

No Child Written Off: 'You Can Get Smarter'

In Evanston, a radical experiment is under way to prove that intelligence is not fixed and achievement gaps are not inevitable.



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Evanston, Ill.--It's lunchtime at Evanston Township High School, and a group of students, teachers, and staff are meeting in a classroom. There's free pizza and

lemonade, and a stack of T-shirts that say "teamASAP" on the front and "FOLLOW ME" on the back.

At the top of today's agenda: planning the annual "Pathways to AP" forum, an event that informs younger students and families about Advanced Placement classes.

"Who's coming?" calls out Beth Arey, the school's college and career coordinator.

Arms shoot up from the crowd of 30-odd teenagers munching and chatting around the room.

"We want to hear from you. We want to hear from the people in the AP classes," says Kevin McCaffrey, the school's head of AP recruitment and retention.

"And what do we want to look like?" calls out Dale Leibforth, chair of the math department.

"Like Evanston!" calls out a student from near the pizzas.

Evanston Township High School (ETHS) is the only public high school in Evanston. In theory, it's a place where teenagers from all over town mix and interact. But for generations, the student body has separated like oil and water. More-affluent--usually white--students tend to take honors and Advanced Placement courses. Lower-income--usually minority--students do not.

With the goal of making AP courses better reflect Evanston's diversity, ETHS has launched an ambitious, expensive, and sometimes controversial set of initiatives. In the 1950s, the school was one of seven that piloted the College Board's AP program. Now it's challenging old assumptions about who belongs in advanced academic classes.

This Is Not About Programs

"I'll mention one concept that is critical to this," Superintendent Eric Witherspoon tells me when we meet in his office. "This is not about programs. You can't program your way out of these kinds of disparities in achievement."

When Witherspoon came to Evanston nine years ago, the tall, white-haired superintendent expected to find a different kind of job. He's spent his career leading large, urban districts with tight budgets; ETHS is the only school in District 202, and its per-student operational budget is nearly twice the state average. None of his previous districts had a high school with fireplaces in the entrance hall, a planetarium in one of its interior courtyards, and two on-site swimming pools.

Witherspoon knew that ETHS was diverse. The school educates teenagers whose parents are high-powered lawyers and teenagers who are homeless. Today, about 43 percent of students are white, 31 percent are black, 17 percent are Hispanic, and 4 percent are Asian. More than four in 10 students come from low-income families.

"When I came here, though, what surprised me was how segregated the school was internally," Witherspoon remembers. When he walked the hallways or visited a cafeteria, he saw a diverse mix of students. When he popped his head into classrooms, he did not.

"It didn't take a rocket scientist to look at it more carefully and predict that level of segregation by the level of the class," he says. "Our Advanced Placement classes were disproportionately white, and our classes for struggling students were disproportionately nonwhite."

The more Witherspoon looked at the data, the more he saw that the school wasn't focused on preparing all students for advanced work. There was only one pathway to AP, and it led through honors courses. Honors students read different books, completed different assignments, and were held to a higher academic standard. They were on the college track.

This kind of divide [isn't unusual](#). But to Witherspoon, it was unconscionable. He didn't want to excuse the school's racial and socioeconomic achievement gap on parenting or peer pressure or third-grade teaching. And neither did many of his staff members. "We don't want to just say that we're a place where all students are successful," Leibforth says. "We actually want to make it a reality."

What Does Systemic Change Look Like?

Witherspoon began by building on earlier efforts to boost academic achievement. ETHS already had a number of academic supports in place, like AVID, a nonprofit program that helps students in advanced classes build study skills. Under his new administration, those supports expanded to include department study centers, early morning extra help, Saturday study sessions.

In 2009, the district started requiring all staff to participate in a two-day seminar that taught them how to have constructive conversations about race. "We didn't just want to aggregate the data by race without having a protocol to talk about race," says Marcus Campbell, principal and assistant superintendent. The seminars made some parents uncomfortable.

"No question, there was discomfort," Witherspoon says. "There were even people who used terminology like, 'quit stirring it up,' things like that."

Then the district proposed something even more controversial. For years, scores on an eighth-grade standardized test had determined which students were placed into ninth-grade honors science and humanities classes. Witherspoon's team proposed replacing that system with mixed-level courses in which all ninth-graders would enroll. The classes were designed to align with AP requirements, their sizes were small, and students could earn honors credit by performing well on certain assessments.

