

# Increasing Access to Advanced Coursework

## in Massachusetts

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### Introduction

[Research](#) says that when students have access to advanced coursework opportunities, they work harder and are more engaged in school, have fewer absences and suspensions, and have higher graduation rates. Advanced coursework also allows students to earn credits and credentials in high school, so they can get a head start in college and/or their career. Unfortunately, many Black and Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds lack equitable access to advanced coursework opportunities, such as gifted and talented programs in elementary school, eighth grade Algebra courses, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and dual enrollment programs in high school. As a result, these students are missing out on crucial opportunities that can set them up for success after high school.

Existing inequities in access to advanced coursework were exacerbated during the pandemic, when schools went online and AP, IB, and dual enrollment classes were quickly overhauled or canceled. Many already underserved students with limited access to technology, interruptions at home, and/or mental health issues were cut off from the additional resources and supports they needed to succeed and experienced a significant [amount](#) of unfinished learning. But, many schools and districts used federal emergency and recovery funds and new mechanisms to extend access to these students, and [data shows](#) that students with advanced coursework opportunities in middle school fared better than their peers, which suggests that investing in evidence-based programs and practices can accelerate students' learning and reduce persistent inequities.

Increasing access to advanced coursework requires commitment from state leaders to collect and analyze “disaggregated participation and outcomes data, and enact targeted, data-informed efforts to develop policies that increase access to, and success in, high-quality advanced coursework. This brief is designed to support these efforts by providing data analyses and a scan of policies and practices in Massachusetts for advocates, educators, and policymakers who are leading this work at the state level.

### Policy Context

Massachusetts is a national leader in AP performance and enrollment and ranks first in the nation for the percentage of graduating high school seniors who scored a 3 or higher on an AP exam in 2021 and 2022. While persistent disparities remain, the number of Black and Latino graduates in the state who take AP exams has increased over the last decade. However, in Massachusetts, standards for accepting AP credits vary at different public institutions — for example, some institutions accept a minimum AP test score of 3, while others require higher AP scores or don't take AP credits at all.

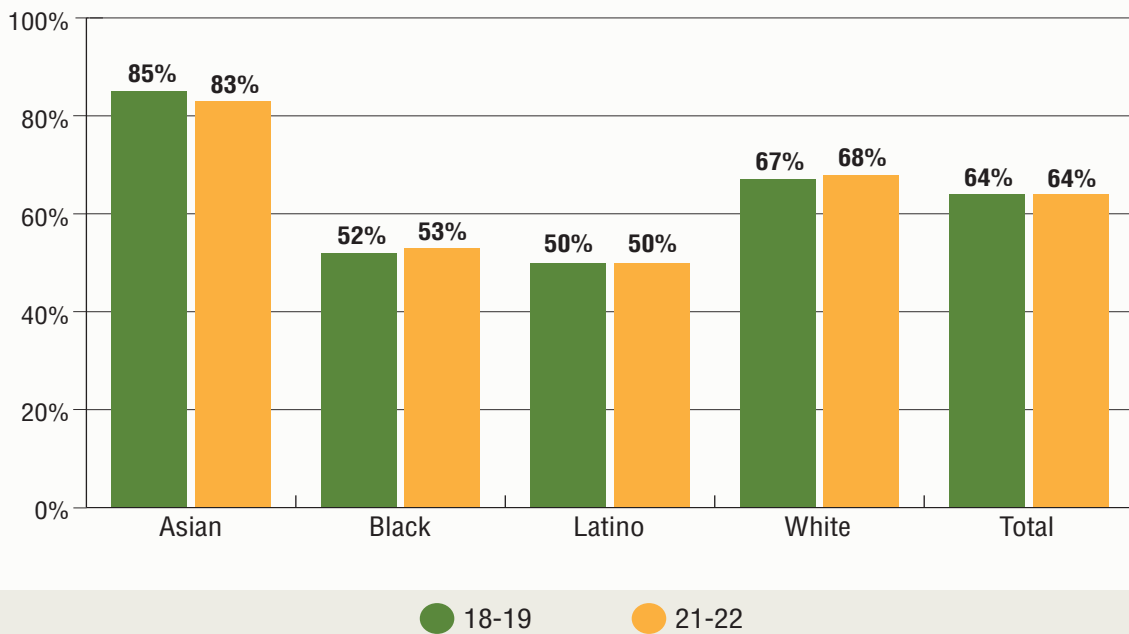
According to the [College Board](#), 36 states have statewide or systemwide AP credit policies, which typically require all public higher education institutions to award credit for AP exam scores of 3 or higher, with very limited exceptions.

