

5 Things State Leaders Should Do to Advance Equity:

Access to and Success in Advanced Coursework



1

Use data to identify the barriers that prevent students of color and students from low-income families from enrolling in advanced courses and take action.

2

Set clear and measurable goals for advancing access to and success in advanced coursework.

3

Invest to expand advanced coursework opportunities — both courses and seats.

4

Require and support districts to expand eligibility for advanced courses.

5

Support Black, Latino, and low-income students' success in advanced courses.





Based on The Education Trust’s analysis of data from the [Civil Rights Data Collection](#) and the [Common Core of Data](#), students in low-poverty schools are nearly twice as likely to be enrolled in eighth grade algebra as students in high-poverty schools. Similarly, students in schools with the lowest percentages of students of color are about 1.5 times as likely to be enrolled in eighth grade algebra than students in schools with the highest percentages of students of color. These inequities prevent Black, Latino, and low-income students from accessing the broad benefits of advanced coursework.

Research shows that when students are given access to advanced coursework opportunities, they work harder and engage more in school, leading to fewer absences and suspensions and higher graduation rates.¹ Rigorous high school courses [contribute to postsecondary success](#) because students can graduate from high school with college credits, giving them a head start. Students who enter college with six or more credits are more likely to earn a degree. When advanced opportunities are extended to students of color, and when teachers receive training and resources, these students thrive alongside their peers.² Not surprisingly, opportunities to take advanced courses open the door for Black and Latino students to have even [more opportunities](#) for advanced work in the future.

But too many Black, Latino, and low-income students, do not receive these opportunities. They are often locked out early, when they are denied access to gifted and talented programs in elementary school, and later when they are denied access to eighth grade algebra and not given the chance to participate in advanced coursework or programs in high school, such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and dual enrollment. These students are missing out on critical opportunities that can set them up for success in college and careers. That’s why all students, including Black, Latino, and low-income students, must have access to — and be supported in — advanced coursework.





1

Use data to identify the barriers that prevent students of color and students from low-income families from enrolling in advanced courses and take action.

All school districts are required to report certain advanced coursework data to the U.S. Department of Education's [Civil Rights Data Collection](#) (CRDC) for each school and each student group within the school.

Beyond this data, states must:

- ✓ Examine representation in advanced coursework, including AP, dual enrollment, IB, gifted and talented programs, and eighth grade algebra.
- ✓ Publish this data annually for each district and school by student group.
- ✓ Collect information to diagnose the various barriers that different groups of students face to accessing and succeeding in advanced coursework. This includes data about whether students of color and students from low-income families attend schools that offer advanced courses, whether there are enough seats in the courses, if these students are being given a fair chance to participate in the courses, or if they are being given the supports they need to be successful (e.g., by examining metrics of success, including AP exam pass rates, IB credits earned, and dual enrollment course grades, for each group of students).
- ✓ Support district leaders to use data collected statewide and by district to put in place the right solutions for the right problems.
- ✓ Generate a publicly available, searchable list that identifies districts that either do not offer advanced courses at all or do not offer enough seats.

North Carolina Data Identifies Barriers for Eighth Graders

According to Ed Trust's analysis, in North Carolina, Black students are severely underrepresented in eighth grade algebra: Black students represent just 14% of eighth graders enrolled in algebra, but they represent 25% of the eighth grade population. What's more, there are fewer students enrolled in advanced courses in the schools with the most Black students, and Black students are denied access to advanced courses within schools. This data clearly signals that policymakers and advocates in North Carolina should be focusing on policy and practice change that 1) increases the number of eighth grade algebra seats in schools with high concentrations of Black students; and 2) addresses the barriers within schools to entry for Black eighth graders.

2

Set clear and measurable goals for advancing access to and success in advanced coursework.