The school board approved the new "earned honors" approach to humanities classes in 2010. Some parents of honors students threatened to pull their kids out of school. A mom told the *Chicago Tribune* that at least one parent was considering a lawsuit. They were worried the new system wouldn't sufficiently challenge their children.

"There's a lot of community support for addressing achievement-gap issues and equity issues," Elliot Frolichstein-Appel, an ETHS parent, told me. "But I think there's also an awareness of, you know, not at the price of my kid--or anyone else's

kid--who would be tracked into honors and would probably be taking AP exams anyway, having a diluted experience." The district later expanded the earned honors approach to include ninth-grade science courses.

ETHS also adjusted its existing budget to spend much more money on professional development, including training teachers how to instruct mixed-level classes. The school has exposed teachers and counselors to the latest research on the kinds of social and emotional support teenagers need, and it has brought in prominent experts, such as Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck, to speak with staff.

As Witherspoon explains all the changes, he gets more and more animated. "Even the belief that intelligence is malleable [has taken root]. You can get smarter," he says, banging his hands on the table for emphasis. *You can get smarter-- bam bam bam.*

"You're not born smart. You can get smarter," he says again.

All of the district's changes are built around a single idea: All students can learn and grow. Once that becomes the mantra, then AP courses are no longer just for "gifted" kids. They're courses that, because they're challenging, can make kids smarter and better prepared for college.

Redefining Success

In the past decade, Evanston Township High School's AP program has seen a crazy amount of growth. Nine years ago, about 38 percent of juniors and seniors had taken at least one AP exam, and 77 percent of tests earned a passing grade or higher. Last year, 64 percent of juniors and seniors took at least one AP exam, and 71 percent of tests earned a passing grade or higher.

Here's what those numbers mean for the class of 2014: 88 percent of white graduates took at least one AP exam. So did 82 percent of Asian graduates, 60 percent of Hispanic graduates, and 44 percent of African-American graduates.

The school still has a yawning achievement gap. And it's too early to tell whether the new ninth-grade structure has improved access to AP classes, says David Figlio, a Northwestern University professor (and EHS parent) who is conducting an evaluation of the change.

But administrators say that the early signs are encouraging. A wider range of students are trying out AP courses. Some students who would have placed into regular ninth-grade courses under the old system are earning honors credit.

And there's an energy in the school embodied by groups such as Team Access and Success in Advanced Placement. It was formed in 2011, when nine students--representing a range of races and ethnicities--asked Leibforth and Arey if they could get together occasionally and brainstorm improvements to the school's AP program.

Team ASAP now has about 250 student members. The group's meetings are a chance for them to vent, hang out, and laugh at Leibforth's goofy jokes. For teachers and staff, the meetings are a carefully calibrated socio-emotional intervention. If a student says an assignment was easy, for example, Leibforth and Arey will ask why. How did that student study? What did she focus on? *You're not born smart. You can get smarter.*

They also show students their opinions matter by acting on requests big and small, from buying Post-it notes to starting a summer college application camp. "What's the secret to all of this? Listening to kids and acting on it," Leibforth says.

At the pizza lunch a few weeks ago, senior Jonathan Senecal was sitting near the back of the room. He was wearing gray sweatpants and a gray hoodie. He took three AP courses last year. His favorite was AB calculus, although he initially felt a little out of place. "On the first day, the students looked at me like--did you walk into the wrong room? Are you sure you're supposed to be here?" he says. He wasn't walking into a particularly diverse class. "I was like the black kid in the room," he says.

Senecal's parents, who were born in Haiti, both went to college, and he had always planned on taking AP courses. "But I did notice that most of my peers weren't," he says. There was "kind of a stigma of--it would be too hard."

Senecal ended up earning a perfect score on the AB calculus exam. "I had a great teacher," he says. Team ASAP helped, too, by introducing him to a community of AP students. "You want to find people who want to learn just as much as you do," Senecal says.

ETHS administrators are proud of the school's high test scores, but they're quick to note that even a failing score on an AP exam can mean progress--if it's earned by a student who decided to challenge himself, stuck it out all year, and learned something.

"We're now looking at outcomes that are more life-determining than how you score on a standardized test," Witherspoon says. "How do you learn to learn? What do you learn about your own potential?"

Not too long ago, Rich Kaplan, Senecal's calculus teacher, got an email from a former student. She's African-American and had struggled in calculus. "I'm sure she got a '1' [the lowest score]" on the final exam, Kaplan says. She wrote to say that his teaching made her the person she is today. And to ask if he'd write her a recommendation letter--she's applying to doctoral programs in clinical psychology.

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