

Advanced Placement Participation Booming

By BEN FELLER, AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON - More students are passing Advanced Placement exams in every part of the country, as college-level work in high school becomes increasingly common — and competitive.

In every state and the District of Columbia, the percentage of public school students who passed at least one AP test was up in 2004, compared with the graduating class of 2000. The Bush administration, which has been pushing to increase high school rigor, embraced the news, which followed other reports that have underscored how unprepared many graduates are for college or work.

Significant gaps remain, even as AP participation booms nationwide, according to the first state-by-state report in the 50-year history of the college-level testing program. Many students enter college without having passed an AP test. And black students have low test participation and test scores a full level behind those of whites.

The AP Program, which began as an experiment for elite students seeking college courses and credit, has now become a fixture in more than 14,000 U.S. public schools. Beyond gaining experience, a student gains an edge; college admission officers say they place more importance on grades in college-prep courses such as AP than they do on any other factor.

Across the country, 20.9 percent of the public school class of 2004 — one in five students — took at least one AP exam, compared with 15.9 percent four years earlier. More significantly, 13.2 percent mastered an AP exam last year, up from 10.2 percent in 2000.

Research shows that success on AP exams is a strong predictor of success in college.

"This new report provides further proof that our children respond when we challenge them academically," said Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, who began her term this week. Spellings said she was particularly happy to see more minorities taking AP courses. That has been a long-standing challenge for the College Board, the nonprofit that runs the AP Program.

Hispanics made up 13.1 percent of AP test-takers last year, up from 10.9 percent. Their participation slightly exceeds their share of the public school population. AP Spanish appears to be influencing those numbers, as 53 percent of its participants are Hispanic.

Black students remain underrepresented in the AP Program. They account for 13.2 percent of the students but only 6 percent of AP test-takers, up from 5.3 percent four years ago.

About two in three AP test-takers are white.

To avoid inflating state performance, the College Board counted students once regardless of how many AP subject tests they passed. But that obscures the point that students in wealthy areas often have access to multiple AP courses while other students do not, said Bob Schaeffer, public education director of FairTest, which monitors standardized testing.

"Unfortunately, despite the value of AP courses, they end up reinforcing huge gaps between haves and have-nots because of differences in where courses are offered," he said.

For many students, an AP course is often their first exposure to challenging material, said Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust, which advocates for minority children. In that sense, she said, the growing participation rates are clearly good news.

But the AP popularity raises questions, too, Haycock said, such as whether the program takes the best teachers and leaves less experienced ones for struggling students. Among students who go on to college, about 40 percent take at least one remedial course.

"It's not the total answer," Haycock said of the AP. "If we think this is the way to improve academics in high schools, we need to think a little harder than that."

Advanced Placement executive director Trevor Packer agreed. Schools that have success in producing access and good scores on the AP are the ones that take a broader approach, he said. They require rigorous curriculum and teacher training years before the grades when AP tests are taken.

On a 5-point scale, the typical test score is 2 for black students, between 2.5 to 2.8 for Hispanic students, and 3 for white students.

New York is the first state to have more than 20 percent of its graduating class achieve a grade of 3 or higher on the exam, the level considered to be mastery. New York's challenging standards and state testing have encouraged AP enrollment, state officials said.

Other states were close to New York, Maryland, Utah, Florida, California and Massachusetts had 18 to 20 percent of students earning the passing score.

The states with the greatest increases in successful AP scores were Florida, Maryland, North Carolina, Colorado, Connecticut and Washington. Gains ranged from just 0.6 percentage points by Louisiana and Mississippi to 5.7 percentage points by Florida.

On the Net:

Advanced Placement Program: <http://www.collegeboard.com>

An interactive map by states: <http://wid.ap.org/schoolscores/2004ap.html>