

Education Week

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AP Teachers Divided Over Push to Open Classes to All

Poll finds educators torn over whether students should be screened

By [Stephen Sawchuk](#)

Teachers of Advanced Placement courses almost uniformly praise the program's continued adherence to a rigorous, high-quality curriculum and assessments, even as it expands to more schools and students.

But they are divided on whether schools should offer AP classes to all interested students, or only to those who demonstrate an ability to master the material, a [new survey](#) released last month concludes.

The survey results sound a faint but distinct warning for the program, said a vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the Washington-based think tank that commissioned the survey.

"Teachers seem torn," said Michael J. Petrilli. "They see the value of getting more students into AP, and to a large extent so far that [expansion] has gone well. But they do have some worries that the quality of students isn't what it used to be, and that that will have a deleterious effect on what they're able to do in these courses."

Sponsored by the New York City-based College Board, the Advanced Placement program allows students who take a demanding exam on their AP coursework and receive a score of 3 or better on a five-point scale to earn college credit. The program has grown rapidly over the past decade.

Trevor Packer, the College Board's vice president for the AP program, said the board welcomed the survey, especially as federal lawmakers prepare to renew a push for higher standards and improved assessments.

"It's asking all the right questions about how we preserve quality while expanding access," Mr. Packer said, "and it sets the pace for questions we need to continue to ask."

The nationally representative survey, conducted last October by the Farkas Duffett Research Group, reflects the paper and online polling of 1,024 public school teachers of one or more AP courses. Its margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Screening Students?

According to the survey, 52 percent of teachers favored allowing only students who meet pre-set criteria—such as teacher approval or a certain grade point average—to take AP classes. A sizable minority, 38 percent, said the classes should be open to all interested students. Overall, 63 percent of teachers said they supported some form of screening to ensure that students who take Advanced Placement classes are adequately prepared.

That position stands in contrast to many schools' policies for admitting students into AP courses. Nearly 70 percent of teachers reported that their schools have an open-enrollment policy. That figure, Mr. Packer said, is roughly in line with the College Board's internal surveys of AP teachers.

Teachers' support of screening mechanisms for AP courses suggests some concern that the level of instruction offered in those classes might fall as fewer well-prepared students enroll in them, the Fordham Institute's Mr. Petrilli said.

"For a long time, [AP] was the one place where the high-performing could be challenged and learn at a quick pace," he said.

Mr. Packer acknowledged that concern, but he added that screening mechanisms must be carefully designed or they could block access by minority and disadvantaged students.

"Too often in the past, students who have had the potential to succeed in AP were denied access," he said. "To deny a student the chance to exercise the skills they need to succeed in college—none of us want that on our hands."

However, schools' commitment to access should not be confused with a desire for prestige, Mr. Packer said, and the survey provides some evidence of that motivation. Most of the teachers surveyed attributed the program's expansion, in part, to students' seeking to make college-application portfolios more competitive, and to schools' trying to boost their position in national rankings that rely on the ratio of AP courses taken as a proxy for school quality.

Quality-Control Steps

But both teachers and Mr. Petrilli praised the College Board's efforts to ensure program quality during its expansion and as a new crop of teachers begins to lead the courses.

One such measure, begun in 2006, requires new teachers to submit their syllabuses and lesson plans for review by college professors before they receive the College Board's approval to offer AP classes.

Although the board doesn't perform site visits to ensure teachers' instruction matches those plans, it does plan to conduct more in-depth analyses of the correlation between teachers' materials and their students' scores, Mr. Packer said.

In July 2010, the College Board will provide a direct, online feed to teachers with detailed breakdowns of how students scored on the tests. Once the direct-feed system is in place, Mr. Packer said, "we will be well positioned for the next step of the dialogue with schools."

The AP program, meanwhile, is likely to receive additional attention as federal policymakers ramp up efforts to promote higher standards for education under the recently enacted economic-stimulus package.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, for instance, has indicated that putting more-rigorous standards and assessments in place will be a key criterion for qualifying for part of the "Race to the Top" fund, a \$5 billion pot of money under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act that will be awarded at his discretion.

The Fordham Institute survey suggests that Advanced Placement could be a model on that front: Ninety percent of teachers responding reported that AP tests were well aligned to the curriculum, in contrast to their generally lackluster support for other forms of standardized testing.

There are also signs that Congress could include additional incentives for schools to adopt AP courses when it reauthorizes the No Child Left Behind Act.

In 2007, for instance, education leaders in the U.S. House of Representatives proposed allowing schools whose students earned passing scores on AP exams to earn credit toward the schools' annual standardized-testing goals under the NCLB law.

