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Advanced Placement in Arkansas: Increasing Equity

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Summary Points

- Arkansas has one of the most aggressive Advanced Placement (AP) programs in the nation.
- Arkansas schools are required to offer AP classes in the core content areas each year.
- Arkansas is one of four states to pay for universal AP Exam fees for all students taking AP courses in public schools.
- Most colleges grant college credit for AP Exams ‘passed’ with a score of 3 or higher.
- 19% of Arkansas’ high school graduates have taken an AP Exam.
- Arkansas’ minority and low-income students are increasingly taking and passing AP Exams.
- Arkansas has an AP exam passing rate of 32% compared to the national passing rate of 52%.

Advanced Placement (AP) in Arkansas: Increasing Equity

Each spring, secondary students across Arkansas sit for Advanced Placement (AP) Exams. Arkansas has one of the most aggressive policies promoting AP in the nation. Despite this, Arkansas students are still struggling with inequitable and inadequate access to AP courses.

This brief examines the effects of Arkansas’ AP legislation on equity, adequacy, and productivity in AP policy, particularly for the state’s low-income and minority students.

What is Advanced Placement?

Advanced Placement (AP) courses provide students in grades 9 through 12 with access to college level curriculum while in secondary school. The end of course exams, developed by the College Board, allow students to demonstrate content mastery and potentially acquire college credit. Most colleges and universities in the country award credit, advanced placement or both if students earn a score of 3 or higher (out of 5) on an AP Exam. Over 35 AP courses on topics ranging from Physics to Chinese are available. The College Board strongly encourages giving all willing and academically prepared students the opportunity to participate in AP.

This Brief

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Why is AP Important ?

Advanced Placement courses offer several benefits to students. Taking a course with increased academic rigor can help students prepare for college coursework. Unlike state assessments, scores on AP Exams are standardized across the country and clearly communicate a student’s academic performance to colleges. The opportunity to receive college credit reduces tuition costs and can decrease time to graduation. Giving students a ‘jump start’ on college could increase college enrollment and completion rates in the state.

AP Access

In 2003, the Arkansas legislature passed one of the most aggressive policies to promote AP access in the nation. Act 102 requires all public school districts to offer students an opportunity to enroll in at least one AP course in each of the four core subjects of math, science, English and social studies (4 Core).

The legislature appropriated funds to, among other things, cover the testing fee for any Arkansas student taking an AP Exam. **Arkansas is the only state in the nation with this particular combination of course mandate and universal funding.**

Prior to Act 102, a series of legislative “sticks and carrots” had been used to promote AP offerings in schools, but wide variation in access remained across the state, with **only 35%** of Arkansas school districts offering even a single AP course. Districts had five years, until 2008, to meet the mandate of providing students access to the ‘4 Core’ AP courses.

Act 102 was effective at increasing access to AP courses. Since 2008, over 60% of Arkansas districts have offered the ‘4 Core’ AP courses annually. There are still over 30% of the school districts in Arkansas, however, that do not report students enrolled in all ‘4 Core’ courses. It is unclear whether these districts are not offering the courses or if students are not enrolling in them, but in 2015, **87% of Arkansas students attend districts that offered at least the ‘4 Core’ AP courses.**

As more schools offer AP courses, the student enrollment has increased dramatically. In 2003, only 4% of 9th-12th grade public school students in Arkansas enrolled in an AP course, but by 2015 19% of high school students enrolled in at least one AP course.

With more students taking AP, are more students passing the exams as well?

AP Success

Although not required, almost all Arkansas students who enroll in AP courses take the corresponding AP Exam. Over 90% of AP students in Arkansas complete the corresponding exam, compared to national percentage of 73%. This high exam-taking percentage is likely due to both Arkansas’ legislated incentives: receiving a weighted grade in the course if the exam is taken and universally free exams.

Timeline: AP in Arkansas

1990 Lake View Equity Case National trend in equity cases created an intense focus on education in Arkansas.

1995 Act 881 created the **AP Incentive Program**, providing a fee subsidy for low-income students taking the AP exam, a one-time equipment grant to help schools set-up new AP courses in their schools, and created professional development for AP teachers.

1997 Act 929 expanded AP Incentive Program to include Pre-AP courses as well, in an attempt to improve the pipeline of students coming into the AP programs.

2000 AP Credit Policy ensured that students scoring a 4 or above will receive college credit at the state’s post-secondary institutions.

2003 Act 102 mandated ‘4 Core’ all public high schools in Arkansas must offer students the opportunity to enroll in one course in EACH of the four core subjects of math, science, English, and social studies each year. Teachers are required to be AP certified in the course they teach and must attend special AP training every five years to maintain certification. Schools had until 2008 to fully implement. Weighted high school credit for AP courses was later added.

