

The Abell Report

What we think about, and what we'd like you to think about

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Advanced Placement (AP) Exams For High School Students: They are important to the success of the students — but Baltimore City's AP offerings put it behind the counties

ABELL SALUTES Mother Seton Academy— transforming the ideal into the actual.

Students entered the sixth grade of this inner city middle school performing at a fifth-grade-and-one-month skill level on the ACT test—behind the norm by eleven months. (The ACT is a nationally administered standardized test designed to measure children's basic skills.) Three years later these same students had graduated at a skill level of ninth-grade-and-three months—*not only up to grade level but ahead of it by three months*. These students were “disadvantaged,” and receiving this education *at no cost* to the students' families.

This education success story may sound like a dream, but in fact it is the actual story of what happened, and is happening day by day, at the Mother Seton Academy at

Continued on page 6

Since 1992, Baltimore City public high schools have offered the fewest AP level courses and exams of any school system in the Baltimore region.

The Advanced Placement (AP) Examination, operated by the College Board, is a national examination given by the Educational Testing Service, which also administers the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). The College Board offers 32 college-level courses in 19 different disciplines, including English literature, history, biology, foreign language, mathematics, physics, and chemistry. Courses are generally taken during the junior and senior years of high school. At the conclusion of the course work, students may elect to take the AP examination, although students may take the exam without having taken the course. Any student who successfully completes the exam, scoring three out of a possible five points, may qualify for college credit and/or placement out of introductory courses.

The existence of AP courses and exams in a school system is one demonstration of the level of that

system's commitment to high academic standards and college attendance. Conversely, the absence of a wide range of AP courses in a school system does not speak well for it. Students who seek out and succeed at AP courses and exams are viewed by college admissions' counselors as motivated and likely to excel.

Since 1992, the high schools in the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) have offered the fewest *number* of AP courses and exams — and there have been a fewer number of its high schools offering the courses and exams — of any system in the region. In the 1998-99 school year, only four of the five citywide high schools offered AP courses and exams. By comparison, there were AP courses offered and tests taken at every one of the 23 high schools in Baltimore County in that same year. In Washington, DC, 13 of 17 public high schools, or 76%,

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1

offered AP courses and tests.

There are 19 high schools in Baltimore City, including four alternative high schools and five citywide academic magnet high schools: Baltimore City College, Baltimore Polytechnic Institute,

Western High School, Baltimore School for the Arts, and Paul Laurence Dunbar High School. Admission to the five schools is based on test scores, grades, and attendance. Each of those schools purports to offer a rigorous, college-preparatory education. Only four of

them, however, offer Advanced Placement courses.

For the 1998-'99 school year, there were 162 Baltimore City public school students taking 227 exams, while in Baltimore County, 1,689 students took 2,863 exams, **more**

Continued on page 3

Table 1: BCPSS Participation in the AP Program

High School	No. of Candidates		No. of Exams Taken		% of students with scores of 3 or higher		% of students receiving free or reduced price meals
	'97-'98	'98-'99	'97-'98	'98-'99	'97-'98	'98-'99	
*Baltimore City College	107	33	124	47	37.9	68.1	29.3
Baltimore Polytechnic	35	51	65	86	63.1	47.7	27.8
Western High School	58	66	77	79	33.8	29.1	35.5
Baltimore School for the Arts	15	12	20	15	90	100	15.6
TOTAL	215	162	286	227	56.2 (average)	61.2 (average)	27.0 (average)

* Note: Baltimore City College recently introduced the International Baccalaureate program, a highly regarded upper-level academic program with its own series of examinations. This explains a portion of the decrease in students participating in the AP program.

Table 2: Participation in the AP Program at selected* Baltimore County Public Schools

High School	No. of Candidates		No. of Exams Taken		% of students with scores of 3 or higher		% of students receiving free or reduced price meals
	'97-'98	'98-'99	'97-'98	'98-'99	'97-'98	'98-'99	
Dulaney	258	277	497	597	82	76	2.6
Dundalk	33	56	44	64	25	34	25.8
Kenwood	43	43	47	52	38	23	27.5
Randallstown	20	22	21	22	19	18	25.2
Woodlawn	65	35	83	49	26	59	23.2
TOTAL (Not including Dulaney HS)	161	156	195	187	27	33.5	25.4

* Other than Dulaney High School, the Baltimore County schools were selected for their comparable percentages of students receiving free and reduced price meals.

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Continued from page 2

than ten times the number of students participating in Baltimore City. A single Baltimore County high school, Dulaney, had 277 students take 597 tests. The record shows that 34% of the juniors and seniors at Dulaney participated in the Advanced Placement program. In Washington, DC, 505 students took 746 tests and 50% of the students scored a 3 or better.

The 1998-'99 participation rate in Baltimore City, defined as the percentage of the total number of BCPSS high school students who take Advanced Placement examinations, is 0.5%. By contrast, the participation rate in Baltimore County for that same year is 5.7%. The participation rate at the Baltimore area independent schools surveyed is approximately 30%. It is particularly striking that fewer than one-fourth of BCPSS high schools offer AP courses and exams, particularly when compared to Baltimore County, where every high school offers AP courses and tests.

