Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE).

Recent reports and editorials in the *St. Petersburg Times* have called into question the value of the AP program by revealing significant disparities in student performance by school. An analysis of student performance on AP tests in Hillsborough and Pinellas County high schools showed that "the results are all over the map. Under some teachers, every student passes. Under others, none do."¹

We should all recognize that the AP program is not the only means by which Florida can or should promote college readiness among its high school students. It is a valuable component of any college prep curriculum and the AP environment of higher expectations benefits students even if they do not pass the examination. However, it is not the sole solution to Florida's college readiness problem. All high school students, whether enrolled in AP, Dual Enrollment, IB, or other accelerator programs, should have access to a curriculum that prepares them for success in either higher education or the 21st Century workforce.

¹ Ron Matus and Connie Humburg, "AP students in bay area get mixed results; so do their teachers,"

AP Participation and Performance

A report released by the Florida Department of Education in August 2009 highlighted the continued progress of Florida's students: Florida recorded the greatest one-year increase in the number of Advanced Placement (AP) public school exam takers in the country. Florida also led the nation in the number of AP exams taken, though it came in second place in the number of students receiving an exam grade of 3 or higher.²

The AP program in Florida has grown dramatically in recent years. While the total school membership in grades 10-12 has increased 17% from 2002 to 2009 (480,772 to 564,258) the number of students taking an AP exam has grown 150% in the same time period (51,070 to 131,818), as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1
AP Exams and Scores, 2002-2009

Year	Number of Student Taking AP Exams	Total number AP Exams Taken	Number of AP Exams with a Score of 3 or Higher	Total Number of Students Grade 10-12	Percentage with Score of 3 or Higher	Percent of AP takers/total Number of 10-12
2002	51,070	89,295	48,004	480,772	53.8%	10.6%
2003	60,978	109,175	54,193	503,119	49.6%	12.1%
2004	67,750	121,682	60,193	351,097	49.5%	19.3%
2005	78,121	140,535	66,511	556,030	47.3%	14.0%
2006	90,677	163,547	73,957	558,047	45.2%	16.2%
2007	103,547	186,152	83,339	518,265	44.8%	20.0%
2008	117,698	210,321	88,279	566,189	42.0%	20.8%
2009	131,818	233,851	100,356	564,258	42.9%	23.4%

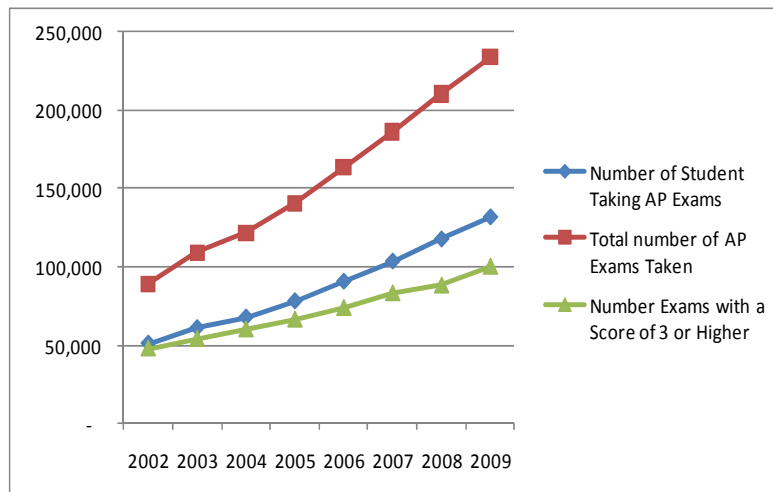
Source: For this and all other tables and figures go to: <http://www.fldoe.org/evaluation/act-sat-ap.asp>

² For the full report go to: www.fldoe.org/evaluation/pdf/APTrends2009.pdf

However, the passing rate for these tests actually declined, from 53.8% in 2002 to 42.9% in 2009, a 25% decline.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the rate of AP passers is not keeping up with the pace of AP exam takers.

