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Recruiting for Advanced Placement

Brandis Friedman (/stories-by-author/brandis-friedman) | April 27, 2015 10:30 am

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Last week, Evanston Township High School (<http://www.eths.k12.il.us/main.aspx>) was ranked in the top 3 percent on a list of the most challenging schools across the country.

The list, created by the *Washington Post*, is based on how many rigorous courses, like Advanced Placement, a school offers. But administrators at ETHS say while they've always offered AP courses, and others like it, not all students were participating.



Students here at Evanston Township High School outside Chicago can take anything from automotive service excellence certification to astrophysics.

They also have their pick of almost 30 Advanced Placement courses. Dale Leibforth heads AP recruitment.

“Portfolio studio or Latin, art history, music theory, statistics and calculus,” Leibforth said, naming several AP courses offered at ETHS.

Even though it's a top-rated school, with a diverse student body, until recently only certain students were picking AP courses.

“We had students of color and low-income students terribly underrepresented in our Advanced Placement courses,” said ETHS Supt. Eric Witherspoon. “There's still a predictability among student achievement in our school district based on race, and we do see a wide gap in some areas.”

When Eric Witherspoon became superintendent eight years ago, he noticed that AP classrooms were filled with mostly white students, while regular classrooms were filled with mostly minority and often low-income students, who make up 41 percent of the student body.



Witherspoon said he realized students were being tracked into AP courses through honors classes based on their eighth grade standardized test performance, while other students were tracked into less rigorous courses.

"It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that here we're getting disparate results, but in fact, we have a structure that may be even is causing some of those disparate results. But certainly if not causing, certainly not doing anything to change those results," Witherspoon said.

To bridge that gap, Evanston Township High School began enrolling all incoming freshmen in the honors English and history class, called humanities.

Eventually, all ninth-grade students—except for those reading below grade level—were also enrolled in the honors level biology, no matter how they performed on their eighth grade standardized test.

The school is hoping to implement the same strategy for ninth-grade math.

"We've put a lot of work into convincing students that this is something everyone can do. This is a place where you belong," Leibforth said. "Where you have shown you can show resilience, you can show this grit, you can show the hard work and effort that it takes to be successful."

The idea is to set higher expectations of all students early, so that more of them are prepared for an AP class by eleventh grade.

But the work didn't stop there.

"The recruitment, the access, stripping away barriers, we've done that. Now, it's you're in the class," Leibforth said. "We've done the easy part. Now, it's how can you be successful? We have instituted just a series of supports for the kids."

The school developed ways to be sure students who enrolled in honors, and eventually Advanced Placement classes, didn't fail.



One of them is a program called Team Access and Success in Advanced Placement or Team ASAP. It's a support group for AP students.

"For me it's kind of like a stress reliever. I don't know, just whenever I'm having an issue in one of my classes I can just kind of come here and talk about it, and talk to other students who might be having the same issues," Vanessa Senecal, an eleventh-grade student, said.

"It's a great way to just get AP study strategies, and I know that I plan on taking AP classes next year," said Cypher Eason, a tenth-grade student.

Senior Jonathan Senecal said black male students are often still underrepresented. But he said this push to diversify AP classes is making a noticeable difference.

"The Advanced Placement is traditionally kind of a white space, but, like in recent years, we've seen it changing a whole lot. I know that even in my stats class, it's like everyone's very well-represented," he said. "What it helps to do is you get a lot of unique perspectives, people got different kinds of analogies, they're bringing different things to the table and everyone really improves just because of that."

The district says early numbers show (<http://www.eths.k12.il.us/assets/1/Documents/AP%20Board%20Report%202014.pdf>) the changes it's made are making a positive difference for all students.

Between 2011 and 2014 alone, the number of students taking the AP exam is up 31 percent.

White students showed a 19 percent increase, black students taking AP tests are up 35 percent, and Latino students showed the most growth, up 78 percent in those three years.

Not only are more students taking AP tests, but the number of students scoring a three or higher—a score that can lead to college credit—is up too.

For white students, it's up by 31 percent, black students by 98 percent, and Latino students by a whopping 116 percent.

"It's a lot more about truly educating yourself to your own curiosities, as opposed to just regurgitating facts. You really get to, like she said, challenge yourself. Test your skills. You discover new skills that you have," Jonathan Senecal said. "It's a lot more helpful in terms of like letting you figure out what you'd like to spend the rest of your life doing, what you'd choose as a career."



