

In Many Classrooms, 'Honors' in Name Only

As High Schools Offer More Advanced Courses, Educators Fear Content Doesn't Always Earn the Label

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During a visit in March to an honors sophomore English class in an impoverished area of Connecticut, Robyn R. Jackson heard the teacher declare proudly that her students were reading difficult texts. But Jackson noticed that their only review of those books was a set of work sheets that required little thought or analysis.

Jackson, an educational consultant and former Gaithersburg High School English teacher, sought an explanation from a school district official. He sighed and told her, "We have a lot of work to do to help teachers understand what true rigor is."

In an American education system full of plans for better high schools, more and more courses have impressive labels, such as "honors," "advanced," "college prep" and "Advanced Placement." But many researchers and educators say the teaching often does not match the title.

"A company selling an orange-colored beverage under the label 'orange juice' can get in legal trouble if the beverage contains little or no actual juice," said a February report from the National Center for Educational Accountability, based in Austin. "But there are no consequences for giving credit for Algebra 2 to students who have learned little algebra."

Grade inflation is a well-known issue. Many critics of public schools contend that students nowadays get better grades for less achievement than they used to. Experts also worry about courses that promise mastery in a subject but fail to follow through. Call it course-label inflation.

The educational accountability center's researchers, Chrys Dougherty, Lynn Mellor and Shuling Jian, found course-label inflation particularly harmful to low-income and minority students. They said 60 percent of low-income students, 65 percent of African American students and 57 percent of Hispanic students who had received course credit for geometry or algebra 2 in Texas failed a state exam covering material from geometry and algebra 1. By contrast, the failure rates for non-low-income and white students were 36 and 32 percent, respectively.

U.S. Education Department senior researcher Clifford Adelman, the government's leading authority on the links between high school programs and college completion, said some high school transcripts apply the label "pre-calculus" to any math course before calculus. Some students who had taken "pre-calculus," according to the transcripts he inspected, had skills so rudimentary that they were forced to take basic algebra in their first year of college.

The College Board's Advanced Placement program plans to ask teachers soon to fill out a form confirming that their course materials meet college-level standards. Jackson said one College Board official told her of a school that had started an AP Spanish course but was using seventh-grade workbooks.

AP courses at least have final exams, written and scored by outside experts, that reveal whether students have mastered the material. Wayne Bishop, a math professor at California State University in Los Angeles, examined an AP calculus class in a Pasadena, Calif., high school. All 23 students, Bishop found, got As and Bs from their teacher, but their grades on the AP exam were the college equivalent of 21 Fs and two Ds.

Most high school honors and advanced courses don't have independent benchmarks like the AP tests, so inflated course labels are more difficult to detect. Michael Goldstein, founder of the MATCH Charter Public School in Boston, described the sort of dialogue that often produces courses that don't keep their promises in other schools:

"The principal tells the teacher, 'You're teaching algebra 2.' The teacher responds, 'But our tests show these kids haven't mastered one-fourth plus one-half, let alone algebra 1.' The principal responds, 'Well, we need to offer them algebra 2 because it helps on their college transcripts.' "

Many selective colleges defend themselves against course-label inflation by giving admitted students placement tests to see which college courses they are ready to take. A better and more far-reaching solution, many high school educators say, is to prepare students in lower grades for the demanding courses ahead of them and make sure the standards do not slip.

The center for educational accountability's report recommended that high schools help ninth-graders see the worth of taking challenging courses and find ways to build their skills so they are ready for them. Experts cite Wakefield High School in Arlington, which this year won a \$25,000 Inspiration Award from the College Board for preparing large numbers of low-income and minority students for AP courses.

Wakefield junior Narciso Chavez, 16, is a product of the school's AP Network, a collection of summer programs, ninth-grade interventions and student clubs operated by teachers who look for potentially strong students who had been overlooked. Chavez's father is a bus driver and his mother a hotel supervisor; both are from El Salvador. Before Chavez arrived at Wakefield, he was told he had a learning disability. But the Wakefield teachers thought he could handle an accelerated program, including geometry and algebra 2 in his sophomore year.

Chavez said he resisted until his friend Marcelo Rejas, already in the courses, suggested that Chavez wasn't up to it. Chavez accepted the challenge, took both courses and received high scores on the state tests in geometry and algebra 2.

This year, he is taking AP Spanish, AP English language and AP chemistry. He also has a special AP seminar that gives him extra time at school to confer with teachers and do homework. He does four more hours of homework a night, with an hour-long break at 9 p.m., when he reads the Bible and prays with his family. "I decided I wanted to be successful," said Chavez, who is thinking of a career in engineering, law or chemistry.

Mike Riley, superintendent of a school district in Bellevue, Wash., and a proponent of higher national high school standards, said the solution to course-label inflation was to connect tightly the curriculum of each grade, from kindergarten through high school, to the next, so it is obvious which students need more help.

Several educators said external benchmarks are also necessary, pointing to state math tests that Chavez took in the spring. They showed that he had mastered geometry and algebra 2.

Without such benchmarks, said Andrew Rotherham, a former White House education adviser and a member of the Virginia Board of Education, "there is too much variance, and that ultimately disadvantages students, in particular poor and minority students. It sounds very romantic to say, 'Leave it all to the schools or the teacher,' but it just doesn't work in a system as heterogeneous, in every way, as ours is."

