

OPPORTUNITY GAPS IN ADVANCED-COURSES

A Policy Brief by Thien Nguyen

INTRODUCTION

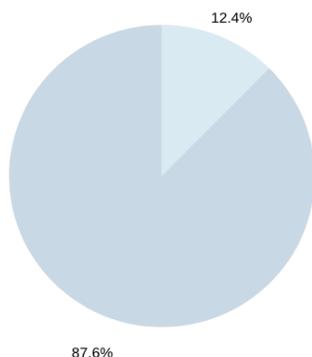
With the support of the Washington State Board of Education (SBE), I conducted a research project that aimed to examine the opportunity gaps in advance-course taking at traditional public high schools across Washington state. Throughout the course of the project, I have discovered that these opportunity gaps persist mainly in school districts that consist of two or more high schools. Now, I am writing this policy brief to recommend solutions on how to ensure students in these select school districts are getting equitable access to advanced courses.

It is not shocking to know that in our own state of Washington—and the rest of the United States—there is inequitable access to rigorous courses, especially for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students. Our state has already recognized that this is an important issue to tackle, with **multiple state agencies** already proposing solutions to address the root of this problem. However, I want to recommend solutions that are based from a **student's point-of-view**, specifically a high schoolers.

THE STUDY

This study focused specifically on school districts that serve two or more high schools. I utilized data from the **Washington State Improvement Framework (WSIF) Winter 2020 Edition**, the most recent of its kind. I was able to find disparities in ratios of white to BIPOC students participating in dual credit courses and the disparities in dual credit accessibility within select school districts.

OVERALL FINDINGS PART ONE



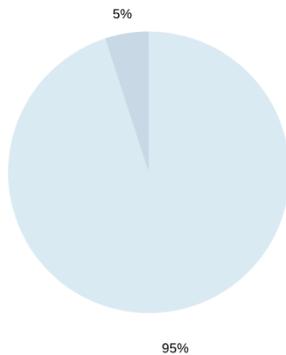
Out of 121 high schools in 40 school districts across the state, **only 15 schools (12.4%)** had a percentage of students of color enrolled in dual credit classes at a higher rate compared to white students. The margin of difference ranged from **1% up to 6%**.

Example 1: Rainier Beach High School in Seattle Public Schools

At Rainier Beach, BIPOC students enroll in dual credit classes 6% more compared to white students. It is the **only school** in this district that BIPOC students lead in DC enrollment. What's special about Rainier Beach is its program called "IB For All." In 2014, juniors were "required to take IB English Language and Literature [and by] 2016, IB History of the Americas [also] became a requirement." Now, 95% of all juniors are enrolled in "at least two, if not three, four, or even seven IB courses." By reducing the requirements for students who wish to participate in advanced courses, students gained more access to them.

- **47.9%** of schools have white students participating in dual credit courses at a higher rate compared to BIPOC students
- **39.7%** of schools have relatively close ratios of white to BIPOC students participating in dual credit courses

OVERALL FINDINGS PART TWO



Out of 40 school districts, **only 2** have similar percentages in access to dual credit courses at their respective high schools. For the 38 school districts, their high schools **do not** have the similar access to DC classes all throughout. Within those districts, either white students, BIPOC students, or both do not have similar access to DC.

Example 1: School District A, a medium-sized district in Pierce County

School District A serves two high schools with student populations ranging from 1,500 to 1,700. At one school, **74.8%** of white students and **72.2%** of BIPOC students participate in DC. At the other school, **75.2%** of white students and **74.1%** of BIPOC students participate in DC. We see that the margin of difference is about 1-2%. This school district is what I consider to have similar access to DC classes, regardless of what high school a student attends.

Example 2: School District B, a medium-sized district in King County

School District B serves four high schools with student populations ranging from 1,300 to 1,700. This district is a prime example of inter-district disparities in access to dual credit courses. At School #1, **84.7%** of white students and **77.8%** of BIPOC students participate in DC. School #2 has **75.2%** white and **72.5%** BIPOC. School #3 has **71.2%** white and **63.8%** BIPOC. Lastly, School #4 has the least access to DC classes with only **64.1%** white and **55.5%** BIPOC participation. The margin of difference is huge within this school district.

TAKEAWAYS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Takeaways for School Districts: You must recognize that you are **NOT** providing equal access to dual credit classes among the high schools you serve. The main message here is that students, **regardless of what high school they attend in the district**, have a fair and fighting chance in enrolling in advanced coursework. And within these high schools, you must work to close the opportunity gap between white and BIPOC students' access to DC.

Takeaways for policymakers: You have a lot of **influence** and **power** to close these opportunity gaps.

Recommendations for the Washington State Legislature and other educational agencies:

- 1. Establish an internal and external review system.** An internal system allows for a school district to monitor their progress in closing the opportunity gap. An external system allows for an outside organization to review a district's progress, reducing the potential bias in their analysis. School districts may incorporate these systems into their district or school improvement plans already required of them by the state. External reviews could be done **annually** while internal reviews be done **continuously**.
- 2. Remove outside factors as a requirement to advanced courses.** This pertains to high school level courses and does not expand into College in the High School or Running Start courses. The state legislature has passed RCW 28A.320.195, allowing students who meet or exceed state testing standards to automatically be enrolled in advanced courses. But, we need to take it a step

further. Standardized tests **DO NOT** provide a true picture of a student's abilities in a learning environment. Students should be able to sign up for advanced courses without needing to excel at tests or gain teacher or counselor permission. By removing these factors, we can reduce the racial biases that prevent many BIPOC students from enrolling in DC.

3. **Provide necessary funds for diverse teacher hirings.** After the barriers are removed, BIPOC students need more teachers that share their experiences and can work well with them in advanced-course settings. Representation matters because we “base [our] visions of [our] futures on what [we] see in [our] everyday environments (American University, School of Education)”