

# The Leaky Pipeline of Advanced Placement Testing

An Essay for the Learning Curve by Kristen Hengtgen and Kimberly Lent Morales  
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Florida has long emphasized increasing access to accelerated curricula.<sup>1</sup> Ensuring cost is not a barrier to low-income students, Florida is 1 of 12 states that provides funding for students to take Advanced Placement (AP) tests. In 2020, Florida had the nation’s highest AP test participation rate, according to the College Board.<sup>2</sup> Yet, even as Florida has worked to narrow gaps in access by eliminating costs to students and families, racial disparities in both enrollment and test taking remain.

To better understand these gaps, we looked at state- and district-level data from the US Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) for traditional public schools during the 2017–18 school year, the most recent year for which AP enrollment and testing data are available.<sup>3</sup> That year, one in four public high schoolers in Florida took an AP class.

Florida’s high school students are diverse. About half of Florida’s high schoolers identify as Black (21 percent) or Hispanic (32 percent), 40 percent identify as white, 3 percent identify as Asian, and 3 percent identify as two or more races. Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander students and American Indian or Alaska Native students add up to about 0.5 percent.

That diversity, however, does not extend to AP classes. Though 25 percent of all students take an AP class, only 15 percent of Black high schoolers do. In comparison, 50 percent of Asian students took AP classes, while white, Hispanic, Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander students, and students of two or more races take AP classes at roughly the same rate as the state average. American Indian or Alaska Native students are slightly less likely than average to take AP courses, with just over 20 percent taking AP courses.

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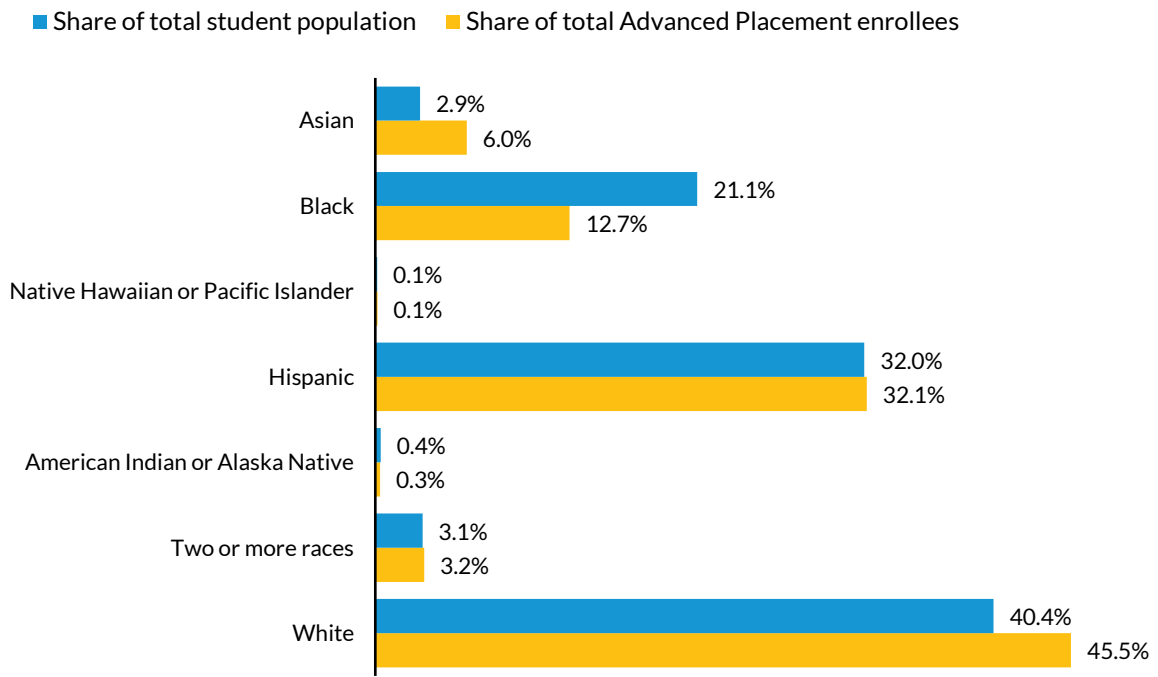
<sup>1</sup> Florida Department of Education, “Florida Soars on Advanced Placement Performance,” press release, February 25, 2021, <https://www.fldoe.org/newsroom/latest-news/florida-soars-on-advanced-placement-performance.stml>.

