Jefferson Parish schools work to expand Advanced Placement participation

Grace King seniors Marley Olavarrieta, Lydia Chon and Pei Yu attended the AP Initiative kick-off on Tuesday, September 18, 2013. Grace King saw a 200 percent increase in AP class participation from 2012 to 2013.

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on September 23, 2013 at 10:21 AM, updated September 23, 2013 at 12:03 PM

Less than 10 percent of Jefferson Parish students were enrolled in an Advanced Placement course last school year, prompting the Jefferson School Board to launch an initiative to increasing the number of students participating. Last week, the system celebrated gains made at Grace King High School in Metairie, where enrollment in so-called AP classes has risen 200 percent from last year.

"In the past, enrollment with AP classes was always, 'the usual suspects,'" Grace King principal Meg Griffon said. "It's absolutely phenomenal to see how many students have stepped up to the challenge this year."

In previous school years, there has been wide variation in Jefferson schools that offer AP courses, with most of the participation taking place at Haynes Academy for Advanced Studies and John Ehret High School. Advanced Placement courses offer college-level work to high school students. If students score high enough on a yearly standardized exam, they can also receive college credit for having taken the course, and studies have shown that students who take Advanced Placement classes are better prepared for college and less likely to drop out.

Last April, however, the school board signed a partnership with the education non-profit Mass Insight, which is also working on the system's Turnaround school network, to help boost Advanced Placement class participation at schools that needed it the most.

Grace King, West Jefferson High School in Harvey and Fischer in Lafitte were chosen to implement the initiative, which included teacher workshops and training in teaching AP classes, Saturday help sessions for students, and extra tutoring.

The initiative is also seeking to improve student scores on the Advanced Placement exams, administered at the end of the year. If a student scores high enough on the exam, they can earn college credit for the course.
This year, Grace King had 283 students out of its 1,180 total student enrollment participate in an Advanced Placement course. This was a 200 percent increase from last year, when the school had only 47 students in Advanced Placement classes.

The school has also increased the number of classes it offers from three to nine, including Calculus, American History, Psychology, Chemistry, Biology, Physics, Statistics, English Language and English Literature. The school has a dedicated Advanced Placement "lead" teacher, who motivates participating students, and will be offering Saturday sessions for students who need extra help.

"This is my first time being in an AP class," junior Carlos Salgado said. Salgado is enrolled in two courses this year, Advanced Placement Physics and English Literature.

"I didn't take one last year because I was scared," he continued. "But this year, I realize that AP classes are harder than regular classes, but it's not about being smart enough to take them."

His classmate, junior Rinesha Williams who will be taking Advanced Placement English Literature this year, added to his sentiment.

"It can be challenging, and I was nervous to take it this year," Williams said. "But I've made my decision to take a college class, so keep calm and get college credit."

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