Figure 1
AP Testing and Performance, 2002-2009



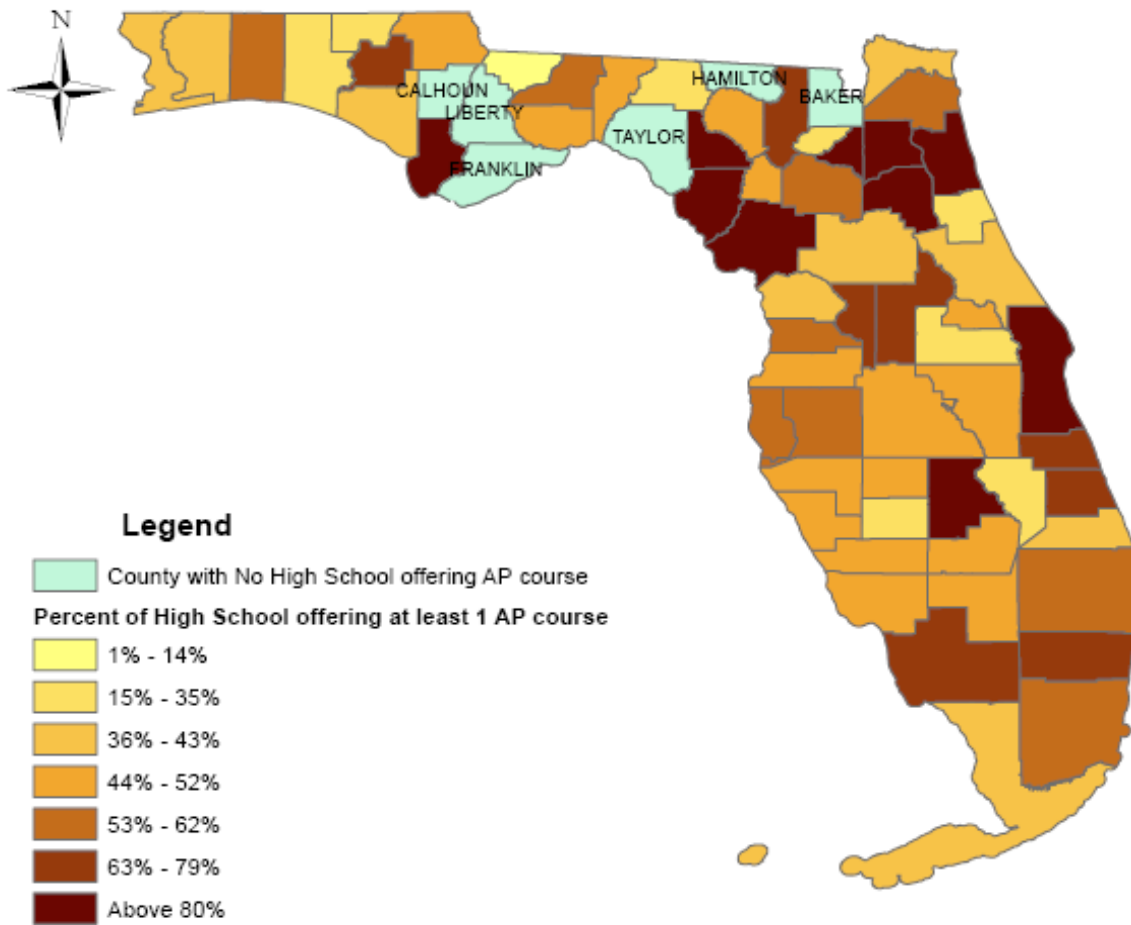
When one considers student participation by race and ethnicity, it is also clear that Florida’s investment in the AP program has expanded access to AP courses for underrepresented students. Table 2 reveals that African American and Hispanic students registered the highest gains in the number of AP exams taken from 1999 to 2009.

Table 2
AP Tests Taken, by Race and Ethnicity, 1999 and 2009

Category	AP Exams Taken				Net Change in Percentage
	1999		2009		
White Non-Hispanics	20,218	58.4%	66,056	50.1%	-8.3%
African Americans	2,595	7.5%	17,403	13.2%	5.7%
Hispanics	6,181	17.9%	30,316	23.0%	5.1%
Asians	2,280	6.6%	8,200	6.2%	-0.4%
Others	1,228	3.5%	5,867	4.5%	0.9%
No response	2,105	6.1%	3,976	3.0%	-3.1%
Total	34,607		131,818		