To better understand the potential consequences of Massachusetts' inconsistent AP score acceptance policies, and how the pandemic may have changed those patterns, we analyzed state- and school-level data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the National Center for Education Statistics on student access, enrollment, and performance in AP and other advanced courses.

## Access to Advanced Courses

In 2021-22, only half of Latino students and slightly more than half of Black students completed at least one advanced course, compared to 64% of all students. There were no sizable differences in completion rates from 2018-19 to 2021-22. This statistic mirrors national trends, which show that Black and Latino students are [underenrolled](#) in advanced courses, due to systemic causes such as resource inequities, educator bias, and racialized tracking.

**Median percentage of 11th and 12th graders completing any advanced course, by race/ethnicity: SY 2018-19 & 2021-22**



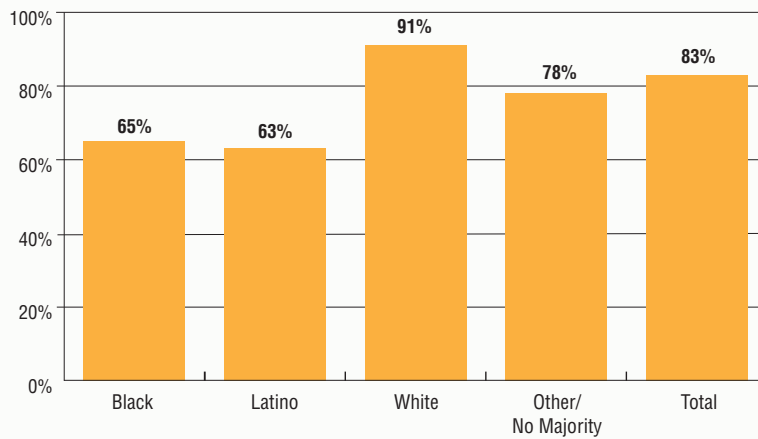
**Reading this figure:** In 2018-19, 85% of Asian 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders completed any advanced course.

Note: Massachusetts' [definition](#) of advanced courses includes but is not limited to Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), Project Lead the Way (PLTW), dual enrollment for credit, Chapter 74-approved vocational/technical secondary cooperative education programs and articulation agreement courses, and other state-selected rigorous courses.

Source: Ed Trust analysis of data from the [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education \(DESE\), NCES Elementary/Secondary Information System](#) (accessed March 2023).

Looking at AP classes specifically, schools that are more than 50% Black or Latino are much less likely to offer AP courses than majority-White schools. This statistic stayed fairly constant from 2018-19 to 2021-22.

**Percentage of high schools offering any AP course by majority race/ethnicity:  
SY 2021-22**

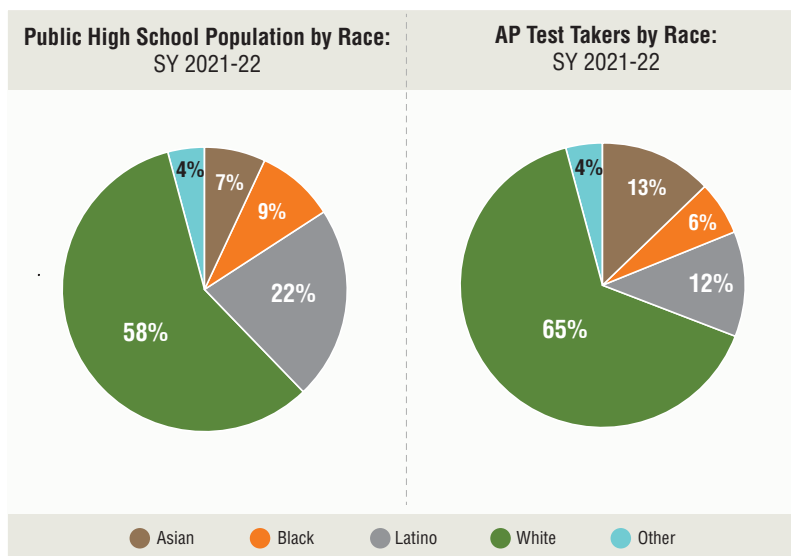


**Reading this figure:** Among high schools with a majority Black student population, 65% offered an AP course in 2021-22.

