

Finding America's Missing AP and IB Students

JUNE 2013



The Education Trust



EQUAL
OPPORTUNITY
SCHOOLS

TO THE POINT

- ▶ AP and IB courses are a powerful means of disrupting high-end achievement gaps, but too many low-income students and students of color are missing out.
- ▶ Expanding access to more schools is needed, but if every school with an existing AP program focused on finding its own “missing students,” we could almost entirely eliminate participation gaps.
- ▶ Many schools have successfully eliminated inequitable patterns in students taking advanced courses. Their stories offer lessons for others ready and willing to take action.

Finding America's Missing AP and IB Students

BY CHRISTINA THEOKAS AND REID SAARIS

Visit a local high school and ask to sit in on one of their best, most challenging classes. More often than not, you'll be shown an Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) course. Designed to provide a head start on a college education, these classes conclude with rigorous, externally scored examinations, success on which can earn students college credit. In addition to helping students prepare for college-level work, they increase students' chances of college admission and success.

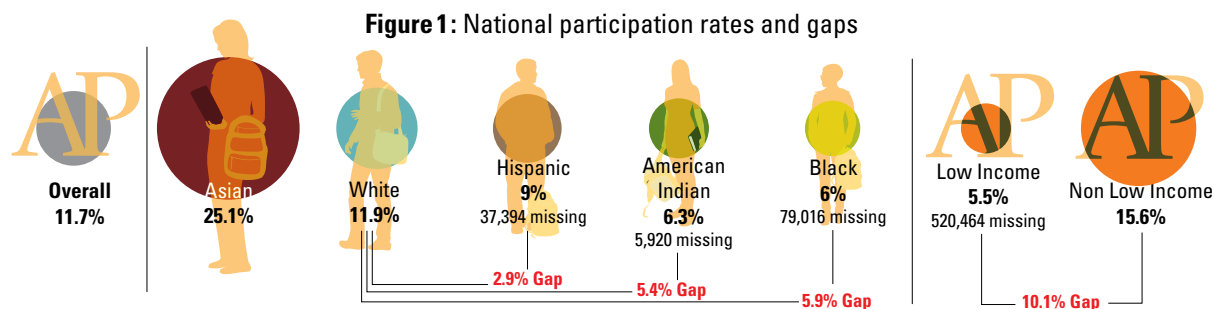
First-time visitors to such classes are likely to be impressed. The teachers are engaging, the intellectual rigor is high, and the assignments are challenging. What you won't see, however, are many black, Hispanic, or low-income students. Fortunately, these patterns have not gone unnoticed; federal and state governments, districts, and even the private sector have stepped up to help expand access believing in the worthiness of advanced study. However, virtually every analysis finds continued gaps in participation rates in these courses by race and family income levels (see Figure 1 for our analysis of national AP participation data). Lost in these participation gaps are real students. Lost, too, are some of the reasons why these gaps persist, despite the effort to close them.

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In our report, we examine AP/IB participation patterns nationally and then by school to estimate how many students are missing out. We try to determine if the gaps are the result of spotty AP course availability in schools serving concentrations of black, Hispanic, American Indian, and low-income students, or if the gaps are primarily caused by an enrollment problem, meaning these students are in schools with AP courses but are not enrolled in them.

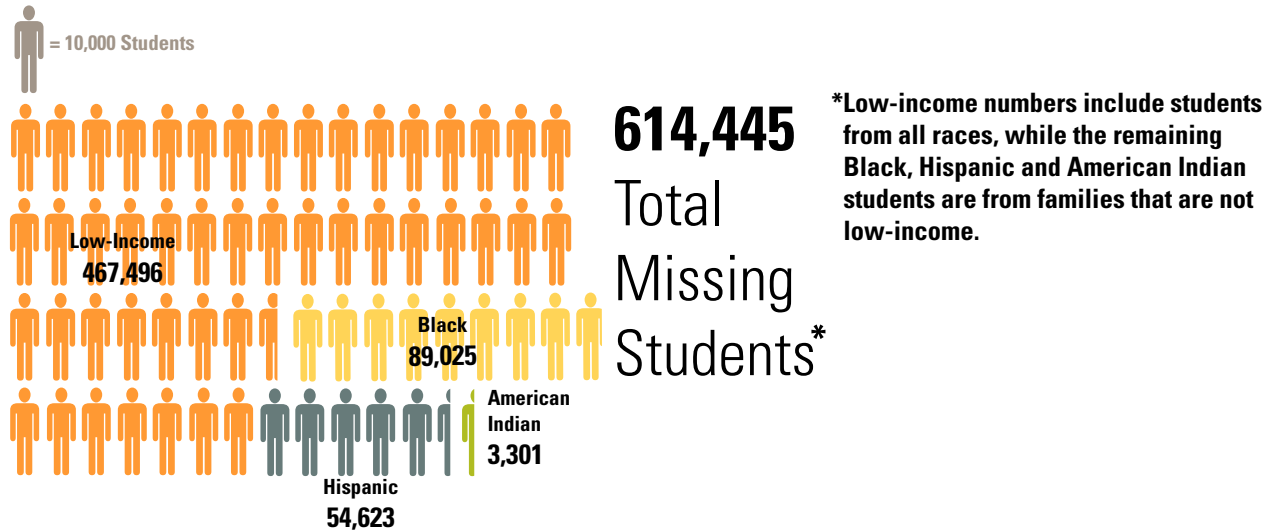
It turns out that, each year, more than half a million low-income students and students of color are "missing" from AP and IB participation — students who would benefit from these advanced opportunities if they participated at the same rate as other students. It also turns out that expanding AP to more schools is only a small part of the solution. The data show that if every school with an existing AP program focused on finding its own "missing students," we could almost entirely eliminate the national participation gaps. For IB, an emphasis on expansion remains a worthy goal, as less than 5 percent of high schools have a program (compared to 71 percent with AP). But in those schools already offering an IB program, equitable access is a problem (see Figure 3).