2005 All AP Exam fees paid by the state. Student must take and complete corresponding AP course to qualify. Students may take unlimited exams as long as they meet the other requirements. In order to receive weighted credit for the course, students must take the AP exam.

2008 Full implementation of ‘4 Core’ expected.

Annual Cost for AP?

\$3.6 million contract with College Board for testing fees, Assessments, End of Course Testing

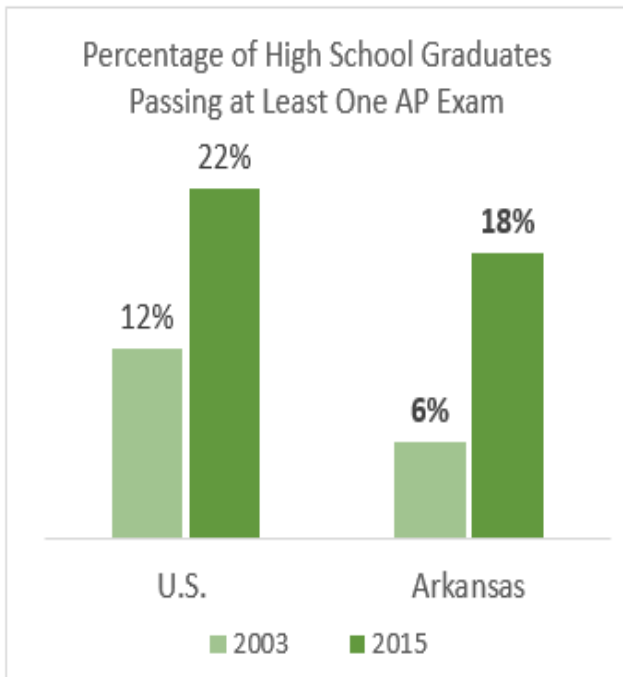
\$825,000 AP Incentive Funds: covers teacher PD and one-time classroom grants

\$1.33 million in AP Score Incentive Bonuses from Arkansas School Recognition Program: covers \$50 bonuses paid to schools for each exam passed

In 2015, over 46,000 AP Exams were taken in Arkansas by more than 26,500 students. Of exams taken, only 15,000 were “passed” with a score of 3 or higher. This 32% passing rate is low compared to the national passing rate of 52%, and is the lowest in the nation except for the District of Columbia.

In 2003, prior to ‘4-Core’ legislation, Arkansas had an AP Exam passing rate of 51%. In 2008, the first year of full implementation of Act 102, the AP passing rate declined to 31%. In the intervening years, the passing rate has remained in the low 30s.

Although behind the nation in passing rates, there has been a large increase in the percentage of Arkansas graduates passing at least one AP Exam while in high school. In 2003, only 6% of seniors had passed an AP Exam, but in 2015 that percentage tripled to 18%, nearing the national average of 22%.



Increasing Equity

Given the aggressive policies in place to support AP access and AP Exam Participation, it is important to examine the impact of those policies on different groups of students throughout the state.

In Arkansas, white students are more likely to take and pass AP Exams than black or Hispanic students. This finding is not surprising, because high school enrollment is 70% white, 20% black and 4% Hispanic. Given the variation in enrollment by race, it is important to look at AP Exam takers and passing rates relative to racial representation. For example, since 70% of Arkansas high school students are white, we would expect white students to comprise 70% of AP Exam takers.

If all Arkansas students are equally well prepared for AP success, we would expect to see similar passing rates among the groups of students who complete the exams.

An equity gap exists when the racial/ethnic group accounts for a smaller percentage of AP Exam takers or AP Exam passers than of the graduating class

National AP data reflect equity gaps for minority and low income students both in AP Exams completers and passing rates. In 2013, black students represented 15% of the national graduating class, but were underrepresented as AP Exam takers at only 9%. Further, only 5% of black graduates who completed the AP Exams received a passing score.

Have Arkansas’ aggressive policies to improve access to AP courses and Exams helped to close the equity gaps in Arkansas? **YES!**

As can be seen in Table 1, **Arkansas is closing the equity gap as minority and low-income students are taking AP Exams at higher rates than they were in 2003 and are also more likely to receive a passing score.**

White students represented 69% of high school graduates in 2013, but 74% of the graduates who had completed an AP Exam. While still over-represented, the magnitude is much less than in 2003, when white students made up 84% of AP Exam takers. There has been a 5 point decline in the likelihood that white students who take an AP Exam will receive a passing score, but the passing rate of 69% is still well above the overall national average.