Source: Ed Trust analysis of data from the [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education \(DESE\), NCES Elementary/Secondary Information System](#) (accessed March 2023).

## AP Test-Taking

Ensuring that students have access to advanced courses is just the first step. Schools and teachers need to support students to take the end-of-course tests and be successful in earning college credit by cultivating positive school climates, providing assistance to students who may need it, and using culturally affirming teaching practices. Unfortunately, many schools are not giving Black or Latino students equal access to AP exams. Black and Latino students make up almost one-third of all public-school students, but they represent only 18% of AP test takers, often because students lack [sufficient support](#) to feel prepared to pass the test, or because [AP exam fees](#) can be a financial barrier.



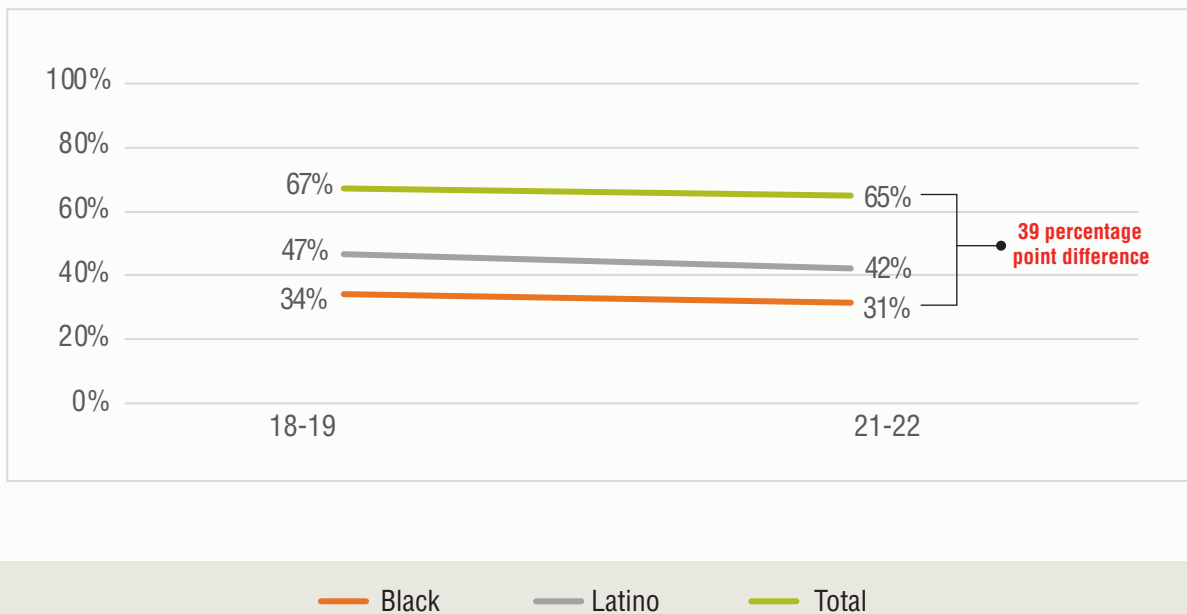
Source: Ed Trust analysis of data from the [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education \(DESE\), NCES Elementary/Secondary Information System](#) (accessed March 2023).

