Fewer students of color take Advanced Placement exams

Enrolling in Advanced Placement courses can be an important step in preparing for college success, but in order to realize the full benefits of the AP program students must take and score well on the associated exams. Data show disparities in test-taking, which means many students of color enrolled in AP courses are not accessing the full range of advantages related to the AP curriculum, and the pandemic may have added to the problem.

Advanced Placement (AP) courses appear on the schedules of many college-bound students. The benefits of enrolling in AP courses are well known: students are exposed to college-level material and ways of processing it. At the end of the course, students can opt to take an AP exam in the subject, which provides them with the opportunity to earn college credits. In order to ensure access for all students, Wisconsin requires districts to cover the cost of the tests for students who qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Despite these attempts to ensure equity, however, there are disparities among students in reaping the benefits of these challenging courses. For years, analysis by the Wisconsin Policy Forum for our School DataTool has found a lower proportion of students of color receiving a high enough score to gain college credit. Here we add to that work by examining whether there is an even more fundamental disparity in terms of which students actually take the test.

We examined data available through the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), a program of the federal Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights which collects a wide range of information from all local educational agencies (LEAs) in the nation. In this case, we examined the portion of students who enroll in at least one AP course but do not take any AP exams.

For the 2017-18 year (the most recent for which data are available), 32% of all Wisconsin students enrolled in at least one AP course didn’t take an AP exam. Yet the share was much higher for some groups: 50% of Black students who enrolled in an AP course did not take an exam, nor did 49% of American Indian or Alaska Native students, 43% of Hispanic students, or 37% of students identifying as two or more races (see Figure 1).

The outcomes were even less favorable in some school districts. Of the 10 districts with the highest number of Black students enrolled in AP courses (and therefore reasonably large samples), six had non-testing rates over 50% (see Figure 2 on page two). For example, in Beloit and Wauwatosa (the district with the third-highest AP enrollment of Black students), 84% and 82% of Black students respectively did not take the exam. In Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), the state’s largest district and the one with the largest number of Black students, 44% of Black students did not take an AP exam, somewhat better than the state average.

![Figure 1: Fewer Students of Color Take AP Tests](https://ocrdata.ed.gov/)

Source: Federal Office of Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection
MPS generally had smaller racial disparities than other districts. For example, the district had the most Hispanic students enrolled in AP courses, and just 27% opted out of the exam, well below the state average for Hispanic students. In eight of the top 10 districts by AP enrollment, however, the rates of non-testing for Hispanic students were higher than the state average. In the Lake Geneva-Genoa City high school-only district, 79% did not take the exam, followed by Racine Unified (66%) and the School District of Janesville (63%).

The Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) had the highest number of students identifying as two or more races enrolled in AP courses (154 students), and 38% of those did not take an AP test, roughly the same as the state average for that group. While La Crosse (26%), Verona (24%), and MPS (26%) beat the state average, Kenosha (62%) and Janesville (55%) had a far larger share of students identifying as two or more races not taking AP tests.

Comparatively few American Indian or Alaska Native students enrolled in AP courses, with MPS having the most at just 30 students. That makes analysis difficult. Cause for concern remains, however, as in some districts none of those students took an AP exam despite being enrolled in AP courses.

Although white and Asian students had the highest rates of testing statewide, some districts still saw relatively large portions of these students opting not to take the test. Among districts with the highest enrollment of white students in AP classes, 47% did not take the exam in Janesville, 41% in Kenosha, and 31% in Appleton. For districts with the highest enrollment of Asian students taking AP courses, the percent of Asian students not taking exams ranged from 1% in New Berlin to 45% in Green Bay, with 27% not taking the test in MMSD and 21% in MPS.

**MPS AHEAD OF STATE AVERAGES**

In MPS, all student groups had lower rates of opting out than the state average. This is especially important as MPS serves large numbers of students of color and is the district with the highest AP enrollment for English Learners and students who identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, Black, and Hispanic, and is a very close second for students identifying as Asian. MPS officials note the district’s success may be due in part to an increased push in identifying and recruiting students who would do well in and benefit from AP courses that began in the 2016-17 school year. Unfortunately, the effort was funded through a statewide GEAR UP grant, which has since lapsed. Additionally, MPS officials noted that the district has a policy of paying half of the testing fee for students who are not eligible for the full waiver, which may encourage additional test taking.