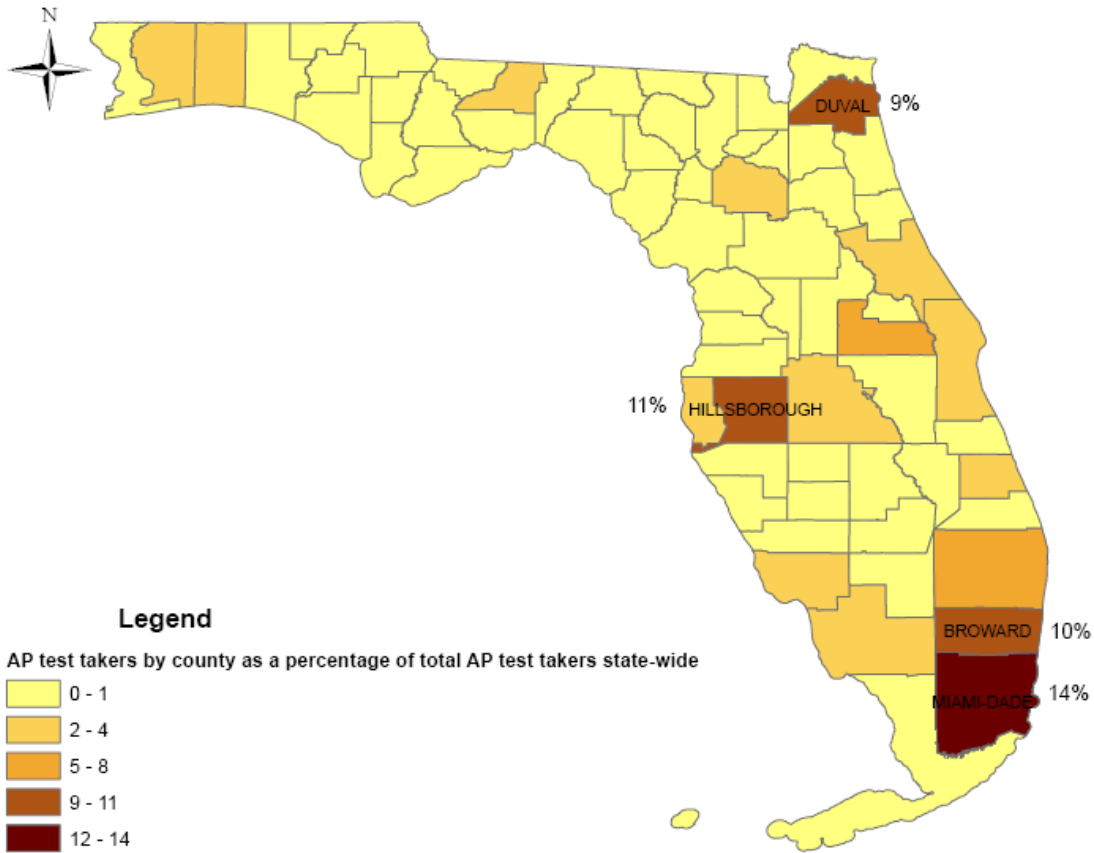
However, students still do not have equal access to an AP course in the state of Florida. As shown in the following map, over 80% of the high schools in Broward County offer at least 1 AP course, while no high schools in 6 rural districts in north Florida offer any AP course.

Figure 2
AP Course Availability, By County



The disparity in AP course offerings has created a program that is concentrated geographically in large urban areas. Of the 131,818 students in Florida who took an AP test in 2009, 57,659 (or 44%) resided in only 4 of Florida’s 67 counties: Broward, Duval, Hillsborough, and Miami Dade. These large urban school districts participate aggressively in the AP program, recording some of the highest AP participation rates in the state, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Distribution of AP Test Takers, by County



Even within School Districts that participate aggressively in the AP program, there is substantial room for expanding access to AP courses and increasing the number of students who take an AP exam. As shown in Table 3, for example, only 23.87% of the 10th to 12th grade students in Miami Dade took an AP exam, while 50.32% of the 10th to 12th grade students in Duval County took an AP exam.

Table 3
AP Test-Taking and Performance in Selected School Districts, 2008-2009

County	10TH-12TH Graders	AP Test Takers	% of AP Test Takers	Number of High Schools	Passing rate	Passing rate			
						White	African American	Hispanics	Asian
Broward	56,575	13,411	23.70%	41	49.02%	55.4%	27.0%	54.1%	53.0%
Duval	23,593	11,871	50.32%	21	53.23%	32.5%	8.7%	27.2%	35.8%
Hillsborough	38,297	14,117	36.86%	27	36.21%	40.1%	17.0%	33.2%	44.2%
Miami Dade	76,506	18,260	23.87%	58	40.45%	54.0%	18.5%	41.2%	45.2%
Orange	35,984	10,522	29.24%	18	42.66%	52.6%	17.5%	38.7%	47.9%
Palm Beach	38,244	9,733	25.45%	27	52.25%	58.2%	25.5%	50.2%	56.5%

Policy Implications

Public debate about the student access to and performance in the AP program should take place within the framework of an accelerator program that is not designed as a surrogate for a rigorous college prep curriculum. We cannot expect to promote a more rigorous and relevant high school curriculum just by expanding the AP program throughout the state. The AP program is a valuable component of a larger state effort to boost rigor in the high school classroom, but it is not the only means by which teachers and principals can enhance the college readiness of their students.

