



Illinois high school shrinks its achievement gap for minority students by setting a high bar

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Evanston Township High School outside of Chicago offers its students nearly 30 Advanced Placement classes. But despite the plentiful offerings, administrators noticed that minorities were underrepresented in these courses that can be a boost to a college application. How did the school bridge the gap? Brandis Friedman of WTTW reports from Chicago.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Most high schools offer some amount of advanced placement courses, designed to be more challenging for students, while allowing them to potentially earn college credit.

While more high school students are taking A.P. courses than ever before, the amount of diversity in those classes hasn't kept pace.

From WTTW in Chicago, Brandis Friedman reports on what one high school is doing to make sure students aren't left behind.

BRANDIS FRIEDMAN, Special correspondent: Students here at Evanston Township High School outside Chicago can take anything from automotive service excellence certification to advanced calculus. They also have their pick of almost 30 advanced placement courses.

Dale Leibforth heads A.P. recruitment.

DALE LEIBFORTH, AP Recruitment and Retention Manager, Evanston Township High School: Portfolio studio, or Latin or — the list goes on. We just added an A.P. government course.

BRANDIS FRIEDMAN: Even though it's a top-rated school, with a diverse student body, until recently, only certain students were picking A.P. courses.

ERIC WITHERSPOON, Superintendent, Evanston Township High School: We have students of color and low-income students terribly underrepresented in advanced placement courses. There's still a predictability among student achievement in our school district based on race.

BRANDIS FRIEDMAN: When Eric Witherspoon became superintendent eight years ago, he noticed that A.P. classrooms were filled with mostly white students, while regular classrooms were filled with mostly minority and often low-income students, who make up 41 percent of the student body.

Witherspoon says he realized students were being tracked into A.P. courses through honors classes based on their eighth grade standardized test performance, while other students were tracked into less rigorous courses.

ERIC WITHERSPOON: It didn't take rocket scientist to figure out that here we're getting disparate results, but, in fact, we have a structure that may be even is causing some of those disparate results, but certainly if not causing, certainly not doing anything to change those results.

BRANDIS FRIEDMAN: To bridge that gap, Evanston Township High School started enrolling all incoming freshmen in the honors-level English and history class called humanities.

Eventually, all ninth grade students, except for those reading below grade level, were also enrolled in the honors-level biology, no matter how they performed on their eighth grade standardized test. The school is hoping to implement the same strategy for ninth grade math.

DALE LEIBFORTH: We put a lot of work into convincing students that this is something everyone can do. This is a place where you belong, where you have shown you can show resilience, you can show this grit, you can show the hard work and effort that it takes to be successful.

MAN: And which one is further away and generates more volume?

BRANDIS FRIEDMAN: The idea is to set higher expectations of all students early, so that more of them are prepared for an A.P. class by 11th grade. But the work didn't stop there.

DALE LEIBFORTH: The recruitment, access, getting — stripping away barriers, we have done that. We have done the easy part, right? Now it's, how can you be successful? And so we have instituted just a series of supports for the kids.

BRANDIS FRIEDMAN: The school developed ways to be sure students who enrolled in honors, and eventually advanced placement classes, didn't fail.

MAN: What can we do, what do you think we should do to make that experience for those kids better?

BRANDIS FRIEDMAN: One of them is a program called Team Access and Success in Advanced Placement, or Team ASAP. It's a support group for A.P. students.

VANESSA SENECAI, Evanston Township High School junior: It's kind of like a stress reliever. Just whenever I'm having an issue in one of my classes, I just kind of come here, and talk about it, and like talk to other students who might be having the same issue.

CYPHER EASON, Evanston Township High School sophomore: This is a great way to just get A.P. study strategies. And I know that I plan on taking A.P. classes next year.

BRANDIS FRIEDMAN: Senior Jonathan Senecal says black male students are often still underrepresented. But he says this push to diversify A.P. classes is making a noticeable difference.

JONATHAN SENECAI, Evanston Township High School senior: Advanced placement is, like, traditionally kind of a white space, but, like, in recent years, we have seen it change a whole lot. I know that, even in my stats class, everyone's very well-represented. And what it helps to do is, you get to have a lot of unique perspective. People have got different kinds of analogies. They're bringing different things to the table and everyone really improves just because of that.

BRANDIS FRIEDMAN: The district says early numbers show the changes it's made are making a positive difference for all students. Between 2011 and 2014 alone, the number of students taking the A.P. exam is up 30 percent. White students showed a 19 percent increase, black students taking A.P. tests are up 35 percent, and Latino students showed the most growth, up 78 percent in those three years.

Not only are more students taking A.P. tests, but the number of students scoring a three or higher, a score that can lead to college credit, is up too. For white students, it's up by 31 percent, black students by 98 percent, and Latino students up by a whopping 116 percent.

Northwestern University professor and researcher David Figlio is also an Evanston High School parent. He's volunteering his research expertise to study if and how well these changes are working.

DAVID FIGLIO, Director, Northwestern University Institute for Policy Research: Evanston High has a formula in some regards for success for the advantaged kids. And so any monkeying around with that formula could be risky. And, at the same time, it could pay off in big ways.

So we need to know this — what is happening with the students who would have been in honors classes anyway before this has happened, as well as success of those who wouldn't have been in the

honors classes had this not been happening.

BRANDIS FRIEDMAN: Students say that, while they appreciate the increased number of students of color, when they are in class, they should have just one focus.

DEYON KEATON, Evanston Township High School senior: I feel like there are classes that are more diverse than other classes, but it's not something that you should pay attention to. If it's what you want, then just go after it.

BRANDIS FRIEDMAN: Figlio adds that a community like Evanston is an ideal place to test this model. It's rich in diversity, resources and the will to make a change, a change that educators hope could be replicated in other districts.

I'm Brandis Friedman reporting for the PBS NewsHour from Chicago.

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