Despite MPS’ improvements in this area, disparities remain. Although Black MPS students tested at higher rates than the state average, they were still the group with the highest rate of opting out. American Indian or Alaska Native students were the next most likely group of students to not test, at 40%. About a quarter each of Hispanic enrollees, white enrollees, and students identifying as two or more races each did not test, while just over one in five Asian students enrolled in an AP course did not take an exam.

**PANDEMIC LIKELY ADDED TO PROBLEM**

The CRDC data on AP testing examined so far predate COVID-19. Recent data from the state Department of Public Instruction suggest overall test-taking and some disparities have worsened during the pandemic but offer only a partial look at the issue because they do not account for enrollment in AP courses.

These data show that, after years of sizable increases in the number of AP tests taken in Wisconsin, the total began dropping in 2018-19 for students of most races.
and ethnicities and accelerated after the onset of COVID-19 (see Figure 3). In 2020-21, Wisconsin students took 66,584 AP tests, down 7.2% from the previous year and the lowest number since 2014-15.

The vast majority of these tests (54,235 in 2020-21, or 81%) were taken by students who identify as white, but the number of tests taken by white students has decreased since 2017-18, with the sharpest year-over-year drop in 2020-21 (7.8% fewer than the previous year and 9.1% fewer than in 2018-19). Over the same period, the number of tests taken by students who identify as Asian and Pacific Islander has remained relatively steady, while the number of tests taken has declined for students identifying as Black or American Indian. The latter two student groups saw the largest percentage-point declines from 2018-19 to 2020-21 (30.6% and 41.5%, respectively). After an uptick in 2018-19, the number of tests taken by students who identify as Hispanic declined over the initial years of the pandemic as well, by 17.9%.

**TESTING NOT THE ONLY DISPARITY**

Enrolling in AP courses and taking the exam offer important benefits, but scoring a 3 or higher on the exam out of a possible score of 5 provides the additional tangible benefit of college credits for students.

As shown in our School DataTool, gaps between student groups have persisted in this metric as well, with 63.2% of students identifying as white scoring a 3 or above in 2020-21, compared to 45.8% of Hispanic students and 30.8% of Black students. Unfortunately, data from the 2020-21 school year show that the percentage of students scoring a 3 or higher on AP exams has declined for students of all races compared to the previous year, with a particular decline for those identifying as American Indian.

**UNDERSTANDING THE GAPS**

Addressing these gaps in general and the particular disparity between races of non-test takers requires a deeper understanding of the factors at play. These students have already chosen to enroll in AP courses, so they would seem to be interested and invested in the potential benefits of the AP curriculum. A key question is what factors prevent them from reaping the full benefits of that enrollment by taking the exams and potentially earning college credits?

In theory, the cost of the exams should not be an impediment because, as noted earlier, districts are required to provide financial support to those who qualify (in most districts, this criterion is based on free or reduced lunch eligibility). In practice, however, there might be a lack of understanding about this support or bureaucratic hurdles to accessing it. Family income and resources also might affect student access or behavior in other ways, such as by increasing the likelihood of jobs or other competing priorities that might reduce time available for studying. The expectations of teachers or peers might likewise play a role.

To some degree, communication to students and families about the potential benefits of taking both AP courses and the exams, as well as the financial support for doing so, may help to address the gap. The higher rate of test participation within MPS may reflect at least in part the value of greater and more systematic outreach and financial support, and it would be worth following up to see if the higher testing rates have persisted in Milwaukee following the expiration of their GEAR UP grant.

Last, the students’ own assessment of their readiness and knowledge of the material – whether accurate or inaccurate – as well as how well the subject aligns with students’ interests and future goals likely plays a role in
whether they take the exam. Ensuring that students have access to AP courses that correspond to their postsecondary plans may increase engagement, including test taking. Addressing broader disparities within K-12 education is also likely to be helpful or even necessary.

Given the need for increased post-secondary education enrollment and completion for all Wisconsin students as a means of addressing both workforce shortages and income disparities, policymakers may wish to enhance their focus on AP enrollment and test taking. AP success, in all its forms, provides both financial and academic benefits to students. Opening up the full benefits of AP courses to as many students as possible might be one way to help address one of the state’s most pressing challenges.