



BEYOND THE NUMBERS CONVENING 2014

Breakout Session Summary

The AP Pipeline | Improving Access to Rigorous High School Coursework

For most students, enrolling in rigorous high school courses is a key contributor to success in college. Many districts and states are paying closer attention to the types of rigorous courses offered by high schools and student enrollment and success in these courses. This session offered participants an opportunity to learn more about the barriers students face to enrollment in rigorous coursework and some of the interventions and tools that states and districts are implementing in the effort to combat these barriers. Participants also had the chance to hear from researchers and practitioners on research being done to better understand pathways to rigorous course-taking.

Maureen Reyes, senior director of AP Program Management at the College Board, began the session with important findings from analyses conducted by the College Board. Reyes discussed the relatively low Advanced Placement (AP) course enrollment rates among African American and Hispanic students, nationally. The College Board hopes to address this challenge by increasing adoption of their web-based “AP Potential Tool.” The tool helps educators identify and recruit students who are likely to succeed in AP classes early on, rather than waiting until the junior or senior year of high school. Recently, information available via the “AP Potential Tool” was shared with students in the form of a report called “My College Quickstart.” To date, the information was largely available to teachers and guidance counselors. By involving students in their high school course selection process, Reyes hopes to achieve their ultimate goal of “empower[ing] students to see and match available course options to future aspirations.” Partnership with Dell and Google are helping the College Board achieve this goal.

Mary Batiwalla, policy analyst at the Tennessee Department of Education, shared analyses on student course taking patterns, but from the perspective of a state education leader. Compared to national averages, students in Tennessee are taking many fewer AP exams and passing many fewer AP exams. Batiwalla warns “gaps between economically disadvantaged students and their peers have increased in recent years.” By analyzing results from eighth grade high stakes assessments and identifying AP-potential students, state education leaders have successfully pushed legislation to fund AP exam completion for students who face financial constraints. Despite this success, challenges persist. “Along the pipeline, economically disadvantaged students were more likely to dropout,” Batiwalla added. Further analyses revealed core challenges faced by schools that include: low access to rigorous courses, low enrollment, differential enrollment by economically disadvantaged status, low AP exam taking rates, and differential AP exam taking rates by economically disadvantaged status.

SDP Fellow Alum Darryl Hill at the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) presented findings from research on WCPSS’ universal algebra test-taking efforts. By utilizing the state’s education value-added assessment system (EVAAS) results, Hill used a regression discontinuity design to determine a student’s probability of success in Algebra I. Students with at least 70% probability were recommended

for Algebra I. Preliminary evidence shows a negative impact on short-term measures of student achievement (e.g., GPA and test scores), particularly among female students. According to Hill, “the team needs more information to fully understand the impact of this policy,” and he plans to evaluate any long-term effects, particularly on measures of student self-perceptions and behavioral outcomes.

Finally, **Chris Avery, Roy E. Larsen Professor of Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and SDP Faculty Advisor** discussed research he has led to better understand exactly how the rigorous coursework access gap grows at every age. “From grade to grade, there are fewer disadvantaged students in the top-performing group of the class,” he noted. He added that research conducted by The Chicago Consortium for School Research (CCSR) “finds that students with 4.0 GPAs are not attending selective colleges and/or graduating from college.” Avery’s research with Caroline Hoxby, the Scott and Donya Bommer Professor of Economics at Stanford University, has further found that many high-achieving students do not even apply to selective colleges. For Avery, the key is in understanding the “choices students make along the pathway from high school and into college.” These choices include: taking rigorous coursework during middle school and into high school, completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and avoiding summer melt. Commenting on Tennessee’s work, Avery added “it makes sense for Tennessee to choose eighth grade; this demonstrates that data on AP potential can be combined with earlier metrics of achievement.” Solutions as simple as checklists or roadmaps of key actions students should complete at every grade could tackle implicit barriers found in many schools.