Another important issue is the number and type of AP courses offered in Baltimore City. An informal survey of Baltimore City high schools by the Office of the High School Director in March, 1999, indicates that there is a limited range of courses, and therefore of tests offered. The courses include English literature, calculus AB/BC, biology, chemistry, European history, French, Spanish and German. In addition, the Baltimore School for the Arts offers music theory and art history. Until this year, AP U.S. history was also offered; however, the decision by the

BCPSS to move U.S. history to the 9th grade curriculum limited the ability of the individual schools to offer AP U.S. history in the upper grades.

By contrast, Baltimore County public schools offer a broader array of courses, including U.S. history, world history, journalism, economics, statistics, psychology, environmental science, physics, Latin, and computer science, all courses that are not currently offered in Baltimore City. There are 20 different Advanced Placement courses offered at Dulaney High School alone. **At most, a student in one of five Baltimore citywide high schools has a choice of four AP courses; students at zoned high schools have no access to AP courses.**

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“Cost” is one reason why schools in Baltimore City say they do not offer AP test courses

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The BCPSS survey also provides some insight into the reasons for the dearth of Advanced Placement and other upper level coursework in Baltimore City’s high schools. School administrators reported that the following factors inhibit AP course enrollment and test-taking: perceived difficulty and value of taking the

courses, the sense that all students qualified to take AP courses attend citywide high schools, the need for teacher preparation, lack of general faculty support, lack of encouragement from home and teachers, motivation, and lack of confidence.

The cost of taking the test is also cited by guidance counselors at Baltimore City high schools as a reason why their schools do not offer Advanced Placement courses. Counselors also cited the cost to the school in the form of additional teachers and training as a barrier to increasing the number of courses given.

AP examinations cost students \$76 each; however, the College Board offers a fee reduction of \$22 per exam for students in need, and there are several schools that forgive the \$7 per exam rebate that they receive from the College Board. Those two reductions reduce the fee to \$47 per test to the student. Several of the Baltimore City high schools offering AP courses reduce that fee still further. At Poly, students pay \$10 per exam, with the school paying the difference; at the School For the Arts, Western High School, and City College, the schools pay 100% of the reduced fee.

The low value that is placed on advanced coursework in general, and on Advanced Placement coursework in particular, based on its minimal presence in the Baltimore City Public School System, are disturbing. While it may well be true that today there is not a critical mass of students at every

Continued on page 4

Continued from page 3

BCPSS comprehensive high school who could handle an Advanced Placement course, it should be the goal of the system to produce students who can; and there should be a clearly outlined strategy to achieve the goal. In Baltimore County, even the lowest income student has access to AP courses and examinations, which cannot be said about Baltimore City.

At a minimum, there needs to be a concentrated effort to increase the numbers of students taking Advanced Placement courses at the citywide high schools. In addition, opportunities should be available for those students attending comprehensive high schools who wish to take Advanced Placement or other rigorous courses.

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A committee convened in 1998 and made seven specific recommendations:

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The small number of Advanced Placement courses offered by the BCPSS has negative effects on the student population. It sends a message to students that there is no value in challenging oneself academically. Guidance counselors, teachers, parents and principals

should regularly communicate the importance of advanced coursework, and emphasize that the absence of AP courses and tests on a student's transcript may be interpreted by college admissions officers as a lack of initiative on the part of the student. In addition, the frequently stated presumption that the majority of BCPSS students, particularly those attending comprehensive high schools, are not capable of doing Advanced Placement coursework, and by extension, college-level work, can have a negative effect on student motivation.

The Master Plan drafted for the Baltimore City Public School System in 1997 called for "the improvement of honors and advanced placement offerings in all high schools" as an important component of high school improvement. A committee convened in 1998 to create a strategy for this mission identified a lack of qualified teachers in math and science as a major obstacle and made the following recommendations:

- fund AP training, beginning with teachers of English and history courses,
- provide an additional allocation to high schools who offer AP courses with an experienced AP instructor,
- hire qualified retired teachers on an adjunct basis to teach AP courses,
- provide increased compensation for qualified AP teachers,
- provide a citywide program to

defray the cost of AP exams for students,

- create a communications campaign regarding AP opportunities, and
- investigate the use of distance learning in the AP context.

As a result of Baltimore City's focus on low-achieving students in its high school reform plan, none of these recommendations has been implemented.

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Baltimore County has increased participation in AP coursework

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Though the task of upgrading course offerings is daunting, there are several examples of districts, including Baltimore County, that have dramatically increased the participation of advanced coursework in the last decade. ***In 1993, there were 555 students in Baltimore County who took 795 exams and AP courses were available at all but four of the county's high schools. Last year, as previously stated, there were nearly 1,700 students taking nearly 3,000 tests representing every county high school (regardless of demographics),***

Continued on page 5

Continued from page 4

a three-fold increase in number of students taking tests and a five-fold increase in the number of tests taken. Commensurate with that, the participation rate in Baltimore County has grown from 1.7% in 1993 to the present 5.7%.