<sup>2</sup> College Board, *AP Cohort Data Report: Graduating Class of 2020* (New York: College Board, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> “Wide-Ranging Education Data Collected from Our Nation’s Public Schools,” Civil Rights Data Collection, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/>.

Though Florida has policies to support advanced coursework opportunities, including AP classes, these data suggest there are still significant gaps in who takes advanced courses. Florida boasts that it has eliminated its AP participation and performance gap for its Hispanic students, thanks to, among other policies, its AP fee waiver and universal free PSAT in 10th grade to identify students who may need additional help to be prepared for advanced courses.<sup>4</sup> So even though Florida has made gains with Hispanic students, Black students are still being left behind.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Racial and Ethnic Composition of Advanced Placement Enrollees and the Overall Student Population in Florida**



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**Source:** US Department of Education 2017–18 data from the Civil Rights Data Collection.

**Notes:** To prevent the disclosure of identifying information, most data in the Civil Rights Data Collection public-use file have been privacy protected by making small, random adjustments to the data. Because data are self-reported by district, they can vary and are subject to error.

Equitable enrollment in AP courses should remain a critical goal. Florida already offers teachers, schools, and districts significant financial support for AP success. At the district and school level, AP enrollment, along with other accelerated curricula, are included in Florida’s accountability system.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Florida Department of Education, “Florida Soars on Advanced Placement Performance”; and Florida Partnership for Minority and Underrepresented Student Achievement, F.S. 1007.35 (2021).

<sup>5</sup> “Florida School Accountability Reports,” Florida Department of Education, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://www.fldoe.org/accountability/accountability-reporting/school-grades/>.

When calculating a school's grade, schools earn points based on the share of graduates who took accelerated curricula.<sup>6</sup> In addition, successful AP students relay bonus funding to districts and schools through the state funding system, the Florida Education Finance Program.<sup>7</sup> Individual classroom AP teachers receive monetary bonuses when students receive a score of 3 or higher on an AP exam, with an additional bonus when the teacher is in a D or F school.<sup>8</sup>

## Taking an AP Exam Offers More Benefits Than Just Taking an AP Class

But taking the AP test, and not just the class, is key. Of course, taking the test is the gateway to earning college credit. Beyond gaining credit, research emphasizes that passing an AP test, rather than just taking a course, is a better predictor of college success.<sup>9</sup> Yet even when students take an AP exam but earn a low score (1 or 2), they still tend to attend more selective institutions and are more likely to return for their second year of college than students who do not take any AP exams.<sup>10</sup> Students who earn a low score are also very likely to take further AP exams and earn higher scores in the future.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that even when students do not pass, it still benefits them to take the test.

Therefore, expanding access to enrollment in an AP course is not enough, and students receive the greatest benefits when they take the exam. In Florida, however, there is a leaky pipeline when it comes to taking AP tests.

Although Florida is one of just a few states that subsidizes the test fee, thousands of Florida's students taking AP courses do not take AP tests and potentially miss out on postsecondary benefits. About 1 in 10 enrollees in Florida's AP classes do not take any tests. Aligned with the state average, 9 percent of white and 11 percent of Hispanic students do not take any AP tests. Asian students take the test at a higher rate than average (4 percent take no tests), and like the gap for Black students in AP enrollment, Black students enrolled in AP classes are less likely than their peers to take the test, with 15 percent taking the class but not the exam.