Northwestern University professor and researcher David Figlio (<http://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/faculty-experts/fellows/figlio.html>) is also an Evanston Township High School parent.

He's volunteering his research expertise to study if and how well these changes are working.

"What they are doing, I think, could be seen as risky, right? Evanston high has a formula in some regards for success for the advantaged kids. And so any monkeying around with that formula could be risky," Figlio said. "But then at the same time, it could pay off in big ways. So we need to know what's happening with the students who would've been in the honors classes anyway before this happened, as well as the students who wouldn't have been in the honors classes had this not been happening."

Students say that while they appreciate the increased number of students of color, when they are in class, they should have just one focus.

"I feel like there are classes that are more diverse than other classes, but it's not something that you should pay attention to," Deyon Keaton, a senior, said. "If it's what you want, go after it."

Figlio adds that a community like Evanston is an ideal place to test this model. It's rich in diversity, resources and the will to make a change – a change that educators hope could be replicated in other districts.

ETHS parent Sara Polonsky's eleventh-grade daughter, Shanti, is enrolled in both AP calculus and AP physics classes. Shanti recently scored a 34 (out of 36) on the ACT exam. She says while the AP calculus is challenging, she's frustrated with what she calls the "watering down" of the AP physics class.

What's your daughter's experience been with her AP physics course?

It's been so frustrating. They're trying to make everything "mixed honors," which means people of all skills can be in the same class. I totally understand the intention: for kids who're struggling and if they're in the class with kids who're doing well, then you have children to serve as the role model to improve behaviors, demonstrate study skills, answer the questions correctly in the classroom. So, for my daughter, who's doing well, she's teaching other people, which is great for her self-esteem and she's giving back to the community. But, then she doesn't have that same experience. She never gets to be with people who're challenging her and pushing her to improve, if she's always the best in the class.

The other issue is that she's been in classes where the teacher is so wrapped up in discipline, because it's a mixed ability class where people just aren't motivated to be there, that she doesn't feel like she's getting the teaching that she should because the teacher is so involved in other issues.

So that's the downside, when you're a very bright person in the class and you're not receiving the academic rigor that you would like.

What are your thoughts on the structure of the ETHS honors/AP program?

The one that's kind of been a waste for her is this physics class. I feel like the College Board is watering down the APs by even creating that class. It's essentially an honors-level physics class, rather than a college-level physics class.

It'll be interesting to see what the AP scores are. If they're pushing more people to take the APs and all their AP scores are going down, what have you accomplished? And not so much for the school, but really, what are you accomplishing for the kids? They're taking this class, and if you don't get a 4 or 5, it's not going to work in terms of giving you college credit. Now, it may expose you to supposed college-level rigor, which might be helpful in terms of getting people toward college readiness, so in that sense, maybe it's useful or helpful.

Does she feel like it's always been this watered down, like in her previous honors classes?

She's been very frustrated by the chemistry honors. She was frustrated by some of the behaviors in some of her classes, by the other students. Just people in the classes have different motivation. As she's gotten into classes where it's at a level that's engaging to her and the other kids are more engaged, she enjoys it more.

Interview has been condensed and edited.



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**Student** • 2 years ago

As a student taking many AP classes and typically being among the best students in the class at ETHS, I did feel like the mixed honors classes were watered-down, but I think it was a worthy tradeoff. In my classes, I saw a lot of students who struggled but really gained a lot from being in an environment with high-achieving students. It's obviously a tough call to have some students be bored for the benefit of other students, and I'm not sure if it has hurt my education to have not done much in a class (history, for example) for an entire year, but taking AP classes this year without preceding classes that were challenging to me was manageable and I could still reap the benefits of them without a lot of preparation.

Understandably, most high-achieving students, or parents of high-achieving students for that matter, are against this watering-down of classes, so it'll be hard to find a way to benefit the entire school and leave everyone happy.

1 ^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ▾

**Fellow Classmate** • 2 years ago

"So, for my daughter, who's doing well, she's teaching other people, which is great for her self-esteem and she's giving back to the community. But, then she doesn't have that same experience. She never gets to be with people who're challenging her and pushing her to improve, if she's always the best in the class."

This is a very presumptuous claim that she is always the best in the class. I personally am in Latin 3 Honors with her and in no way is she far above everyone else. Let's also mention that there is a teacher (Mrs. Whickham) who has a vast background of Latin and challenges her students everyday. And lastly I would like to bring up the point that she rarely actually helps class mates but serves more of a distraction sometimes. So before we praise this girl for doing the schools job for them, I think we should look at the facts.

