

Nancy

FYC 13100

Professor Clauss

13 December 2010

Advancing Towards the Future: An Argument for the AP Program

As a former student of Nixa High School who took many dual enrollment classes during my four years there, I am writing to the members of the Nixa School Board of Education to present the advantages of offering AP courses alongside the current dual enrollment (DE) courses. As a student at NHS, I earned many hours of college credit through DE (dual enrollment) classes but, since I am attending an out-of-state college, none of these credits transferred. I am writing this letter, to be presented as a speech to the Board of Education, to convince the board members that gradually introducing AP credit classes into NHS will be advantageous to the students by giving them the same learning opportunity as students nationwide, while avoiding transfer issues, as well as giving them an education that is proven to help them succeed in college.

I appreciate you all giving me the chance to speak today about a great concern I have which is a matter that will affect students both now and for years to come. For those of you do not know me, my name is Nancy -----, and I am a 2010 graduate of Nixa High School who is currently attending the University of Notre Dame as a biology major. I am extremely proud to be an alumnus of a school like NHS that places such a strong emphasis on academics, especially when it comes to moving on to higher education. From the teacher-led ACT review classes to the guidance office's extraordinary amount of college and scholarship information, it is obvious that the entire school has a commitment to preparing students for life after high school. However, in my experiences, both during high school and now that I've graduated, I've come to the conclusion that there is another step NHS can take that will better prepare its students for college. This step would be to include more AP classes in the curriculum. While NHS currently has one AP course and many similar dual enrollment (DE) courses, by implementing additional AP courses, the district will be able to maintain their high academic standards; students will be

able to use their credit in a wider selection of colleges; and, most importantly, they will be engaged in classes that will better prepare them for more advanced college courses.

As a former student, I am well aware of the high academic standards and the importance that is placed on “Learning First”; it is the school’s mission statement after all. But as a student, especially one who was actively involved in school activities, I also know how much our rivalry with Ozark means to both the school and to the community. The intense competition that Nixa and Ozark undergo every year knows no bounds; we compete in everything from football to MAP scores to canned food drives, and each time Ozark advances, Nixa must do the same and vice versa. What relevance does this have to AP classes, you might ask? While the rivalry is not the sole factor to introduce more AP courses, it does provide a reason to apply these changes soon. You may have recently read an article in the Springfield News-Leader that reported on Ozark High School’s plan to implement the International Baccalaureate (IB) program within two to three years. The IB program, as the article states, is “a comprehensive and rigorous two-year curriculum for high school students beginning the junior year” (Baxter). Various officials from Ozark High School, including Principal Sam Taylor and assistant superintendent Kevin Patterson, laud the program and its ability to prepare students for higher education and to give them the opportunity to earn college credit. Taylor also claims that the IB program will expand education in all primary subjects and will give “a broad spectrum of education” to students (qtd. in Baxter). Although I have not personally experienced the IB program, I do know of its prestige and the weight it carries when applying to universities and I believe that by implementing the IB program, Ozark is taking the necessary steps to outpace Nixa’s academics. While it is not necessary to “beat” Ozark in academics, their move to the IB program might be a sign that the academics in Christian and Greene County will soon become more competitive than they

currently are. So if Nixa wants to maintain the high-achieving status it has now, there is a good chance that quickly moving to a more advanced curriculum will become necessary to remain among the top tier of schools in the area.

While Ozark's plan to introduce the IB program might be enough reason for many die-hard Nixans to want to implement our own IB program, I am sure that many of you are not convinced that Nixa needs to change anything about its academics. Additionally, there is a good chance some of you may not see the logic in introducing AP classes when students already have the opportunity to take college-level classes through Missouri State's DE program. Dual enrollment courses are useful because they allow students to earn college credit, while spending much less money than they would if they were to take the course as a college freshman. Additionally, credit is offered in many different subjects, from math to science to English, so students can earn credit for a variety of college classes which, in turn, will expand the number of classes available to them their freshman year. The majority of universities in Missouri and some universities in neighboring states accept dual enrollment credit; so, since most NHS students attend these schools, for the majority of the student population, the DE system seems ideal.