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<sup>6</sup> Florida Department of Education, "2021 School Grades Overview" (Tallahassee: Florida Department of Education, n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> "Florida Education Finance Program," Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://oppaga.fl.gov/ProgramSummary/BackPageDetail?programNumber=2002&backPageNumber=01>.

<sup>8</sup> Funds for Operation of Schools, F.S. 1011.62 (2021); and Florida Department of Education, "2021 School Grades Overview."

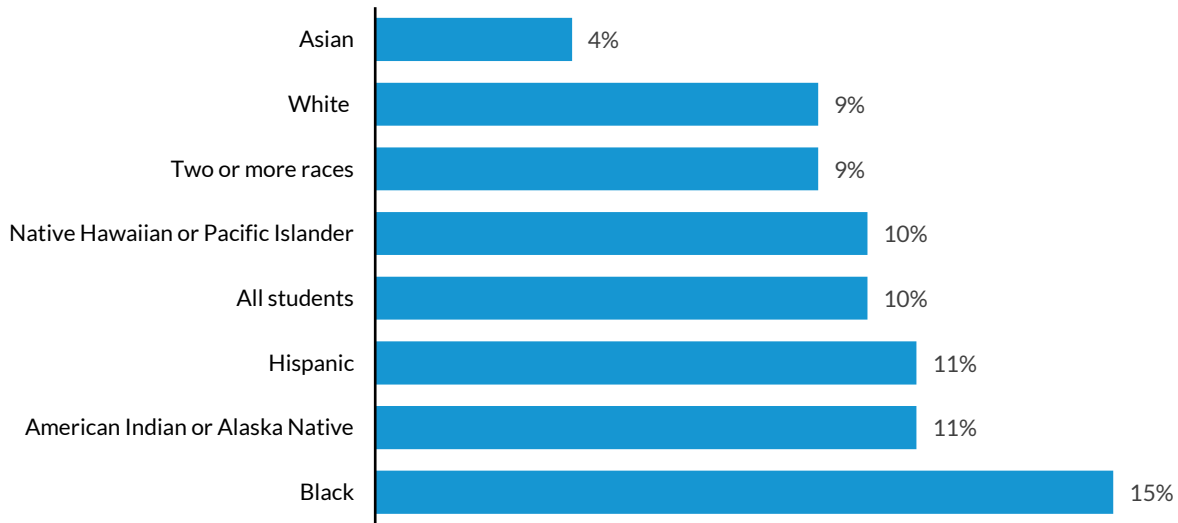
<sup>9</sup> Suneal Kolluri, "Advanced Placement: The Dual Challenge of Equal Access and Effectiveness," *Review of Educational Research* 88, no. 5 (October 2018): 671–711, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654318787268>.

<sup>10</sup> Krista D. Mattern, Emily J. Shaw, and Xinhui Xiong, "The Relationship between AP Exam Performance and College Outcomes" (New York: College Board, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> College Board, "New Analyses of AP Scores of 1 and 2" (New York: College Board, 2021).

FIGURE 2

Share of Advanced Placement Enrollees Who Do Not Take the Test, by Race or Ethnicity, in Florida



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Source: US Department of Education 2017–18 data from the Civil Rights Data Collection.

Notes: To prevent the disclosure of identifying information, most data in the Civil Rights Data Collection public-use file have been privacy protected by making small, random adjustments to the data. Because data are self-reported by district, they can vary and are subject to error.

Many districts mirror the state-level pattern of around a 10 percentage-point test-taking gap, with Black students overrepresented and Asian students underrepresented. For example, about 10 percent of Miami-Dade’s AP enrollees do not take any tests, which is 8 percent of white AP enrollees, 18 percent of Black AP enrollees, 10 percent of Hispanic AP enrollees, and 5 percent of Asian AP enrollees. Miami-Dade is the largest district in Florida and the fourth-largest district in the country, and more than 90 percent students of color.<sup>12</sup>

Black students are also more likely not to take tests in other large Florida districts. In Leon County, home to Florida capital Tallahassee, about 11 percent of AP enrollees do not take any tests, which is 7 percent of white students, 20 percent of Black students, 12 percent of Hispanic students, and 1 percent of Asian students. In Pinellas County, which includes St. Petersburg and Clearwater, about 10 percent of AP enrollees do not take any tests, which is 10 percent of white students, 19 percent of Black students, 11 percent of Hispanic students, and 5 percent of Asian students.

