

## JUMPING OUT OF THE RAT RACE: AP CLASSES, RANKINGS, TESTING AND COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

Once you become active in something, something happens to you. You get excited and suddenly you realize you count.

– Studs Terkel

A major goal of *Race to Nowhere* is to stimulate dialogue and motivate change within individual schools and districts as well as at the state and federal level. Change is being made in many schools through a grassroots movement that includes parents, students, educators and administrators. These people are challenging the way students are educated in this country and we can learn and be inspired by them.

### ABOLISHING COLLEGE BOARD ADVANCED PLACEMENT (AP) CLASSES

Below are some public and private schools that have responded to research showing minimal benefits from AP classes. The research in the area includes:

A survey of 8,594 college students taking introductory science courses found that students who took and passed an AP science exam did only about one-third of a letter grade better than their classmates with similar backgrounds who did not take an AP course.<sup>10</sup>

A survey of 18,000 college students enrolled in introductory biology, chemistry and physics found little evidence that high school AP courses significantly boost college performance in the sciences.<sup>11</sup>

A *USA Today* analysis found that the number of students taking Advanced Placement tests hit a record high last year, but the percentage of students who fail the exams is rising as well. In 2009, 41.5% of students who took Advanced Placement tests in the USA received a failing score.<sup>12</sup>

#### Chestnut Hill, MA

The independent school, Beaver Country Day School, eliminated AP courses in 2006. Instead of AP courses that concentrated on breadth instead of depth, the school wanted more focused courses on engaging themes. As a result, they

developed advanced courses on topics such as Exploring the Roots of Islamic Extremism; Complex Systems Modeling; Cryptology and Monsters; and Degenerates: A Study of Dark Figures in the Novels of Conrad, Wilde, Woolf and Others. Beaver's Advanced Biology is divided into three one-term segments: DNA and Genetic Science; Ecology and Field Studies; and Anatomy and Physiology.<sup>13</sup>

#### Bronx, NY

The Ethical Culture Fieldston School, an independent school, eliminated AP classes in 2001, three years after a student, Matthew Spigelman, wrote a paper for his English class arguing that the school should drop AP. "While the goal of AP courses is to prepare students for the AP test, the goal of Fieldston-specific courses is to learn for learning's sake. Courses specific to Fieldston have curricula generated by Fieldston teachers. Thus, Fieldston teachers bring enthusiasm to the Fieldston-generated courses not generally found in AP courses." Spigelman also commented on the paradox of offering fact-based survey courses as the capstone of the curriculum. "It is ironic," he wrote, "that the top students, who will be trying to take the most specialized courses available in college, are taking the most general courses available in high school largely because the course titles are preceded by the letters 'AP.'" <sup>14</sup>

The first class to graduate in three decades without taking one AP class heard back from colleges about early admission decisions. At least 40 were admitted through early decision to their first-choice schools, and about a dozen were admitted through early action selections that are non-binding for the students. "The totals constituted the highest early acceptance rate for the school in several years," said Rachel Friis Stettler, the principal of its high school.<sup>15</sup>

#### Scarsdale, NY

The public high school in Scarsdale turned its back on school rankings in the media and abolished AP classes to free teachers from having to teach to the test. The school has replaced AP classes with an Advanced Topics curriculum that allows students to study topics more in depth including string theory, advanced government and art.

An English teacher who taught AP English for six years welcomed the change, saying that he previously felt as if he was cheating his students when he strayed from the regimen of test preparation. "The teaching can be more indirect now and, I think, richer and deeper," he said. "Our responsibility is to prepare students as well as we can, but we're not going to the scores to see whether it's working."

## Westtown, PA

The Westtown Schools is a Quaker, co-educational, day and boarding school for grades Pre-K - 12. When the school dropped AP classes, Tim Loose, who taught AP Biology for over 20 years and also served as a reader of AP exams reinvented his teaching. “The biggest benefit is pace,” said Loose, “I don’t have to lay out my whole syllabus at the beginning.” Loose now plans his course in two-week intervals in order to be more responsive to students’ interests.

Rather than offer a single advanced Biology course, Westtown now teaches two: Research Ecology: Pieces, Patterns, and Processes; and Evolutionary History of Life on Earth. Each course offers ample opportunity to examine big-picture themes. Such possibilities are most obvious in Evolutionary History of Life on Earth. While typical biology courses merely describe the characteristics of organisms, this one allows students to see relationships between them as part of evolutionary development. It also opens the door to meaty big-picture issues about the meaning of it all.<sup>16</sup>

## RETHINKING RANKINGS

Every year *Newsweek* magazine ranks the “best high schools” in the U.S. based solely on the percentage of students taking AP or International Baccalaureate Tests. In 2007, the Palo Alto School District in California said that it would not play this game. In declining to participate in *Newsweek* magazine's annual ranking of high schools, Palo Alto says it hoped to strike a blow against shallowness, student stress and unwanted publicity. Other schools have declined to answer the survey, which ranks the top 1,200 or so high schools in the nation. But this may be the first time an entire district has dropped out.<sup>17</sup>

This move came two years after Palo Alto High School students took a survey about student stress. According to the survey, completed by 1,450 students online, most students said large amounts of homework – up to five hours a night – cause them the most stress. Students also stated that parents – as well as themselves – dole out the excessive pressure to achieve high grades and get into top colleges. Adding to their homework frustrations, students said their teachers rarely indicate how much time assignments should take, nor do they check in to see how long the projects actually took.<sup>18</sup>

## STANDARDIZED TESTING

*The push for standardized testing has an impact on schools and children as early as kindergarten. The National Association for the Education of Young Children, a professional organization of educators and administrators, has long counseled a measure of sanity in contrast to over-testing of children. The organization has a position statement that decries the impact of public demand for stringent educational standards as early as kindergarten and gives classroom teachers little or no part in decisions which determine curriculum and instructional methodology.<sup>19</sup>*

Standardized testing has been at the core of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and now Race to the Top (RTT), yet there is no research that shows that such testing actually helps students learn. The inordinate amount of time spent teaching to the test has actually been shown to have some negative effects. In addition, it can cause students to disengage.