Although we have a long way to go before AP and IB participation gaps are closed, there is some encouraging news in the school-level data: Many schools have eliminated gaps in participation by race and family income, and others are moving in that direction. For example, 10 percent of high schools nationally have no missing low-income students. In these schools, the participation of poor students in the



Participation in the AP program represents a small part of the student body; slightly more than 1 in 10 students participate. Clearly, some subgroups are more likely to participate, including Asian and middle and high-income students. White students participate at the average and low-income, black, and American Indian students are the least likely to participate; slightly more than 1 in 20 students. Gaps represent large numbers of students.

This EdTrust report was written by Christina Theokas, director of research at The Education Trust, and Reid Saaris, executive director of Equal Opportunity Schools. For a full copy, visit www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/Missing_Students.pdf

Figure 2: Number of missing students due to AP participation gaps within schools

AP program is equal to or greater than that of students who are not low income.

Lessons from schools that have closed their gaps suggest there are some steps districts and high schools can take immediately to remove barriers that are contributing to inequitable participation patterns.

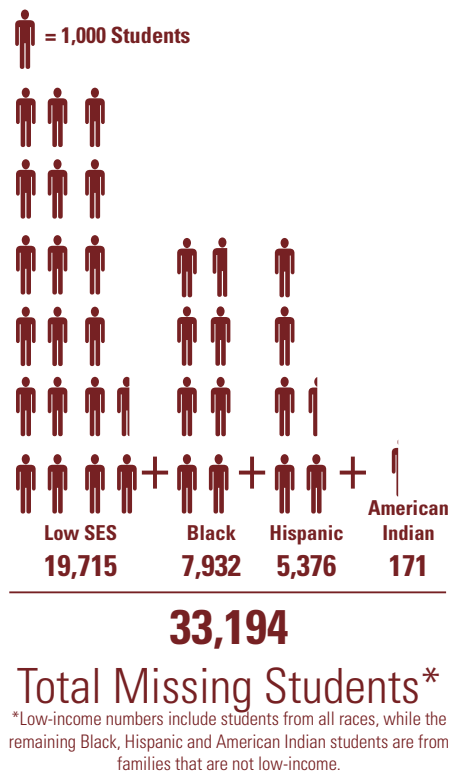
District and high school educators can:

- Examine their data and start asking questions
- Audit program entry requirements
- Examine what students and teachers know about accessing the AP/IB program
- Consider expectations and long-held beliefs about which students should participate
- Think about how to improve readiness and the pipeline prior to high school
- Set a specific, near-term goal to find missing AP/IB students and clearly articulate that goal.

Now that we know the problem exists both between and within schools, there is more work to be done by policymakers as well.

Policymakers can:

- Be vocal about gaps at the high end
- Make sure all high school students have access
- Ensure grant programs that fund AP/IB programs focus on equitable participation
- Require that all high schools offer a minimum number of AP/IB classes and provide necessary support
- Report participation and success rates in courses offered for all student groups at the school level
- Identify diverse schools and districts that have narrowed or eliminated these gaps
- Take action.

Figure 3: Number of missing students due to IB participation gaps within schools.

Data show that AP/IB opportunity gaps exist in many places, between schools, among types of programs offered, and within schools. There are immediate actions that can be taken right now to improve the experiences of many students.

This report is part of Ed Trust's Shattering Expectations series. For more about the series, visit www.edtrust.org. ■

ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels — pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people — especially those who are black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families — to lives on the margins of the American mainstream.

ABOUT EQUAL OPPORTUNITY SCHOOLS

Equal Opportunity Schools partners with school, district, county, state, and national leaders around the country to close race and income enrollment and success gaps in their Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs. By identifying, enrolling, and supporting missing students in challenging college-preparatory courses, we boost their academic motivation and achievement, and their likelihood of going to and graduating from college.

SHATTERING EXPECTATIONS

ABOUT THIS SERIES

In this series, we will be producing reports focused on calling attention to gaps at the high end of achievement and shattering expectations about the achievement of our low-income students and students of color that have existed for far too long. This is the second paper in the series; the first report, *Breaking the Glass Ceiling of Achievement for Low-Income Students and Students of Color*, outlined the progress and gaps that remain in which students reach advanced levels of performance, as measured with the National Assessment of Educational Progress. This report examines the high-end opportunity gap that exists in regard to AP and IB course taking within our schools. Future papers will examine other opportunity gaps, as well as the opportunity costs of certain course taking patterns. Each report will provide examples of schools that are breaking these long entrenched patterns and how they are helping all their students reach high levels of performance. In general, papers in this series will focus on strategies for increasing excellence and rigor in our schools, while also attending to equity.



The Education Trust

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