

Is AP Good for Everyone?

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I am no match for Chester E. Finn Jr. in a debate. The president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and author of "Troublemaker: A Personal History of School Reform Since Sputnik" (Princeton University Press) is feared by many ideological adversaries for his sharp wit and inexhaustible erudition. But I am taking him on anyway in this column because he suggested recently in his own weekly Gadfly column that I was promoting Advanced Placement courses for all students, even those unable or unwilling to handle their difficulties. I thought this would also be a good way to explore the limits of the movement to make high schools more challenging, a very lively issue in our highest-performing schools. Here we go:

Mathews: I want to get to the broader issues pretty quickly, but let's deal first with your wicked poke in my ribs. I don't believe I have ever said AP is for everyone. My view has always been that AP is for far more people than are allowed to, or encouraged to, enroll in AP (and International Baccalaureate) courses. There is lots of data to support this, including College Board analysis of PSAT scores showing two or three times as many people could handle and benefit from AP than actually take the course. Have you got a citation showing I said any such silly thing? If not, please debase yourself with an apology to my readers so we can get to the fascinating topic of how much AP and IB should kids have.

Finn: Wicked poke indeed. It was the lightest of taps. Your ribs have endured far worse. Readers should eyeball Gadfly's entire (very short) piece on this topic, findable at <http://www.edexcellence.net/gadfly/index.cfm?issue=341#a4030>. We started by quoting a young lady in upscale Montgomery County (one of your favorite places) saying some kids just aren't up to the rigors of AP courses. She's right. I sat through a focus group the other evening of AP teachers, several of whom said the push to get more high school kids into AP classes -- which they attribute to administrators seeking to boost their schools' Mathews ratings! -- is loading their classrooms with kids who really don't belong there and aren't up to the work and don't much want to be there. Plus it's cheapening the currency as the big enrollment bulges occur in what these teachers characterized as the easy AP courses (e.g. psychology, human geography), not such traditional toughies as calculus, physics and European history. Is it possible that a revenue-hungry College Board is serving up faux AP courses, that status-hungry principals are pushing middling pupils into them, and that Jay Mathews is the engine behind much of this?

Mathews: Nope. I will get to the ancient teacher complaint about kids "who don't really belong there" in a minute. Consider instead how likely it is that a ranked list of schools in a magazine and a newspaper is going to be able persuade American teenagers to choose courses in which they are going to have to tackle very long reading lists and three-hour final exams. No principal in America has the power or skill to force them into such courses against their will. I have been reporting on the rise of AP and IB in the Montgomery County schools for a decade. The students there tell me three factors are causing them to take more AP and IB: (1) the selective colleges want them to; (2) those are the courses with the least boring teachers; and (3) those are the courses their friends are in. When I ask them if they took AP so their school would look good in Newsweek, they laugh at me.

Finn: Maybe you're talking to too many kids and not enough adults. The AP teachers I observed through the one-way window were impressive, thoughtful individuals with many years of teaching -- including many years of AP course-teaching -- under their belts. They say many kids are now signing up for these classes because (a) their yuppy parents are pushing them to; (b) principals and guidance counselors are pushing them to; and (c) all manner of dubious incentives are now being offered them. I hear, for example, that the Montgomery County school board recently voted to exempt from course finals anybody who even sits for the AP exam in that subject, no matter what score they earn. (And of course, the course grade is long since determined before the AP score report comes back in midsummer.) In other words, take the AP test (which the school will help pay for if needed) and you can take it easy during finals--and sleep late the day your classmates are sweating bullets. And your course grade will be based on other factors, not the final exam. What does that do to someone's motivation to study hard during the second half of the year?

