

POLICY ALERT: College Readiness at Risk



ENLACE FLORIDA

MISSION:

to promote college readiness, access, and success for Latinos, African-Americans, and other underrepresented groups through research, communication, advocacy, and support.

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Florida students have achieved great success in Florida's Advanced Placement (AP) program. Thanks to a unique partnership between the College Board and the State, Florida has registered impressive gains in the number of students enrolled in AP Courses and passing the AP exams. Last year, Florida ranked No. 4 nationally in participation rates and No. 11 in passage. Participation and passage rates have increased steadily for Hispanic and African American students, demonstrating the value of this important college readiness program. Just three years ago, Florida took great pride in closing the achievement gap for Hispanic students, who constituted 24.2% of all AP examinees but represented only 20.7% of the Hispanic student population in the state. These courses, for which students can earn college credit if they score a passing rate on the exam, reduce the time required to earn a college degree and generally foster a more positive learning environment in our high schools.

Given the great success and national distinction that Florida has achieved in the AP program, it is surprising that the Florida Senate has proposed to slash AP funding by another 50%. The program was already cut from \$100 million to \$66 million in 2008, so another deep cut would inflict serious harm on the program. The money is used to train teachers to teach AP courses, pay for the tests, and offer bonuses to AP teachers. Commissioner of Education Eric Smith and School Superintendents around the state are pleading with legislators to maintain funding for this important college readiness program. Hillsborough County Schools Superintendent MaryEllen Elia, who has led an aggressive AP campaign in her district, argued that "AP 'cannot be done on the cheap unless you don't want to get the results."

Now is not the time for Florida to slash the AP program. Indeed, now is the time to build on the gains we've already made by expanding course offerings in schools that currently do not offer enough college prep courses. A recent ENLACE Florida analyses showed the disparities in course offerings by high school. Under-performing schools, many of them with high numbers and percentages of limited income students and racial/ethnic minorities, generally offer fewer AP courses. To ensure that all students have equal access to a college prep curriculum, Florida should be making every effort to offer more courses at under-performing schools. Schools and districts will not be able to do this if the legislators slash AP funding.

Further reductions to the AP program will compel schools to offer fewer courses, meaning that our schools will graduate fewer students who are college ready. While the budget situation is dire, we will not serve our long-term economic needs by producing fewer students who are ready to enter college or the workforce of the 21st Century. The AP program in Florida is a valuable college readiness program that should not suffer another round of budget cuts. Indeed, the AP program has registered such impressive successes that it merits higher levels of state investment to expand educational opportunities for all students. We expect our elected officials to make tough decisions in tough economic times, but drastic reductions to a proven success story is not tough; its just wrong.