However, quite a few drawbacks occur when students decide to attend colleges that are out-of-state. Often, colleges in states outside of Missouri, and even certain Missouri universities, do not accept DE credit, which, unfortunately, is what happened to me. When I was deciding whether or not to attend the University of Notre Dame last spring, I became aware of the fact that none of my DE credits would transfer. I was extremely upset, not only due to the loss of the credit, but also due to the large amount of money spent by my parents on a program that ultimately served no purpose for me. Unfortunately, with the current DE system, this is a common scenario for students attending out-of-state universities. Most students do not settle

upon a college until their senior year and, by that time, students taking DE classes have spent hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars on enrollment fees. If the student ultimately chooses a college that does not take this credit, there is nothing he or she can do, but many still feel it is worth it to pay for the DE credit just in case they decide to attend a university that accepts it. Forcing students to decide whether or not to spend huge amounts of money on classes, months before they even know which college they are attending, is an unfair stress that is being placed upon these students. The AP program has a distinct advantage over DE in this respect; not only does the AP exam cost less than the corresponding DE course (\$84 per exam (Tai 40) compared to \$200-\$500 per class), but it also allows the students to spend an entire year learning the material before they decide whether they feel prepared enough to spend the money on the exam. In addition to the large price difference, the credit earned from the AP exams is much more widely accepted than credit earned through DE; statistics from the 2008 AP Report to the Nation confirm that AP credit is accepted by “more than 90 percent of four-year colleges and universities in the United States” (Topiel). So, for a student going out-of-state for college, it is much more likely that the university they choose will accept AP credit, rather than DE credit. While the cost and the wide-spread acceptance of AP credit may appear to be more favorable than DE, the actual classes could be a completely different story. However, I believe my experience with my AP class here at NHS is very telling of the probable success other AP classes would have here as well.

During my senior year I took the only AP course Nixa offered: AP Calculus. Although the course was difficult, considering the subject matter, I felt it was not overly difficult compared to the advanced classes I had taken junior year and those I was taking concurrent to calculus. The reason I feel AP classes would flourish at NHS is based not only on my experiences in this class,

but also because both AP and DE credit was offered for the same class. All students, regardless of which credit they were working towards, learned the same information, had the same homework, and took the same exams up until the AP exam in May; there was virtually no difference between taking “AP Calculus” class and “DE Calculus” class and in our class, every single student elected to take the AP credit over the DE credit. The only difference between the different forms of credit was that DE was more expensive than AP and the AP requires students to take a final exam, which I believe, was actually an advantage to the students. While this may seem like an odd advantage, especially coming from a student, with NHS’s final exam policy, it was the only final exam I ever had to take in my high school career. Without this one exam, I would have no experience in studying for final-type exams and, as I am preparing to begin studying for my first college finals, I am grateful for the experience. However, it is not just my personal knowledge of the AP program that is my reason behind my support of this program; there is also a large amount of hard evidence that supports AP classes and AP exams as good preparatory techniques for college.

AP exams are some of the most widely used placement exams, so it isn’t surprising that a large amount of data has been collected regarding their effectiveness in preparing students for college classes. Some researchers, like those cited in the 2008 AP Report to the Nation, indicate that taking AP classes and doing well (receiving a 3 or better) on the AP exam is a reliable indicator of college success. The report also indicates that implementing AP programs will assist in preparing students for college and, consequently, will reduce college drop-out rates. Specifically, College Board President Gaston Caperton was quoted as saying, “The critical reasoning, subject-matter expertise and study skills students must develop...fortify high school graduates for a successful transition into their freshman year at college” (Topiel). Others,

however, remain unconvinced of the AP's influence on college success. Some, like Robert H. Tai, professor of science education at the University of Virginia, believe that even though students with high scores on AP exams typically do well in college, this fact alone does not necessarily mean that every student taking advanced courses will excel in college (40). And his research seems to support his belief. In his 2007 study, he examined the use of AP scores in chemistry, biology and physics to predict the students' grades in similar college courses. He found that of the students who earned a 5 on the AP exam (which corresponds to an A), only half went on to earn an A in their actual college class (Tai 41). However, there are many others who believe, and other studies that show, that AP scores do accurately reveal students' mastery of subjects and can accurately predict their success in college.

Both the AP press release and a study, conducted by Timothy P. Scott, Homer Tolson and Yi-Hsuan Lee, conclude that students who take AP classes in high school will be significantly more successful in college. The studies cited in the press release originated from the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Texas at Austin and the National Center for Educational Accountability and each found that AP students tend to both graduate more frequently and perform better in college than their non-AP counterparts (Topiel). Some researchers doubt the validity of these results since, they claim, it is mostly "high achieving and highly motivated" students who participate in AP classes, and these students would excel in college with or without AP courses (Scott 27). However, the study conducted by Scott, Tolson and Lee set out to disprove this theory. In their study, they recorded the high school GPA (which corresponded to class rank) and SAT scores for students who took AP courses and those who did not take them. They then compared groups of AP students with certain GPAs and SAT scores to non-AP students with similar credentials. The results confirmed that "for students with similar

high school rank or SAT scores, those with advanced placement credit significantly outperformed their peers with no advanced placement credit” (30). Clearly, while evidence exists on both sides of the issue, AP classes can and do have some positive impact on students as they go onto higher education.