Nevertheless, it provides valuable support and encouragement for students to prepare themselves for college. The waiver of the AP testing fee, combined with the opportunity to earn college credit while still in high school, provides particularly valuable incentives to limited-income students. Florida can do a better job of expanding access to the AP program for limited income-students. In 2008, 17% of all seniors in United States who took and passed an AP exam were from a low income family. In Florida, the participation rate is at 14%.⁴

Florida should continue to develop the AP program and attract more limited-income students to it, but it is not the exclusive means of promoting college readiness. The most effective way to prepare more students for success in college or their careers is by infusing the basic high school curriculum with more rigorous and relevant college prep coursework. ENLACE Florida supports Lumina Foundation's BIG GOAL of increasing the percentage of Americans with higher education credentials or degrees from 39% to 60% by 2025.⁵ This goal has been endorsed by the Gates Foundation, the American Council on Education, the College Board, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and representatives of both major political parties. If and when the United States reaches this ambitious goal, it will once again lead the world in higher education attainment and provide the intellectual foundation for a thriving, competitive, and innovative economy and society. To reach that goal, Florida can not rely solely on the AP program. We will have to increase high school graduation rates, college-going rates, and college graduation rates through a comprehensive effort that must include higher high school graduation requirements.

Florida—and the United States for that matter—is not likely to increase its college attainment rates significantly if our college readiness efforts start and end with the AP program. We can even redouble all of our efforts in the IB and Dual Enrollment programs and still fall far short of the BIG GOAL. To register truly significant increases in our gradua-

⁴ "SREB States Maintain Lead in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate Programs," http://publications.sreb.org/2009/09E05_Lead_AP_IB.pdf

⁵ For Lumina Foundation's Strategic Plan go to: www.luminafoundation.org/goal_2025

tion rates, we will have to embed college and career readiness into the *entire* high school curriculum. In fact, ENLACE Florida has advocated for a college prep curriculum as the default curriculum for all high school students.⁶ Students should be allowed to opt out of this curriculum with parental consent, but all students should be expected to graduate from our high schools prepared to enter and succeed in college or the high-technology workplace. ENLACE Florida is confident that the state can convert its traditional high school program into a college prep curriculum at a minimal cost.

Indeed, plans are already in development that will do just that. Florida is one of 48 states participating in the Common Core Standards initiative of the National Governor's Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. These college- and career-readiness standards, scheduled for completion in early 2010, will be:

- “Aligned with college and work expectations
- Include rigorous content *and* application of knowledge through high-order skills
- Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards
- Internationally benchmarked, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society
- Evidence and/or research based.”⁷

At the same time, Florida is implementing a new school grading system this year that reduces the weight of FCAT scores to 50% and adds other factors that measure college readiness. The other 50% of a school's grade will be determined by other factors, including:

- High school graduation rate of the school
- High school graduation rate of at-risk students who scored at Level 2 or lower on the 8th grade FCAT in reading and math
- Student performance on statewide standardized end-of-course assessments
- Postsecondary readiness of students, as measured by the SAT, ACT, or the Common Placement Test
- Student participation in and passage of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses and exams

⁶“Toward a College Preparatory High School Curriculum in Florida,” ENLACE Florida Policy Brief, Vol. II, Issue 6 (June 2008).

⁷ Common Core Standards Initiative, <http://www.corestandards.org/>

- Annual growth or decline in these components

In addition, legislators in the 2010 session are likely to consider again a high school rigor bill that will, if passed,

- Phase in end-of course exams
- Raise math standards by including a mandatory course in Algebra II
- Raise science standards
- Require all high schools to offer a minimum of four courses in AP, IB, Dual Enrollment, or AICE
- Move the FCAT on-line

These proposed reforms are designed to align Florida with national trends and prepare more students to enter and succeed in college. They represent a viable and comprehensive effort to improve college readiness in our high schools. The AP program is, as it should be, included in these new initiatives. The state, school districts, and teachers should do everything possible to improve the delivery of this program and expand access to it, but we should not take their eye off the big prize: a college prep curriculum throughout our high schools.

ENLACE FLORIDA is a statewide network promoting college readiness, access, and success for Latinos, African-Americans, and other underrepresented students in Florida through non-partisan research, communication, advocacy, and support. The views expressed in this Policy Brief were developed independently and do not reflect the opinions of the universities with which the Leadership Team and staff are affiliated. For more information, visit: www.enlaceflorida.org



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