## Proficiency in AP

The benefits of passing an AP test are not reserved for the highest scorers: [Research](#) shows students who earn a 3 or higher perform well in college courses, take more college coursework in their AP disciplines, and are more likely to graduate in four years than students who do not pass the test. What's more, the benefits of earning college credit are significant. Students who enter college with approximately 10 hours of AP credit have \$1,000 [less debt](#) on average. This is particularly important given that Massachusetts has the [eighth highest average student loan debt amount](#) in the country and that Black and Latino students face higher [student loan debt burdens](#), with [Black borrowers](#) often hit hardest by student loans. Black students are more likely to borrow, borrow more, struggle with repayment, and default on their student loans than their peers, because they collectively have fewer resources due to the generational and ongoing effects of structural racism. We cannot afford to compound existing inequities by shutting Black and Latino students out of opportunities to enroll in AP classes and pass AP exams, which could enable them to earn credits and save money in college.

And yet, when looking at AP proficiency in Massachusetts, as in other states, we see evidence of unfinished instruction that exacerbates inequities. As we emerge from the pandemic, we must do more to help students recover lost ground. All students, but especially Black and Latino students, were less likely to receive the instruction and supports needed to earn a 3, 4, or 5 on their AP exams in 2022 compared to 2019.

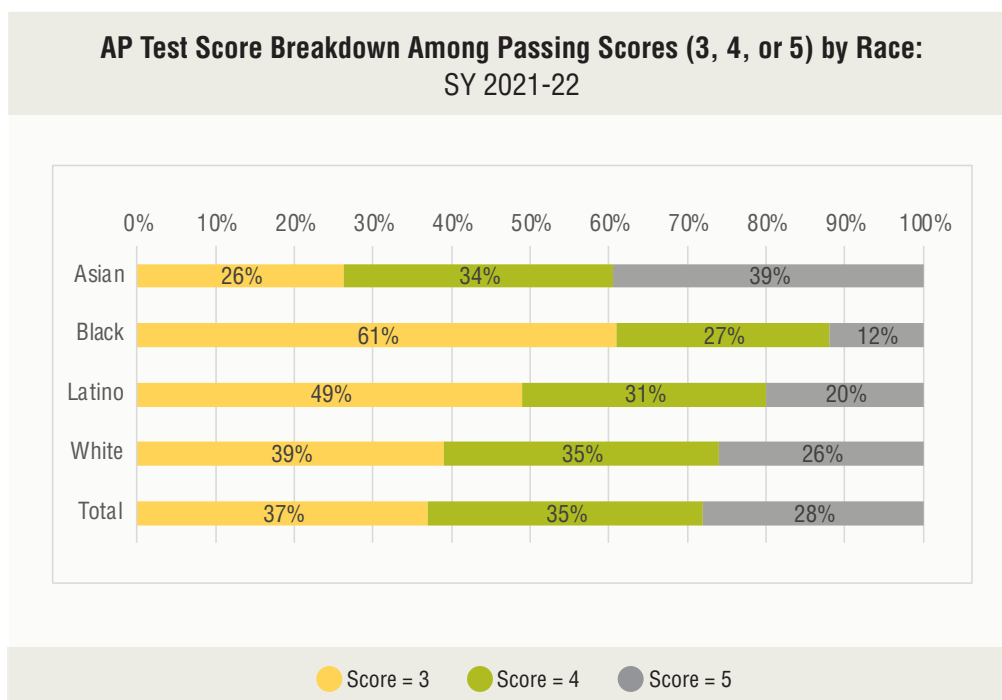
### Percentage of AP test scores (in any subject) scoring 3, 4, or 5, by race/ethnicity between SY 2018-19 and 2021-22



Source: Ed Trust analysis of data from the [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education \(DESE\)](#) (accessed March 2023).

Even more concerning, the state’s lack of consistency in awarding credits disproportionately harms students of color. While a score of 3 or higher is generally considered to be a passing score on AP exams — and 36 states have a standardized statewide policy that requires higher education institutions to award credit for a score of 3 or above — Massachusetts lets universities set their own standards for awarding credit — and as a result, some only accept 4s or 5s. The lack of a statewide standard in Massachusetts — which also doesn’t require institutions to publish their AP credit policies — makes it harder for Black and Latino students with a passing score of 3 to get credit for their hard work and achievement on the AP exam and also costs them time and money.