A study by researchers at Rice University and the University of Texas-Austin found that Texas' public school accountability system, the model for the national NCLB, directly contributed to lower graduation rates. Particularly disturbing were findings that schools' ratings increased in part because low-achieving students dropped out at increased rates.<sup>20</sup>

The Coalition for Better Education is fighting against standardized testing in Colorado and encouraging parents to refuse to have their children take standardized tests by submitting an "opt-out" letter to their child's school and/or district. For more information and a sample opt-out letter go to [www.thebbe.org](http://www.thebbe.org) or page 150 of this Guide.

A clearinghouse of information for parents and educators interested in stopping over-reliance on standardized testing can be found at: <http://www.susanohanian.org>. The website also includes numerous action and advocacy strategies.

Diane Ravitch, Assistant Secretary of Education under President George H.W. Bush, led the federal effort to promote the creation of state and national academic standards. In a stunning turn-around, Ravitch publicly reversed many of her previous positions with respect to accountability and choice. With reference to standardized testing, she wrote in an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post*, "We need assessments that gauge students' understanding and require them to demonstrate what they know, not tests that allow students to rely solely on guessing and picking one among four canned answers." We wasted eight years with the "measure and punish" strategy of NCLB. Let's not waste the next eight years.<sup>21</sup>

## COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

The college search should be about finding the right fit rather than the most prestigious college. There are many resources to help students do this. They include:

**Colleges That Change Lives, Inc.** (<http://www.ctcl.org/>) Colleges that change lives (CTCL) is dedicated to the advancement and support of a student-centered college search process. Their mission is to support the goal of each student finding a college that develops a lifelong love of learning and provides the foundation for a successful and fulfilling life beyond college. The director of CTCL, Marty O'Connell, challenges students to:

**"think about the people in their lives who are happy and successful and find out where, or if, they went to college. Doing this same exercise using "famous" people, they discover that most often the name and visibility of a college choice has much less to do with success in life than do the experiences and opportunities students take advantage of during their college years."**  
<http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/28/lessvisible/>

**Education Conservancy** (<http://www.educationconservancy.org/>) The Education Conservancy (EC) is committed to improving college admission processes for students, colleges and high schools. By harnessing the research, ideas, leadership and imagination of thoughtful educators, EC delivers appropriate advice, advocacy and services.

**FairTest** (<http://www.fairtest.org/>) FairTest works to end the misuses and flaws of standardized testing and to ensure that evaluation of students, teachers and schools is fair, open, valid and educationally beneficial. This organization lists colleges where the SAT is optional or accorded less weight in the admissions process.

**The National Survey of Student Engagement** (<http://nsse.iub.edu/>) The National Survey of Student Engagement gathers data about colleges and universities beyond the usual rankings. The organization examines student engagement, how students spend their time and what students perceive they gain from attending college.

## END NOTES

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- <sup>12</sup> Gillum, J., & Toppo, G. (2010, February 4). Failure rate for AP tests climbing. *USA Today*.
- <sup>13</sup> Independent Curriculum Group. (n.d.). *Beaver Country Day School*. Retrieved December 29, 2009, from [http://www.independentcurriculum.org/index.php/schools/beaver\\_country\\_day\\_school/](http://www.independentcurriculum.org/index.php/schools/beaver_country_day_school/)
- <sup>14</sup> Independent Curriculum Group. (n.d.). We put learning in the hands of students. *Fieldston School*. Retrieved December 17, 2009, from [http://www.independentcurriculum.org/index.php/icg/schools/fieldston\\_school](http://www.independentcurriculum.org/index.php/icg/schools/fieldston_school)
- <sup>15</sup> Zhao, Y. (2001, February 1). High school drops its AP courses, and colleges don't seem to mind. *The New York Times*.
- <sup>16</sup> Independent Curriculum Group. (n.d.). The big picture in biology. *Westtown School*. Retrieved December 17, 2009, from [http://www.independentcurriculum.org/index.php/icg/schools/westtown\\_school/](http://www.independentcurriculum.org/index.php/icg/schools/westtown_school/)
- <sup>17</sup> Noguchi, S. (2007, May 21). Palo Alto High School refuses to join *Newsweek* survey of best schools. *San Jose Mercury News*.
- <sup>18</sup> Rocha, A. (2005, May 6). Survey confirms student stress but next step is unclear. *Palo Alto Weekly*.
- <sup>19</sup> National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. (2000). *Still unacceptable trends in kindergarten entry and placement. A position statement. Revision and update*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED445775)
- <sup>20</sup> Study: Texas school system fosters low graduation rates. (2008, February 15). *Austin Business Journal*.
- <sup>21</sup> Ravitch, D. (2010, April 2). A new agenda for school reform. *Washington Post*. Retrieved April 27, 2010, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/04/01/AR2010040101468.html>