

Elevating the High School Experience

A proposal for policies and practices that will positively impact student stress levels, promote course selection based on personal interests, and continue to produce students who will be career and college ready.

Background

National trends in teen mental health tell a troubling story. Incidents of major depressive episodes, characterized as suffering from a depressed mood for two weeks or more and a loss of interest in everyday activities, rose to 17.3% among girls and 5.7% among boys in 2014. The increase in minors requiring hospitalization for eating disorders rose 172% between 2003 and 2014. Twenty-five percent of teens meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder, and 8% of children ages 7-16 have attempted self injury (Source: [Tackling the Student Stress Dilemma](#), EAB, 2017).

In May 2017, as part of a survey on the newly implemented homework policy, ACPS high school students were asked about stress and mental health. Of the nearly 1,200 responses received, 68% indicated that their amount of worry about school work had increased; 72% reported a decrease in the amount of sleep they get; 66% indicated that they had less time to do things other than school work; and 64% reported a decreased amount of time to spend with family and friends.

One element of this stress relates to academics. “Students, in a relentless pursuit of perfection, concerned about getting the highest grades in the toughest possible classes to get admitted to the most selective colleges, have little interest in learning or their own growth beyond building the perfect college resume” (EAB). The stress manifests itself in a number of negative ways including academic misconduct, such as cheating, absenteeism, and maladaptive behaviors like risk aversion arising from fear of failure, and disengagement caused by a singular focus on grades.

In addition to the stressors outlined above, the pursuit of the highest possible grade point average (GPA) leads students to report that they often select classes based on their implied prestige and not on personal interests. In an ACPS survey completed by 2,047 middle and high school students in February 2018, 49% of respondents indicated that the practice of weighting grades increases student stress levels; 68% indicated that weighting grades motivates students to take as many Advanced Placement (AP) courses as possible; and 54% indicated that weighting grades discourages students from taking unweighted elective courses that were of

interest. Additionally, 70% of student respondents indicated that they think the practice of weighting grades gives them a better chance of getting into the college of their choice.

AP courses also have been identified as a source of stress for students, particularly as they relate to the belief that the more AP courses a student enrolls in, the higher their probability of gaining admission to a selective college or university. AP enrollment in ACPS is indicative of this trend. In the 2017-2018 school year, 54 11th-grade students and 158 12th-grade students were enrolled in five or more AP classes. The number of juniors and seniors enrolled in three or more AP classes that same year was 253 and 359, respectively. In the 2018-2019 school year, ACPS offered 28 AP courses.

One benefit of AP that is touted by the College Board is stronger preparation for the level of rigor that students will experience at the college level ([Work Toward College Success](#)). In a survey given to ACPS stakeholders in February 2018, participants were asked how many AP courses they believed students need to complete throughout high school to prove that they can do rigorous, college-level work. Nearly 87% indicated that students should take between zero and six courses to show this capability. The most commonly selected response from the participants (40.6%) was between one and three courses.

Faculty Feedback

During Dr. Haas' summer listening tour, a common request from division teachers was that they be involved from the start in significant decisions that would impact our division. In response to that feedback three meetings were held in January at each of our three comprehensive high schools to solicit ideas about what we might do to enhance students' high school experiences and have a positive impact on their levels of stress.

Based on feedback received from these meetings, three ideas to help us meet our goals emerged or were reinforced:

1. Decrease the number of required course selections for students from eight to seven each academic year.
2. Place a cap on the number of AP classes a student may enroll in during high school or replace the AP program in ACPS.
3. Eliminate the practice of weighting grades.

Three additional meetings took place in April to present these and other ideas and solicit further feedback from classroom teachers.

Our Priorities

ACPS has adopted three strategic priorities:

- Create a culture of high expectations for all.
- Identify and remove practices that perpetuate the achievement gap.
- Ensure that students identify and develop personal interests.

Through our research and conversations with faculty and staff, we believe we have identified multiple practices that are currently in place in or division that are barriers to the attainment of these priorities. It is our duty as a school system to take action to eliminate such barriers when they become apparent to us.

Recommendations

Based on the information above, division staff is making four recommendations that will move us closer to our goal. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Eliminate Weighted Grades.

Rationale: Students have reported to us that the practice of weighting grades makes them less likely to select an unweighted course of personal interest, since unweighted courses have a negative impact on a weighted GPA. Weighted grades, therefore, are a barrier to achieving the Albemarle County School Board's strategic priority to ensure that students identify and develop personal interests.

In Virginia, AP and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes are required by regulatory code to be weighted. In January of 2018 the Virginia Board of Education voted unanimously to grant ACPS a five-year waiver to this regulation, allowing us to study and move forward with a decision to remove weights from grades.

Stakeholders are concerned that eliminating weighted grades may negatively impact college admission. In February 2019, ACPS commissioned a study of this in partnership with EAB. EAB researchers contacted several admissions officers at colleges and universities with high application rates by ACPS students. The majority of colleges and universities contacted reported that weighted GPAs are not a significant factor in admission. The schools generally strip out weight and then use an unweighted GPA paired with an examination of a student's transcript for high levels of academic rigor as significant factors in the admissions process. Schools reported that when they do use weight, it most often is to compare students from the same high school. One university reported to EAB that removing weights would make it more challenging for their admissions personnel to easily identify high-performing students.

Implementation Timeframe: Remove weights from grades for students in the current seventh-grade cohort (Graduating Class of 2024) and beyond.

Expected Measurable Impact: Reduction in the number of students enrolled in a study hall and an increase in students reporting that they choose classes based on personal interests instead of competition for college admission.

