More Texas students taking Advanced Placement tests, but passing rates aren’t keeping up

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Every year, more Texas high school students take Advanced Placement exams, but the number earning passing scores isn’t rising at the same pace.

Most educators welcome the continued expansion of the Advanced Placement program because it gives high school students a taste of college-level work.

This spring, a record 186,000 students at Texas public schools took AP exams. That translates into one of the country’s top rates for AP test-taking.

With greater participation comes lower passing rates. Texas public school students earned passing scores just 44 percent of the time. The national average was 56 percent.

“Our fundamental goal is to expand access to these courses,” said Shelly Ramos, the Texas Education Agency’s director of academic standards and services. “Just the academic rigor of the course has value.”

The Advanced Placement program, run by the nonprofit College Board, exposes high school students to college-level classes in English, math, science, history and other subjects. Students take exams in May to measure what they learned. Scores range from 1 to 5, with 3 considered passing.

Most colleges award credit for scores of 3 and higher, though selective colleges such as Rice and the University of Texas at Austin typically require a 4. Earning college credits in high school can save tuition dollars for students and parents.

Here’s the 2011 breakdown for Texas public school students:
•9 percent of tests received a 5, equivalent to a letter grade of A.

•15 percent received a 4.

•20 percent received a 3.

•24 percent received a 2.

•33 percent received a 1.

Take AP Biology. A decade ago, about 4,600 Texas public school students took the exam, and 35 percent received the lowest score of 1. This year, more than 12,000 students took the exam and 53 percent received a 1.

Meanwhile, the passing rates show only modest declines, given that so many more students are taking the tests. A decade ago, 38 percent of students passed the AP Biology test, compared with 33 percent this year.

This spring, the tests that gave students the hardest time included Calculus AB (48 percent received a score of 1), Chemistry (44 percent) and U.S. Government (40 percent).

Those dismal results raise a question: Why should more and more students take AP classes when scores suggest the majority hasn’t learned the material?

In a 2008 study, three Texas researchers found that students scoring 2 or above on AP exams later had higher college grade-point averages and graduation rates than did students who scored a 1.

Another researcher who has studied Advanced Placement says that school districts should carefully weigh the relative costs and benefits of expanding AP.

“Because the likelihood of success in AP is determined largely by prior academic experience and readiness for college-level work, it is unlikely that many of the students who are the target of an AP expansion will benefit,” Kristin Klopfenstein wrote in the book AP: A Critical Examination of the Advanced Placement Program.

At one time, only the highest-achieving students were encouraged to take AP classes and exams. That excluded many, including minority students and those whose parents had never gone to college.

Texas lawmakers challenged that approach in 1993 by passing a law to expand Advanced Placement. The state helps cover student AP exam fees and provides training for AP teachers.

This year, for instance, the state covered $30 of the $87 exam fee. Other subsidies bring the cost for low-income students down to $9 per exam. And the state will reimburse teachers up to $450 for training on how to teach AP and pre-AP classes.
But this year’s massive state budget cuts also hit the AP incentive program. The annual budget has been cut from $14.2 million to $6.9 million. State education officials said they have not yet figured how those cuts will affect students, teachers and schools.

Some groups are taking the Texas approach to other states. The National Math and Science Initiative, based in Dallas, received funding to expand the Advanced Placement incentive program in six states.

The initiative notes in press releases and printed reports that the 63 schools in the program since 2008 (none in Texas) have seen a 124 percent increase in exams with passing scores. The nonprofit’s data also shows that the number of exams with failing scores increased by 189 percent.

Again, the numbers of successes and failures are fueled by greater participation. At the 63 schools, the number of exams taken exploded from about 6,700 to 17,400 over three years.

National Math and Science Initiative officials say that what’s important is that the AP program is reaching students who were left out in the past and helping them pass.

“On average, we take a school that starts with 40 out of 80 passing, and in a few years, we increase that to 80 out of 200 passing,” said Gregg Fleisher, the director of the nonprofit’s AP training and incentive program.

Yes, that means the passing rate drops from 50 percent to 40 percent, he said.

“We could easily design a program that increases passing rates. All we would have to do is offer incentives for high rates, and teachers will only allow the elite to take the class. That would be a lot easier to do than getting traditionally under-represented populations to pass.”

And, he said, three states — Massachusetts, Kentucky and Arkansas — have kept their passing rates steady while boosting participation rates.

“The long-standing philosophy we have is that it is better to have a higher percentage of the overall population pass,” Fleisher said.

“We’re pleased that more students are exposed, but we’re more pleased that more students are passing, and thus more students are better-prepared for college.”

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<th>Advanced Placement participation</th>
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<td>The Dallas-based National Math and Science Initiative has sought to increase participation in the Advanced Placement program in six states. Since 2008, the group has seen participation soar in the college-level exams by 160 percent in 63 schools. The result as been a 124 -percmt increase in passing exams, as well as a 189 percent increase in failing tests.</td>
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SOURCE: National Math and Science Initiative