Most notable is an AP program in the comparable Dallas (Texas) School District. Beginning in 1994-'95, nine pilot urban schools were selected to participate in the Pre-AP/AP Incentive Program — a replication of a successful program in a suburban Dallas school district. Based on the premise that urban students need prerequisite preparation for AP courses, a *vertical team* and curriculum concept was established, beginning with the offering of pre-AP course content in grades 7th to 10th. Middle and high school teachers within a specific discipline work together on the design and instruction of the grade 6th to 12th curriculum in ten AP courses. Within four years, the number of students enrolled in AP courses surged from 300 students (comparable to 215 students participating in Baltimore City) to 4,450 students in 1998. Although the percentage of students scoring 3 or more on the exams has decreased, the increased access to higher level courses has greatly benefited students. Dallas educators credit the vertical team planning with “priming the pipeline” and financial incentives for both teachers and students as motivating successful course completion.

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***Our children
not only deserve the
opportunity but are
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the challenge***

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Replicating a similar model in Baltimore could establish a much needed middle school pipeline, creating the demand for upper level courses generally felt to be lacking. Because Baltimore’s selective citywide high schools set the standard for rigorous coursework for the city’s public schools at large, it is imperative that the full range of AP and other advanced learning opportunities are offered, and are successfully completed, in these citywide schools. Based on the current performance of students at Baltimore City College, Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Dunbar, School For the Arts, and Western, it is clear that higher levels of academic achievement can and should be expected. One aspect of the higher standards should focus on building the capacity of these citywide schools to provide nationally recognized rigorous course offerings such as Advanced Placement and the International Baccalaureate program to at least 30% of the schools’ juniors and seniors. The goal should be to increase the number of advanced

learning opportunities as well as the number of students who are qualified to participate and receive college credit and/or accelerated placement for these courses. Simultaneously, a focus should be on the expansion of courses like *Pacesetters* (see below) at the comprehensive high schools as well as creating more access for these students to existing AP courses through distance learning technology.

The College Board offers rigorous *high school* courses (as opposed to the college level AP courses) called *Pacesetters* in pre-calculus, English IV, and Spanish III that have been piloted in a handful of Baltimore City schools. Several other courses are under development. The College Board has expressed an interest in working with BCPSS on these initiatives.

It is not enough, however, to implement any of these recommendations without a strategic approach to gifted and talented education throughout the Baltimore City Public School System. Nor should we wait until an elaborate plan is crafted to begin an expansion of Advanced Placement and other advanced learning opportunities in our secondary schools. The time has come to prove that our children not only deserve these advanced academic opportunities, but are capable of rising to the challenge.

ABELL SALUTES

Continued from page 1

724 South Ann Street in East Baltimore.

The school’s history dates back only to 1991, when local religious leaders within the Archdiocese of Baltimore formulated plans for a creative educational venture that would meet the academic and social needs of low-income middle school children who are often precluded from attending Catholic schools due to their costs.



“Our results have been consistently positive from the beginning.”



According to the school’s principal, Sr. Mary Bader, “No religious community had the resources to undertake such a project alone, and so the effort became a joint one among six religious congregations with long traditions of service to Baltimore. Given the demographic economic changes which have affected the city, these congregations felt a strong desire to renew their commitment in a united effort, particularly to those in need.

“As a result, Mother Seton Academy opened in 1993 with its first class of twenty sixth grade students.

Our results,” she says, “have been consistently positive from the beginning. These results are the consequence, I believe, of the combination of our tenets—small classes of no more than twelve, the commitment our teachers have to achieving success with the students one on one, the shared respect—teachers and students—for Christian values, and our *total focus on academics*. We offer no athletics or after school activities. The *only* after school activity is supervised homework!”

Parents of the graduates put it all another way. Nina Lewis is the mother of graduate Wendy Lewis. She says, “Mother Seton did wonders for Wendy. She is now at Catholic High and doing well, and much the better for having gone to Mother Seton.”

And Sandra Howard, the mother of Seton graduate Ayrea O’Neal explains, “Ayrea was an A student in elementary school and we felt she needed to be academically challenged. Mother Seton provided that challenge, and today Ayrea is an excellent student at Mercy High.”

Sr. Mary Bader adds, “The school currently educates approximately sixty seven sixth-grade, seventh-grade, and eighth-grade students at an average of \$5,000 per child—below the norm.”

Recognition for the school’s success is richly deserved, and The Abell Foundation salutes with enthusiasm the Mother Seton School, its leadership, faculty, and students.

The following back issues of The Abell Report are available.

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- “Will Smart Growth produce smart growth?”** While the concepts embraced are sensible and well-intentioned, questions remain as to how effective the law is likely to be.
- “Baltimore’s poor children learn as much as middle-class children during the school year, but fall behind during the summer, Hopkins researchers document.”** If disadvantaged students stayed in school 12 months would they progress academically at the same rate as middle-income students? New research shows that the answer is “yes.”
- “Street smart activists use street wisdom to turn around broken lives and broken neighborhoods.”** The program’s lack of sophistication and system may be in the end its strength, making it for some a last best hope.

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