Table 1. Enrollment, AP Exam Participation and Passing Rates for Arkansas High School Graduates, by Race and Low Income, 2003-2013.

		2003	2008	2013	10-Year Change
White	% of high school graduates	75%	71%	69%	- 6
	% of graduates taking an AP Exam	84%	75%	74%	- 10
	% of AP Exam takers receiving a passing score	84%	81%	79%	- 5
Black	% of high school graduates	21%	21%	20%	- 1
	% of graduates taking an AP Exam	7%	13%	14%	+ 7
	% of AP Exam takers receiving a passing score	3%	4%	5%	+ 2
Hispanic	% of high school graduates	3%	5%	8%	+ 5
	% of graduates taking an AP Exam	2%	5%	9%	+ 7
	% of AP Exam takers receiving a passing score	2%	6%	9%	+ 7
Low Income	% of Arkansas students K-12	53%	56%	61%	+ 8
	% of graduates taking an AP Exam	10%	20%	33%	+ 23
	% of AP Exam takers receiving a passing score	8%	14%	24%	+ 16

Black students have consistently represented 20% of Arkansas' high school graduates, but were only 7% of the AP Exam takers in 2003— an equity gap of 13 points. In 2013, black students represented 14% of exam takers— reducing the equity gap by half. Passing rates, however, are persistently low for black students, with only 5% of AP Exam takers receiving a passing score in 2013.

Hispanic students are increasingly represented in the graduating classes of Arkansas, moving from 3% in 2003 to 8% in 2013. Hispanic students are also experiencing increased AP participation and passing rates. Given that these rates are consistent with the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled, there is no evidence of an equity gap for Hispanic students.

The percentage of **low income students** in Arkansas has increased 8 percentage points since 2003, to 61% in 2013. While still underrepresented compared to enrollment, 33% of low income graduates had taken an AP Exam. This is an impressive improvement over the meager 10% who participated in AP in 2003. Low-income students were three times more likely to pass an AP Exam than they were in 2003. In 2013, 24% of low-income test takers received a passing score, compared to only 8% ten years earlier. Although still evidence of an equity gap, the participation and passing rates for low income students are increasing and above the national average.

These positive trends highlight the **increased equity in both AP access and success**, but there are still areas of concern. A large equity gap exists for low-income students as their AP Participation rate is much lower than their enrollment representation. The anemic passing rates for black students, even in the face of increasing test taking, indicates that students are not prepared to be successful on the AP Exams.

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Conclusion

Arkansas' improvement in AP participation and success is a positive trend in college and career readiness of our students. There are several policy recommendations that would support and expand the success of Arkansas' AP policies.

- **Accountability:** 30% of Arkansas school districts do not have students enrolled in the four AP core classes. Support should be provided to these districts to ensure that all Arkansas students are provided the "4 Core" requirement of offering one each of the four core classes in math, science, English, and social studies every year.
- **Innovation:** Small schools who have consistently offered, and had students enrolled in the "4Core" at their schools appear to be offering classes in sets that vary by year to better meet the need of AP student cohorts within their schools. This and other innovations, such as co-oping with other small schools to provide brick and mortar or virtual classes, as well as the potential of online classes, would insure all students have better access, regardless of where they live in the state.
- **Pre-AP Pipeline to Success:** While passing rates have improved, many students are not adequately prepared for success in AP courses. This could be helped by better defining the pre-AP pipeline, where students are developing needed skills before they sit in the AP classroom. While Arkansas does encourage pre-AP courses, better guidelines with accountability could ensure better student preparation across the state and, again, promote better student success equity.
- **Teacher Quality:** Similarly, students may not be succeeding at higher rates because teachers are not adequately prepared or supported in the teaching of the AP courses. We must ensure teacher quality and recommend increased high quality training for new AP teachers and teachers in high need school districts. We also recommend the formation of an AP teacher support network within the state where novice teachers can receive support from a mentor AP teacher for longer periods of time.

Arkansas' aggressive policies are providing increased access to Advanced Placement courses for Arkansas students. More high school graduates have taken and passed an AP Exam than prior to the implementation of the requirement that all schools offer '4 Core'. In conjunction with access to courses, the policy allowing students to complete AP Exams free of charge may be responsible for the dramatic increase in the percentage of minority and low-income students participating in AP. The final step in closing the equity gaps is to ensure that all students they are adequately prepared for success by quality teachers.

Sources: *CollegeBoard.org, Arkansas Department of Education Data Center, Act 102: [ftp://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/acts/2003s2/Public/ACT102.pdf](http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/acts/2003s2/Public/ACT102.pdf)*