The test-taking gap looks different across small and large districts. In large districts (at least 10,000 students), the average gap between enrollment and test taking is 9 percent. Yet as the districts get smaller, the gap grows. For midsize districts with 2,000 to 9,999 students, the average test-taking gap is

<sup>12</sup> Miami-Dade County Public Schools, “Statistical Highlights 2019-2020” (Miami: Miami-Dade County Public Schools, n.d.).

13 percent. For districts enrolling less than 2,000 students, the average test-taking gap is 37 percent. In some of Florida's rural north and panhandle districts, such as Gadsden, 96 percent of AP enrollees did not take any tests (608 of 636 students). In Holmes, Gilchrist, and Calhoun school districts, no AP enrollees took any AP tests. This has been previously examined in Florida and may be explained by previous research findings expressing difficulty finding trained teachers in rural communities.<sup>13</sup>

## There's More to the Equation Than Access

Not all students benefit equally from increased AP enrollment. Although Florida has emphasized expanding access to accelerated curricula of many kinds across the state, and more rural students, low-income students, and racial and ethnic minorities have seen a rise in AP enrollment nationally, this test-taking gap shows barriers remain.<sup>14</sup> These barriers likely limit equitable opportunity for all students to access the benefits taking and passing an AP test can bring.

Florida has much to be proud of as the state with the highest AP exam participation rate. But a closer look illuminates lingering inequities. It is important to do further qualitative research to understand the phenomenon behind the test-taking leak, focusing on the needs of smaller, more rural districts. In the meantime, policymakers and educational leaders should consider what prevents students from taking the exam and the policy levers that can increase test taking aside from financial incentives.

*Note: The CRDC 2017 survey contains a dataset on Advanced Placement Course and Test Taking. We downloaded this dataset for all Florida schools with at least 11th and 12th grades. To ensure we included only traditional high schools in our dataset where students would have access to AP courses, we restricted the full CRDC school-level dataset. This follows the methodology in the Community College Research Center's "Technical Memo on the Preparation of CRDC Data for Descriptive Reporting on Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement in U.S. High Schools."<sup>15</sup> Out of the schools in the CRDC dataset, we eliminated virtual schools, county jail schools, Department of Juvenile Justice-related schools, alternative education, and special education schools.*

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<sup>13</sup> Diane Rado, "The Ups and Downs of Advanced Placement: Roughly Half the Florida Kids Who Took the Tough Exams in 2018 Didn't Pass," *Florida Phoenix*, February 28, 2019, <https://floridaphoenix.com/2019/02/28/the-ups-and-downs-of-advanced-placement-roughly-half-the-florida-kids-who-took-the-tough-exams-in-2018-didnt-pass/>.

<sup>14</sup> Brandon LeBeau, Susan G. Assouline, Ann Lupkowski-Shoplik, and Duhita Mahatmya, "The Advanced Placement Program in Rural Schools: Equalizing Opportunity," *Roepers Review* 42, no. 3 (July 2020): 192–205, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2020.1765923>; and Kayla Patrick, Allison Rose Socol, and Ivy Morgan, "Inequities in Advanced Coursework," The Education Trust, January 9, 2020, <https://edtrust.org/resource/inequities-in-advanced-coursework/>.

<sup>15</sup> John Fink, "Technical Memo on the Preparation of CRDC Data for Descriptive Reporting on Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement in U.S. High Schools," memorandum to Adam Lowe and Alijah Conner, October 2018, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/technical-memo-crdc-data.pdf>.

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