

# OFFICE FOR EDUCATION POLICY

## CONCURRENT ENROLLMENT VS. AP COURSES

*Policy Brief - April 2005*



The *Lake View* decision required that Arkansas schools provide a “substantially equal” curriculum to all students. As part of this decision, the court ordered for all schools to have Advanced Placement (AP) courses in each of the certain academic areas (e.g. math, science, English). Currently, Arkansas legislators are considering replacing the AP requirement with concurrent enrollment for students, where they can earn both college and high school credit simultaneously. This policy brief explains both concurrent enrollment and AP programs and the major advantages and disadvantages associated with each program.

### CONCURRENT ENROLLMENT

Concurrent enrollment (also called dual or joint enrollment) is generally defined as a college class usually taught at the high school by an approved high school teacher. These classes are designed for students to earn both high school graduation and college credit when successfully completed. Initially, concurrent enrollment programs were designed for gifted students; however, programs now exist for virtually all students.<sup>i</sup> Similarly, more students are taking part in these programs, increasing from 96,913 in 1993 to 123,039 in 1995. Current estimates place nearly 500,000 students in programs across 30 states.<sup>ii</sup>

The National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP) was created in 1999 to establish and “promote national standards for concurrent enrollment programs, to research and disseminate information about such programs, to encourage strong relationships between secondary and higher education institutions, and to support its membership in issues of common concern”. This organization was designed to represent those engaged in the management of concurrent enrollment programs and serves to organize concurrent enrollment programs. The NACEP also has standards for students, faculty, curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation, which can be found at [www.nacep.org](http://www.nacep.org).

### Advantages of CE

Advantages to CE programs have been linked to students, colleges, high schools, and society. The concept of concurrent enrollment has been around for

several decades, yet the research surrounding the practice is inconclusive as to if it benefits or costs students. This section explains some of the benefits to specific groups, although the social benefit that students are more prepared and qualified to work in the real world is also mentioned in the literature.

- **Students:** Some of the advantages to the CE program described in the literature for students include: encouraging seniors to care about the last year of high school and avoiding the “senior slump”, encouraging students to continually learn, reduce the drop out rate for at-risk students,<sup>iii</sup> increasing the number of students applying for and attending college, preparing and challenging students for the college experience,<sup>iv</sup> and reducing the overall cost of a college degree since students are able to take classes while in high school.<sup>v</sup>
- **Colleges:** Benefits to colleges from the CE programs include new ways of recruiting students, increased revenue sources, increased visibility around the community in which the school is located, and an increased link between the community and the school.
- **High Schools:** Benefits to high schools include collaborations with colleges. Also students have a future motivation and are more responsible and responsive in high school. Schools generally also are able to offer an expanded curriculum.

### Disadvantages of CE

The CE programs, however, do have critics. Four major concerns are discussed through the literature.

- **Costs:** Who pays for the classes? If the state is picking up the tab, then are taxpayers being forced to pay dual education costs for a single student? If students pick up the tab, then CE programs may only be available to certain students.
- **Quality:** How can CE programs ensure that the programs are the equivalent of college programs? Much of the concern questions

how rigorous the coursework is for students. The choice of faculty is also a concern over quality. Do the high school faculty/college professors receive increased training to teach the students?

- **Transferability:** From a student perspective, one of the largest concerns of CE programs is where do the credits transfer? Typically, high schools establish partnerships with local colleges and universities; however, these credits may not transfer to all colleges within the state and certainly not to colleges out of state. Although, most public schools in state will work with students who have received CE credit at one class (similar to a college student transferring credits); however, each college and university has its own policy regarding CE credits.
- **Safety:** A final concern for students deals with their direct safety. High school students who concurrently enroll in college classes may travel to or visit the college to participate in some courses. This places high school students on a college campus and potentially exposes them to not only the academic college world, but also the social world, which could include underage drinking.

#### ADVANCED PLACEMENT

After being designed in the early 1950s in seven schools, advanced placement courses (AP) are now offered in nearly 10,000 schools and 35 courses in 19 subjects across the US.<sup>vi</sup> According to the College Board, in 2001-02, almost 65 percent of high schools across the country offer advanced placement (AP) courses, and nearly a million students participate in these courses.<sup>vii</sup> Nearly 60,000 teachers also attend AP professional development seminars each year, which means that the AP programs are benefiting more than only the AP students, the programs benefit all students these teachers instruct.

Similar to the CE programs, AP programs were initially designed to challenge the most advanced students; however, each year more students find their way into one of a host of AP classes offered at most high schools. Unlike the CE programs, students do not receive college credit for enrolling and completing the class, rather students receive credit at colleges after successfully passing a standardized AP exam (typically credit is

given only if students achieve a 3 out of a possible 5 points).