1 ^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ▾

**hotel** • 2 years ago

A little background on the so-called watering down of the AP Physics courses:

Up until this year, the College Board offered two AP-level physics classes, Physics B and Physics C, where Physics B was the non-calculus alternative to Physics C. However, over the years, it had been determined that the Physics B curriculum was basically impossible to complete within a single year, and it was considered to be one of the hardest classes ever. So, with the 2014-15 school year, two new classes were introduced: AP Physics 1 and 2. So of course those two classes specifically may seem 'watered down'— that's what they were created to do.

Also, AP classes are definitely not the same as the mixed honors classes.

- yet another student

P.S.: If you really want to get angry at a class model, look at the 'earned honors' classes, like freshman biology. In order to get honors credit for those classes, students have to take four mandatory tests throughout the year. If their score across all four tests is 80% (if I recall, each test is 100 points, 80% is 320/400) or higher, they get the honors credit for that class. However, because the tests are mandatory and factored into the students' grades, students who don't want honors credit and don't do well on the tests are doubly hurt.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ▾

**Mark R Kroll** • 2 years ago

She is correct in that "AP" Physics and Chemistry are watered down and should really only be categorized as Honors. ChemPhys is really the AP rigor.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ▾

**Nick Cannon** → Mark R Kroll • 2 years ago

How can you say that AP chem is watered down when one of the two AP chem classes started with 22 students and is down to 12. Dropping an AP class is no easy task at ETHS and I suggest that you re evaluate how "watered down" a class really is before publicly ridiculing the course.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ▾

**Mark R Kroll** → Nick Cannon • 2 years ago

Nick, I can say it based on the feedback I have gotten directly from students in the classes and from the post here and elsewhere with respect to the effects of pushing unprepared students into higher level classes then they are ready for. Also, the very stat you mention, where almost half of the students end up dropping the class. While you look at that stat and say it is proof that the class isn't watered down. I look at it and see it as proof that the class can't help but end up delivering a watered down experience for the 12 that didn't drop it, while the other 10 were still struggling prior to dropping.

The real point I was trying to make (and admittedly rather poorly) was that if the author of the original post wants to ensure a more positive experience in Chem and Physics that the ChemPhys program might be better and less susceptible to the watered down experience many find in the independent Chem or Physics classes. I believe this to be the case because it is generally understood by students that ChemPhys program is more rigorous. Thus there is a tendency for unprepared students to self-select out of that program earlier, and therefore having the effect of fewer unprepared students watering down the experience for the rest.

<snark> That said, if you still have an issue with me "publicly" expressing my opinion, (and at the risk of perpetuating the watered down experience for others), might I suggest AP US History? </snark>

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ▾

**eths parent** • 2 years ago

The elimination of tracking for freshman Humanities is a disgrace. ETHS is not pulling up the underachievers as much as they are limiting those with the highest potential.

As for the Washington Post ranking, that ranking counts number of students *taking* an AP exam, and other exams, and divides by the number of graduating seniors. The pass rate does not matter. So for ETHS to improve its ranking it only needs to push more students into taking AP exams (and the student has to pay about \$100 per exam). But what is happening to the passing rate on those exams? ETHS has not published this. Statewide the passing rate among black students is very low, but has been improving over the past 10 years. AP exam passing rates for white students has been dropping. How does ETHS compare? Taking an AP exam is stressful, and failing one must take a toll on a student. I question whether ETHS is helping students by pushing AP exam enrollment so hard.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Eileen** → eths parent • 2 years ago

The article DOES address the passing rate:

"Not only are more students taking AP tests, but the number of students scoring a three or higher—a score that can lead to college credit—is up too.

For white students, it's up by 31 percent, black students by 98 percent, and Latino students by a whopping 116 percent."

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**eths parent** → Eileen • 2 years ago

Eileen. You are correct. I take back my criticism of eths regarding ap. I do think the Washington Post ranking would be much better if the counted number of students passing ap rather than taking.

Thank you for pointing out my oversight.

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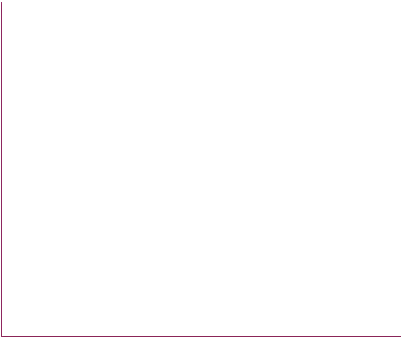
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