To ensure progress, states must:

- ✓ States should use data to set public goals that, within an ambitious number of years, Black and Latino students and students from low-income families will be fairly represented in access to and success in advanced coursework from elementary school through high school, including gifted and talented programs, eighth grade algebra, IB, dual enrollment, and AP courses.
 - If Black, Latino, and low-income students were fairly represented in advanced coursework opportunities, their share of enrollment among all students would be comparable to their share of students enrolled in the course. For example, if the number of Black students in a state represents 20% of the total population, that state might set a goal that within five years 20% of the students enrolled in advanced courses in that state would be Black.
- ✓ Clearly communicate these goals — including to underserved families and communities — and publicly report against intermediate targets to monitor progress toward these goals regularly.
- ✓ Include these goals in highly visible communications, such as back-to-school messages and state-of-the-state addresses.



3

Invest to expand advanced coursework opportunities — both courses and seats.

To ensure that historically underserved students are fairly represented in advanced coursework, states should require or provide funding to incentivize districts and schools, especially those that serve many Black and Latino students, to offer a greater number, a more diverse array, and a larger number of seats in advanced courses. Based on a district's or school's context, a state should offer support in the following areas:

- ✓ Provide additional funding to recruit or train teachers to teach advanced courses.
- ✓ Provide transportation to students in isolated or underserved schools.
- ✓ Purchase necessary curricular and instructional materials.

Beyond providing these financial resources, a state should consider creating or expanding programs to allow fully certified teachers to serve students in other schools (e.g., through blended learning that is accompanied by state support for the necessary technology and infrastructure and state oversight of class size and course quality).

Illinois Supports Districts to Expand Access for Underrepresented Students

The Illinois State Board of Education offers competitive grants to districts with at least one low-income secondary school to build capacity to offer Advanced Placement courses. Schools that receive the grants may use the funds for the development and purchase of necessary course materials and books, tutoring to prepare students for AP courses, and recruitment activities targeting historically underrepresented students and their families — and they must use at least at least 20% of the funds to provide professional development to educators and administrators.





4

Require and support districts to expand eligibility for advanced courses.

States can require that districts institute policies and practices to expand eligibility for advanced courses, and they can pair these requirements with additional support. For example, states should:

- ✓ Require schools and districts to reduce the influence of bias by implementing universal screening for gifted and talented programs and to use multiple measures to identify students for advanced coursework. Universal screening tools administered to ALL students in a targeted grade (instead of a referral-only process) could draw on data such as test scores, previous scores on state exams, PSAT/SAT scores, and grades in relevant subject areas to identify students prepared for advanced coursework. All exams used to identify students for advanced opportunities, especially for gifted and talented programs, should be culturally responsive.
- ✓ Require that information about all advanced courses (including waived fees, course offerings, benefits of enrolling, details on admissions test, and course requirements) be shared with students and families and be made available in families' home languages.
- ✓ Require districts to adopt policies where students identified for advanced coursework through any of the multiple measures above are automatically enrolled in advanced courses, unless their families opt them out.

Colorado Supports Districts in Offering Universal Screening

In 2014, the Colorado legislature passed [a bill](#) that allows districts to apply for funds to offset costs of universal screening for gifted and talented programs. When Denver Public Schools switched from a method that required parents to submit an application to have their children tested for gifted and talented eligibility to a universal screening approach, nearly 1 in 4 students identified as gifted and talented were Latino, [double the percentage](#) of Latino students in the gifted and talented pool the year before.



To ensure that districts can implement these revised eligibility requirements, the state should provide districts with additional funding for **professional development** so that principals, teachers, and counselors can learn about traditional barriers to access and success in advanced coursework, including the effects of implicit bias, how to use multiple measures to determine eligibility for advanced coursework, and how to be proactive in identifying Black and Latino students for advanced course opportunities. See our report, [Systems for Success: Thinking Beyond Access to AP](#), for more information about what this professional development might look like.

The state should also work with districts to **eliminate financial barriers** to participation in advanced coursework, including investing in subsidies so that students from low-income families are not required to pay fees for books; pay to take exams to qualify for, get into, or get credit for advanced courses; or pay for transportation to attend advanced courses.