#### Advantages of AP

The two major advantages of the AP courses are that they are **widely transferable** to virtually all colleges and universities and widely regarded as **rigorous**. Even though more students are now taking part in the courses and more students are taking the AP exams, fewer students (as a percentage) are passing these exams. For example, in Arkansas 63 percent of students received a 3 or higher on at least one AP exam in 1992, while that percentage decreased to 52 percent by 1998 and dropped again to 50 percent in 2002.<sup>viii</sup> Arkansas' numbers are not outside of the norm, the national and regional trends followed similar patterns. The explanation behind the dropping passing rate is that more students are taking part in these classes; however, the courses have maintained their academic rigor and fewer students are passing the exams. Notwithstanding, students, schools, and colleges also benefit from these programs.

- **Students:** Students gain in-depth knowledge about subjects, develop increased analytical thinking skills, feel challenged and motivated by the courses, and, most notably, potentially gain college credit while in high school.
- **Schools:** Schools can increase in quality and reputation as a result of offering AP courses and by having students pass these courses. Also, teachers can feel challenged and motivated by the new materials and increased opportunities. Further, the increased professional development requirements allow teachers to improve. Proponents also contend that students who participate are benefiting from the courses, even if they do not pass the exams. These students are preparing for the rigorous coursework they will experience at college.
- **Colleges:** Colleges are able to target high performing students by locating those students who pass the AP exams. Also, the AP tests become another indicator of student success in college, which can impact scholarship awards

#### Disadvantages of AP

Three major disadvantages are associated with AP courses.<sup>ix</sup>

- **Selectivity of participation**—that is, all students cannot participate in these programs. Critics argue that AP courses are often not available to

students at low-performing or urban schools, which also means that minority students often do not have access to these courses.<sup>x</sup>

- **Costs:** The expenses incurred as a result of the AP programs may be too great for many schools and students. Schools are required to provide increased professional development opportunities for teachers, new textbooks, and potentially other materials as needed. Even though some test prices may be reduced for certain students, the AP exams typically cost over \$70, which can add up quickly for those students taking more than one exam.
- **Student Mentality:** A final cost may be for those students who take the courses but do not pass the exams. These students may believe that they are not prepared for college. The tests could serve to deflate the self-image of students and actually deter them from entering college.

## CONCLUSIONS

Currently, many schools across the nation offer both AP and CE programs. The programs do have some overlap, and do not seem to be targeting specific groups. There are several benefits and costs associated with each approach; however, both approaches were designed to assist high school students in the transition to college. These programs provide ways for high school students to test the college waters before making the proverbial leap.

CE programs provide many students with easy access to college credits, build a link between public schools and colleges, and increase the communication within local communities. However, courses offered through CE programs may not be as rigorous as college classes; they may be more costly to students if students are not able to successfully transfer their credits; and students may be exposed to a world they for which they are not prepared.

AP programs are regarded as challenging and motivating for students and teachers, and they often increase the prestige of schools and provide colleges with a list of high achieving students. AP programs, however, may also be costly and serve only a select population of students.

As state legislators and education officials continue to debate the relative merits of each program, students will continue to partake in them and researchers will continue to try and determine if one approach is superior. Today, however, it seems as though nearly a million and a half students are benefiting from these programs.

<sup>i</sup> McCarthy, L.R. (1999). Dual enrollment programs: Legislature helps high school students enroll in college courses. *The Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, 11(1).

<sup>ii</sup> Bryant, A. (2000). Community college students: Recent findings and trends. (ERIC Document Reproduction No. ED 457 898).

<sup>iii</sup> Spurling, S. & Gabriner, R. (2002). The effect of concurrent enrollment programs upon student success at City College of San Francisco: Findings. Available at: [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content\\_storage\\_01/0000000b/80/27/c0/60.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/27/c0/60.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Kruger, L.A. (2000). An analysis of the costs and savings of the concurrent enrollment programs at Salt Lake Community College. Available at: [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content\\_storage\\_01/0000000b/80/0d/87/a4.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/0d/87/a4.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> State Policy Briefing (2002). The open door: Assessing the promising and problems of dual enrollment. Available at: [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content\\_storage\\_01/0000000b/80/23/e6/06.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/23/e6/06.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> Regan, R. (2003). Advanced placement exam results, 2001-02. (ERIC Reproduction Document Service ED 477 128) Available at:

[http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content\\_storage\\_01/0000000b/80/22/01/ec.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/22/01/ec.pdf)

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Andrews, H. (2003). Progress in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate in SREB states. College Readiness Series. Available at:

[http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content\\_storage\\_01/0000000b/80/24/1a/e1.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/24/1a/e1.pdf)

<sup>ix</sup> Reporting Texas Advanced Placement Examination Performances: Promoting a Head Start on the Transition to College. *Policy Research Report No. 7*. Available at: [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content\\_storage\\_01/0000000b/80/11/22/05.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/11/22/05.pdf)

<sup>x</sup> Hurwitz, N. & Hurwitz, S. (2003). Is the shine off of the AP apple? *American School Board Journal*, 190(3). 14-18.