2. Ensure stronger compliance with the division homework policy.

Rationale: EAB's study, [Tackling the Student Stress Dilemma](#), provides some research-based strategies for positively impacting student stress levels. Two of the strategies focus on homework, something that is directly controllable at the school level. One suggestion is to adhere to the "10-minute rule," which is mirrored in our current homework policy that was implemented in the 2016-2017 school year. When surveyed at the end of the school year, high school students indicated that the division homework policy was not being followed between 27% and 45% of the time.

Work to promote better compliance with the policy is underway. A communication plan began this spring in which a message is sent to all division parents reminding them of the policy and outlining steps they can take if they see their child doing homework that is outside the scope of the policy. This communication will be sent multiple times during future school years. All students in grades 4-12 have recently completed a survey on our current state of homework. This will guide school leaders as they determine how to best address homework in their schools. In addition, division staff is currently seeking to form a student-led project group that to develop regulations for the existing homework policy that ensure stronger fidelity.

Implementation Timeframe: Underway and ongoing. Student group develops regulations during the 2019-2020 school year for future implementation.

Expected Measurable Impact: Increased percentage of high school students reporting that teachers are adhering to the homework policy, with the ultimate goal of reaching 100%. Increased positive indicators for student stress levels, amount of sleep, and time available for non-school activities.

3. Reduce yearly required high school course selections to seven per year and implement an eighth period for intervention.

Rationale: Graduation requirements in Virginia range from 22 credits for a Standard Diploma to 26 credits for an Advanced Studies Diploma. Currently, ACPS students select eight academic classes for each year they are enrolled in high school, providing an opportunity to earn 32 credits over the course of four years. Additionally, many students leave middle school having already earned between one and three high school credits. In a January 2019 survey on our current high school scheduling models, the following key ideas emerged that support a move to seven course selections instead of eight:

- 87% of employees, 67% of parents, and 52% of high school students reported that they would prefer to have seven academic classes in an eight-period schedule, leaving the eighth period available for internships, enrichment, academic support, etc.
- 83% of employees, 88% of parents, and 75% of students indicated that time during the school day for students to meet with teachers and counselors is important.
- 67% of employees, 71% of parents, and 78% of students reported that time during the school day for students to work collaboratively with peers is important.
- Approximately 42% of high school students have selected a study hall as a part of their schedule. This may indicate that students are not taking offered elective courses and/or that overloaded students need time during the day away from academic pressures
- Academically accelerated students who earned high school credit(s) during middle school report increased opportunities to select a study hall compared to students who did not earn high school credit(s) in middle school.

Under this plan, ACPS would continue to offer an eight-period bell schedule, and students would enroll in seven academic classes per year. The eighth period would be used as a period for intervention, enrichment, for students to have time to collaborate during the school day, for off-site student internships and apprenticeships or other activities. As a part of this plan, the current Freshman Seminar course would be redesigned to incorporate it into the intervention period. In addition, student enrollment in study halls would be discouraged and limited to one per year.

Implementation Timeframe: Develop a common high school bell schedule for the 2019-2020 school year. Study the impacts and benefits of a seven academic period schedule during the 2019-2020 school year for potential implementation in the 2020-2021 school year. Each school also will include an enrichment period in its schedule to allow for an eight-period, alternating block schedule.

Expected Measurable Impact: Reduction in study hall enrollment and student stress levels. Increase in elective enrollment and an increase in students reporting that they are choosing their courses based on their personal interests.

4. Limit the number of AP courses in which students may enroll.

Rationale: At its inception in the 1950s, the AP program was designed to provide particularly motivated students the opportunity to earn college credit and graduate early from college. Few students today graduate in less than four years, and most often, students now see AP as a means to college admission rather than an opportunity to earn college credit. With a nearly 40% participation rate, AP now carries diminished significance as a mark of academic noteworthiness. Regardless, there is a perception that colleges demand AP courses as an admission criteria, and this perception causes students to enroll in these courses as a potential admissions ticket. A study that soon will be released by College Board researchers indicates

that AP most positively affects college success for students who go from taking zero AP courses to one or from one AP course to two. After that, the impact on college success is not significant.

Limiting the number of AP courses a student may take addresses our growing concern about student stress. The Harvard Graduate School of Education's [Making Caring Common \(MCC\) Project](#) provides compelling support for this change within their [Caring Schools #CommonGood Campaign](#):

While in many communities, students lack access to key academic resources and opportunities, such as AP courses, in many middle- and upper-income communities especially, students are overloading on AP courses and extracurricular activities and fierce pressure to attend high status colleges is taking a large emotional and ethical toll. Rates of depression, delinquency, substance abuse, and anxiety, for example, appear to be considerably higher in these communities than in the general population of adolescents. Research suggests that achievement pressure is a prime culprit (Galloway, Conner, & Pope, 2013; Luthar & Becker, 2002). The intense focus on personal achievement can also crowd out concern about others and the common good.

Other schools have recently made significant changes in their AP programs. In June 2018, eight Washington-area independent schools, through a [Joint Announcement on AP Courses](#), publicized their shared commitment to eliminate Advanced Placement courses from their curricula by 2022:

As the heads of these schools, we have been meeting regularly over the past several years to discuss educational research and compare experience. One topic on which we all agree is the diminished utility of AP courses and the desirability of developing our own advanced courses that more effectively address our students' needs and interests.

Based on the rationale above, ACPS is recommending the following AP limits, along with a recommendation to study the possibility of developing our own advanced study curriculum:

- Zero AP courses in ninth grade;
- One AP course in 10th grade;
- Two AP courses in 11th grade; and
- Three AP courses in 12th grade.

Implementation Timeframe: Begin implementation with the current seventh-grade cohort (Graduating Class of 2024).

Expected Measurable Impact: Higher number of students reporting that they are selecting courses based on personal interests rather than as a means to college admission. Students reporting reduced stress levels and more time for activities outside of school.