Mathews: The successful AP teachers that have most influenced me over the years say the problem here is very fine teachers, like the ones you describe, who have been sadly affected by the sorting culture that rules in most high schools in the country. They choose not to see themselves as teachers with the skills to raise the kid struggling in class from a 1 to a 3 on the AP exam, but instead as guardians of the AP entrance gate, preferring just to let in those students who don't really need good teachers to do well. The successful AP and IB teachers I know pride themselves on being part of a teaching culture, not a sorting culture. They wish their colleagues could take more pride in adding value to each kid. One Montgomery County math teacher regularly told his pre-calculus class that if they weren't getting in A in that class, they should not even consider taking his AP calculus class. That is not good teaching. And I simply don't believe the my-yuppy-mommy-made-me-do-it theory of why kids take AP.

It is true in a few cases, but the vast majority of kids will tell you that the AP courses are just better and more interesting than the alternative.

Finn: You're getting soft in your (well, our) old age. AP is meant to be college-level work for high school students who, through a combination of smart brains and prior learning, are ready for college-level work in specific subjects even while still enrolled in high school. It's not intended for students doing high-school level work. The AP and IB courses may well be the most interesting and best taught classes in a school, but that statement simply points four fingers at all the *other* dull, drab, boring classes. One might better ask what's needed to juice up *their* content, pedagogy and teaching energy, rather than to give up on the high school courses and invite everyone who is unhappy with them to migrate into college-level courses.

Mathews: Now we are getting to the real issue. It would be terrific if we could create such courses for kids who are allegedly not ready for AP. But it is a losing proposition, given the dynamics of classes that have no outside incorruptible standard. Without IB or AP exams that cannot be dumbed down, high school classes fail to challenge over the long haul. Maybe in a decade or two we will fix that, but we will have failed in the meantime another generation. I am surprised that your talent for detecting nonsense did not react to the dismissive reference to: "big enrollment bulges [which] occur in what these teachers characterized as the easy AP courses (e.g. psychology, human geography)." These teachers are saying, in essence, that it is bad to encourage an average student to take even a relatively easy college intro course in high school. Talk to the kids who have taken them and the teachers who have taught them. These are the same courses they would get as college freshmen, but in topics that interest them and can make high school a much more invigorating place. It is a terrific way to build up academic muscles for college, and much better than what most high schools could come up with on their own.

Finn: That's like saying everyone should concentrate on eating dessert because we can't figure out how to serve palatable vegetables, meats and fruits. You are, in effect, giving up on the entire high school curriculum *except* AP and IB. I take your point about the value of external standards and exams keyed to them, but there are myriad other paths to that result. For example, making sure that high school exit exams are something other than 8th-grade-level no-brainers, i.e. exams worth "teaching to." Ditto the end-of-course exams that some states are developing on their own and that the national organization Achieve Inc. is working with a bunch of states to develop for Algebra II. This could be done for many other subjects.

Mathews: I like your proposed solutions, very much. I don't have much hope that we can get there soon, but it is worth trying. And it brings me to another matter those Montgomery County teachers were complaining about--the new rules removing the honors course option and leaving kids only the regular course or the AP course in that subject. I wrote an Op-Ed last year <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/16/AR2007071601288.html> that argued those schools should kill the regular course instead and make the option be honors or AP, thus rescuing the much-abused regular kids from course sections founded on low expectations. With your snazzy new end-of-course tests--could they have essay sections please?--my dream might be realized.

Finn: Essay questions, by all means. I admire the structure of the AP exams (though of course it ups the price tag when tests are scored by living, breathing people who must be trained, given "scoring rubrics," then monitored for "inter-rater reliability"). But good exams should be the norm in all courses, whatever their label. In jettisoning "regular" courses, you're just inflating the currency -- and probably sapping "honors" classes of their meaning. Game-playing and fraud will surely follow, as happened when states decreed that everyone must take algebra in 9th grade. That led to a lot of "general math" classes being re-labeled "algebra" without any change of content whatsoever. Your plan would result in a lot of "regular" courses being re-named "honors" with no change of content, textbook or pedagogy. Alas, there are no quick fixes here. We have to slog through the big job of reworking standards and assessments AND course curricula and instructional materials AND teacher knowledge bases and pedagogy. All while trying to construct choice and accountability arrangements that drive rather than impede those other changes. Not quick, not easy, but the only education work that will really make a difference in the long run.