

AERA: Illinois High School Expands Access to High-Level Academics

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One of the toughest nuts to crack in secondary schooling is figuring out how to widen access to advanced academic classes so that students of all racial groups, incomes, and achievement levels can take the rigorous coursework they need to get to college.

To address that issue, [Evanston Township High School](#), a diverse, 3,140-student school just outside of Chicago, began to phase in an initiative in the 2011-12 school year to give nearly every incoming freshman a fairer shot at earning honors-level credit and getting on the pathway to higher education. Last week, at the American Educational Research Association's annual conference here, a researcher and an administrator from the district shared some promising results from the first full year of that effort.

"We had a system that tracked kids out of 8th grade using the EXPLORE test," said Pete Bavis, the district's assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. "Once you were in those tracks, you didn't leave. We wanted to create a clear path to advanced coursework."

The problem was that, like a lot of schools, Evanston high school "had racial predictability in coursetaking in 10th to 12th grades," Bavis said. The school's African-American and Latino students were disproportionately represented in non-honors classes, while white students populated honors classes in higher proportions than their numbers would suggest.

"We were two schools," Bavis said, "We were a school for high-achieving, high-flying students and we were a second school for other students."

Evanston's idea, which was controversial in the community, was to essentially consider "every student an honor student before they even set foot in school." Instead of being placed in honors-level classes according to their test-score results, incoming freshman would take honors-quality humanities and biology courses and then be given an opportunity to "earn" honors credit. Of the 750 students who entered the school in the fall of the 2012-13 school year, only 50 students were placed in non-honors courses, mostly due to reading problems.

'Earned Honors'

Under the school's new "earned honors system," students could get honors credit by achieving a C or better during a semester and scoring 80 percent of the points on a series of assessments that were embedded in the curriculum each semester. The tests were designed to align with Advanced Placement standards, the ACT College Readiness Standards, and the Common Core State Standards, according to Bavis.

The educators worked with researchers from the University of Illinois, Northwestern University, and the University of Chicago on an evaluation plan for the initiative. The results were mixed, but potentially promising:

- In the short-term, student engagement rose, and students reported putting more effort into their classes.



- The overall number of students who signed up for AP classes in 10th grade grew.
- Among students who would have been placed in regular classes under the old system, there was an increase in those earning honors credit for one or both semesters.
- Thirty-one percent of students who scored in lower half on the ACT's EXPLORE reading assessment earned at least some honors credit as freshmen.

Conversely, the evaluation found, not all the students whose scores would have previously placed them in honors courses earned honors credit under the new system. The Evanston educators said the real proof of success will be in whether more students, and more students of color, continue to take advanced courses and go on to college. Results on that question are still several years away.

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