As we advocate for policies that expand access to enrollment in advanced courses, particularly for underserved students, we must push institutions to be more consistent about how they award college credit. A statewide policy would help ensure that institutions are transparent and consistent in how they accept AP scores, so students can make more informed college choices.



Source: Ed Trust analysis of data from the [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education \(DESE\)](#) (accessed March 2023).

### --- PROMISING PRACTICE ---

In 2013, Jeremiah E. Burke High School, a Boston Public School, first partnered with [Mass Insight Education & Research \(Mi\)](#), a national nonprofit that helps states, districts, and schools accelerate learning and implement strategies aimed at increasing the numbers of Black, Latino, and low-income students enrolling in and completing advanced coursework. The school recently worked with Mi’s core partnership program to reintroduce strategies to expand access, including Saturday and virtual-study and review sessions for students, a summer bridge program to help AP students get off to a good start, professional development for AP faculty during the summer and fall, check-ins and support by MassInsight content specialists, and access to a large network of experienced AP teachers in MA and nationally.

In three years, access to AP tests for Black and Latino students dramatically expanded at the school, which saw an 8-percentage point increase in Black students taking at least one AP test, and a 13-percentage point increase in Latino students taking AP tests from 2018-19 to 2021-22. The school has also seen an improvement in student performance: In 2018-19, 0% of students had a passing score of 3 or higher. In 2021-22, 4.3% of Black students and 4.9% of Latino students passed an AP exam.

To increase equitable enrollment in AP classes, increase the benefits of taking these classes, and potentially save students time and money by earning college credit, Massachusetts should:

- Require public higher education institutions to be transparent and consistent in awarding college credit, so students and their families can make more informed college choices
  - For example, [Bill S.838](#) and [Bill H.1280](#) would require all public higher education institutions to adopt, and make available on their websites, clear policies about how AP credits map to degree requirements, and bar institutions from requiring a minimum exam score above 3, unless specific reasoning is provided.
- Require and support districts to expand eligibility for advanced courses
  - Districts can adopt policies whereby students are automatically enrolled in advanced courses — unless their families opt them out — if students are identified for advanced coursework via multiple measures. This may include open enrollment for any student who is interested in taking an advanced class.
  - Massachusetts can also eliminate barriers to advanced courses, like AP exam fees. While the [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#) provides AP and IB exam fee subsidies for all low-income public-school students based on the imperfect indicator of the free-and-reduced-price lunch program, students need to fill out a form, which can act as a barrier, and the fee may be an impediment for some students not considered eligible for the subsidy. There is already [groundwork](#) for expanding access: Massachusetts has federal grant funding and partners with VHS Learning, a nonprofit that offers online learning opportunities, to provide certain high schools — especially those that haven't been able to offer advanced classes — with free access to up to seven online AP STEM courses. The state also supports a public private partnership, managed by Mi, reducing barriers to AP STEM & English courses in more than 90 high schools.
- Ensure the state collects and clearly reports essential data to monitor equitable access to and success in advanced classes

For district leaders interested in implementing more on-ramps to rigorous and accelerated coursework, see the Alliance for Resource Equity's [guidebook on Empowering Rigorous Content](#).

- Currently, Massachusetts' data dashboard broadly defines "advanced courses," and reports enrollment and completion data for 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who complete at least one advanced course — which includes any AP, dual credit, or IB class, as well as approved technical and vocational courses, and even courses such as Trigonometry. To better identify inequities, the state should share enrollment data, separated by advanced course-type, and disaggregated by race and ethnicity.
- Support positive school climates and give students a sense of belonging in AP classes
  - Having a sense of [belonging](#) is fundamental to student success in advanced courses. Yet the onus for creating a welcoming environment should not be on students themselves — schools and school systems must create environments that ensure that students of color can fully engage with their peers and classroom content. To do so, schools and districts can invest in recruiting and retaining AP teachers of color, provide advising guidance through near-peer mentors, utilize culturally sustaining curricula, share information with families and students about advanced coursework opportunities in [middle school](#), and offer targeted supports — such as AP Bootcamps in the summer or separate study sessions for English learners — to students to help build their confidence.

To learn more, see [5 Questions to Ask District and School Leaders About Access to Advanced STEM Coursework in High School](#).