The Value of End-of-Course Exams

End-of-Course (EOC) exams:

- Directly test the curriculum the students are taught, close to the time that they are taught it. The impact of an Algebra 1 course is not obscured by the fact that the student may have taken one or more additional math courses before he or she is tested on algebra on the TAKS.
- Enable us to address the “Orange Juice vs. Orange Drink” problem, that students may receive credit for an advanced course (“orange juice”) when in fact they were taught something less (“orange drink”).
- Provide more diagnostic detail on student learning of each objective. For example, separate end-of-course exams can provide a greater number of Algebra and Geometry items than can be given on a single “TAKS mathematics” test. The greater number of items per Algebra and Geometry learning objective increases the diagnostic power of the testing program.
- Provide a clear link between teaching and student results: If students take Algebra 1 in eighth grade but are not tested on Algebra 1 in until ninth grade, the contributions of the eighth and ninth grade mathematics teachers cannot be disentangled.
- Increase our ability to evaluate teacher preparation programs based on student results. These evaluations require a clear link between teaching and student results.
- Prevent critical subject-specific details from being obscured. Currently, a student can earn a passing score on the exit-level science exam *while missing 100% of the chemistry and physics items on the test.* (This is also a reason to pay more attention to students reaching the Commended standard on TAKS.)
- Encourage flexibility in course scheduling by districts. For example, some Texas districts would prefer to move the second half of U.S. History to ninth grade so that it directly follows the eighth grade course. A system that always tests that course in eleventh grade discourages that kind of flexibility.

Recommendations

1. Require districts to administer the Algebra 1 end-of-course exam already approved by the legislature and developed by TEA.
2. Develop and phase in additional end-of-course exams in three areas:
 - a) Subjects currently tested on TAKS: Geometry, English 2, English 3, U.S. History, Biology, and Integrated Chemistry and Physics.

- b) Additional mathematics and science subjects covered under the Recommended High School Program: Algebra 2, Precalculus (included in Option 1), Chemistry, and Physics
 - c) Additional social studies subjects covered under the Recommended High School Program: World History, World Geography, U.S. Government
3. Appoint a committee to review timelines for developing and phasing in end-of-course exams.

Options

- Option 1: Phase out the grades 9-11 TAKS exams once end-of-course exams are fully in place covering the same subject matter. Replace the TAKS graduation requirement with a requirement that students pass each of the EOC exams that replace TAKS. (Allow repeated administration of these exams for failing students, as is done now with TAKS.)
- Option 2: Same as Option 1, but add universal administration of a national college readiness test such as SAT or ACT.
- Option 3: Keep the exit TAKS as an alternative graduation qualifying test for students failing end-of-course exams in specific subjects.

The state should also consider expanding its system of credit by examination so that students who engage in self-study can place out of core courses. Students who wish to receive credit by examination without taking the course would need to demonstrate higher performance than the passing level on the corresponding end-of-course exam.

End-of-Course Exams in Other States

State	Subject
Arkansas	Algebra 1 Geometry Grade 11 Literacy
California	Algebra 1 Algebra 2 Integrated Math 1 Integrated Math 2 Geometry Biology/Life Science Chemistry Earth Science Physics Integrated/Coordinated Science 1 Integrated/Coordinated Science 2
Indiana	Algebra 1 English 11 Algebra 2* Biology 1* US History * <i>* Notes: Pilot tests in 2005/06 yr</i>
Maryland	Algebra/Data Analysis English Geometry Government Biology
Michigan	<i>Algebra 1*</i> <i>Biology*</i> <i>English 9*</i> <i>US History*</i> <i>* Decision to be made Fall 2006</i>
Mississippi	English 2 Biology 1 US History (fm 1877) Algebra 1

End-of-Course Exams in Other States

State	Subject
N. Carolina	Algebra 1 Algebra 2 Biology Chemistry English 1 Geometry Physics Physical Science Civics & Economics* US History* <i>* Note: Started in 2005/06 yr</i>
New York	Math A Math B Algebra Geometry Algebra 2 & Trigonometry Chemistry Comprehensive English US History & Government
Oklahoma	US History English 2 Algebra I, Biology I
S. Carolina	English 1 Algebra 1 Biology Physical Science US History and Constitution
Tennessee	Math Foundations 2 Geometry Algebra 2 Physical Science Chemistry English 1 US History Writing
Virginia	English Algebra 1 Geometry Algebra 2 History Social Science Science

Subjects Tested in State End-of-Course Exams

Subjects	States
Algebra 1	Arkansas New York California Indiana Oklahoma Michigan Mississippi N. Carolina Tennessee Virginia
Algebra 2	California Indiana N. Carolina Tennessee Virginia
Algebra 2 & Trigonometry	New York
Algebra/Data Analysis	Maryland
Geometry	Arkansas California Oklahoma N. Carolina New York S. Carolina Virginia
Integrated Math 1	California
Integrated Math 2	California
Math A	New York
Math B	New York
Math Foundations 2	Tennessee
Writing	Tennessee
Comprehensive English	New York
English 1, English 9	Maryland Michigan N. Carolina S. Carolina Tennessee Virginia
English 2	Oklahoma Mississippi

Subjects Tested in State End-of-Course Exams

Subjects	States
English 11, Grade 11 Literacy	Arkansas Indiana
Biology	California Indiana Maryland Michigan Mississippi N. Carolina Oklahoma S. Carolina
Life Science	California
Chemistry	California N. Carolina New York Tennessee
Physics	Arkansas N. Carolina
Physical Science	N. Carolina S. Carolina Tennessee
Science	Virginia
Earth Science	California
Integrated Coordinated Science 1	California
Integrated Coordinated Science 2	California
Social Science	Tennessee
History	Tennessee
US History	Indiana Oklahoma Michigan N. Carolina Tennessee
US History from 1877	Mississippi
US History & Government	New York
US History & Constitution	S. Carolina
Government	Maryland
Civics & Economics	N. Carolina