Now that you’ve heard both my experiences and some hard data on the subject, I hope that you will be willing to listen to my proposal for Nixa to add a few AP classes to the curriculum. I am not proposing that the school should add each one of the thirty-seven AP classes (Topiel), or even that these AP courses will replace the existing DE courses. Instead, I believe that adding a few AP classes and offering them alongside the current DE courses (similar to what has been done with calculus) would be the best solution. No new classes would be added, and no new teachers would need to be hired; already existing courses would just be supplemented with the AP option and teachers would be trained to teach these AP courses. With this proposed plan I realize that there must be several changes, such as the changes to the class syllabi and AP training for teachers, that must be instated to implement these classes; however, I do believe that solutions to these potential issues exist.

The main problem that I foresee with this proposed plan will be funding. A school’s budget is usually very tight, and I am aware that introducing AP classes may be costly to the school; however, several programs are in place to provide funding to certify teachers to teach AP classes. As shown in the Education Commission of the States’ report on state funding for AP teacher training, Missouri provides funding for two training programs for AP teachers (Dounay). One such program is offered at Truman State University and its website contains information about the training program, including how much a teacher would have to pay to attend a program (which amounts to around \$500)e. While this price tag may seem excessive, especially on a

teacher's salary, when compared to the cost for out-of-state teachers to attend, which is more than triple the cost, the price does not seem so exorbitant ("Frequently"). The website also mentions that school boards can assist teachers in paying for these programs, and, while this is not required, it certainly would be an incentive for teachers to more willingly attend these workshops. Now, you might say that it will be awfully expensive to start paying for teachers' trips across the state to go to these events, and yes, it would be quite costly if every teacher were attending. But with my proposal, only a few AP classes would be instated, so only a few teachers would need to be trained, thus, minimizing the cost to either the teachers or to the school. Other issues may arise from this program but I believe that with funding taken care of, the transition to AP classes will be much easier.

When you look at all the evidence for and against AP testing, the cost of DE vs. AP, and various minutiae related to these advanced classes, it is easy to forget why they were created in the first place: to prepare students for college. They do not exist merely to provide students with credits, nor do they exist to torture students. AP classes, as well as DE classes, exist first and foremost to push students to reach their academic potential in high school and to encourage them to do the same in college. However, just having DE courses is not enough. In addition to finding a positive correlation between AP classes and college success, Scott, Tolson and Lee also discovered that when comparing college GPAs of students who had taken the AP exam to the GPAs of those who had taken a "university administered departmental exam", the AP students scored higher than their counterparts (29). While this is just one study, it shows that there is a difference between the rigors of participating in an AP course and participating in a similar college credit class. If I learned one thing in my time here at Nixa High School, it is that to truly succeed in anything, whether it is a sport, a job, or in academics, students must push themselves



to be their best. The entire faculty and other administrators here have always been solely committed to the success of the students and I attribute much of my own success to attending this school. But now, I believe the time has come that in order to allow students to reach their true academic potential, the advanced courses must be taken to the next level and AP courses must be instated into the curriculum. Thank you for your time and for your consideration of my proposal.

## Works Cited

- Baxter, Donna. "Ozark to add IB diploma program." *News-Leader.com* [Springfield, MO] Springfield News-Leader. 16 Nov. 2010. 26 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.news-leader.com/fdcp/?1290806786037>>.
- Dounay, Jennifer. "Advanced Placement: State Programs and Funding for Teacher Training." *Ecs State Notes*. Education Commission of the States, 2010. 10 Dec. 2010. <<http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=1002>>.
- "Frequently Asked Questions." *Advanced Placement*. Truman State University, 2010. 10 Dec. 2010. <<http://ap.truman.edu/faq.asp>>.
- Scott, Timothy P., Homer Tolson, and Yi-Hsuan Lee. "Assessment of Advanced Placement Participation and University Academic Success in the First Semester: Controlling for Selected High School Academic Abilities." *Journal of College Admission*. Summer 2010:26-30. Print.
- Tai, Robert H. "Posing Tougher Questions about the Advanced Placement Program." *Liberal Education*. Summer 2008: 38-43. Print.
- Topiel, Jennifer. "Press Releases." *CollegeBoard*. The College Board, 13 Feb. 2008. 28 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.collegeboard.com/press/releases/194817.html>>.