A Wave of Automatic Enrollment Policies in States

To address the underrepresentation of Black and Latino students in advanced courses, advocates in Washington state fought for years to pass a law that requires that students who meet or exceed grade-level standards on state exams be placed into the next most rigorous level of advanced courses offered at their high school. North Carolina and Colorado have passed similar policies in recent years.





5

Support Black, Latino, and low-income students' success in advanced courses.

Beyond ensuring that Black, Latino, and low-income students are fairly represented in enrollment in advanced coursework, it is also critical that states help districts and schools to ensure students, especially those who have not been given equitable access to prior opportunities and resources, succeed in these courses. They can do so by supporting students when they enroll in advanced courses. For example, states and districts should:

- ✓ Require subject-matter expertise in teachers who teach advanced courses and prioritize supporting diverse teachers in obtaining such expertise.
- ✓ Support teachers while they are teaching advanced courses, including real-time, ongoing support from school leaders or master educators and time for teachers of advanced courses to collaborate with their colleagues across the school and district.
- ✓ Provide teachers with time and support for ongoing teacher training in subject matter, relevant pedagogy, and tools to identify and address racial bias in advanced classrooms.
- ✓ Require that districts provide additional advanced coursework preparation and support for students who need it. This may include free after-school or summer school preparation courses, as well as additional during-course supports like tutoring.

States should also support districts to provide the necessary resources to prepare students for advanced coursework, such as:

- ✓ Investing in high-quality early childhood opportunities for children of color and children from low-income families. Selective academic opportunities begin as early as kindergarten — and are especially relevant in second grade, where gifted and talented screenings often occur. High-quality early childhood education can help ensure that all students are ready to succeed in advanced opportunities in second grade and beyond.
- ✓ Developing procurement policies to encourage districts to adopt a rigorous, culturally relevant, and engaging curriculum that creates pathways where students are prepared for advanced coursework.
- ✓ Requiring that state grant funding is contingent upon the district developing or submitting a plan for implementing an instructional program that provides an aligned curriculum and teacher professional development that prepares all students for enrollment and success in advanced coursework.

Florida Expands Access to AP for Latino Students

Florida has taken several steps to expand access to advanced coursework for underrepresented students. Nearly two decades ago, the state began providing free [PSAT tests to](#) all high school sophomores, with a focus on helping educators use the scores from that test to identify high-achieving Black and Latino students who were being overlooked for advanced coursework. Florida also provides materials and teacher training to [expand access to AP programs](#) in schools that serve historically underserved student groups. As a result, the state has significantly increased access to and success in AP coursework for Latino students. For example, in 2000, only 5,800 Latino students passed an AP exam with a score of 3 or higher; in 2015, the number of Latino students passing at least one AP exam was 42,000.



Endnotes

1. See Chapter 5 in Marilyn E. Strutchens and Judith Reed Quander, eds., [Focus in High School Mathematics: Fostering Reasoning and Sense Making for All Students](#) (Reston, VA: NCTM, 2011); see Chapter 6 in William Tate, Karen King, Celia Rousseau Anderson, [Disrupting Tradition: Research and Practice Pathways in Mathematics Education](#) (Reston, VA: NCTM, 2011).
2. Carol Corbett Burris, Jay P. Heubert, and Henry M. Levin, "Accelerating Mathematics Achievement Using Heterogeneous Grouping," *American Educational Research Journal*, Spring 2006, 43, 1: 105; David Card and Laura Giuliano, "Can Tracking Raise the Test Scores of High-Ability Minority Students?" Working Paper 22104, (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, March 2016), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w22104>; Kathryn S. Schiller and Chandra Muller, "Raising the Bar and Equity? Effects of State High School Graduation Requirements and Accountability Policies on Students' Mathematics Course Taking," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Fall 2003, Vol. 25, No.3, 229-318; TNTP, "The Opportunity Myth," (New York, NY: 2018); Takako Nomi and Elaine M. Allensworth, "Sorting and Supporting: Why Double-Dose Algebra Led to Better Test Scores but More Course Failures," *American Educational Research Journal*, August 2013, Vol. 50, No. 4, pp. 756–788.