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"The Practitioner's Best Friend"
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How Do You Challenge Second Language Learners with AP and College Classes?

As educators we believe that all children can learn and achieve, but often an obstacle to this is making the students believe they can learn and achieve. Before a student chooses to challenge him or herself with an Advanced Placement course or a college class, the student will need to be given the tools and encouragement to go beyond his or her comfort level and take the challenge. Ultimately, our goal is to see our students succeed and confront obstacles with confidence. We are experiencing an atmosphere of change, where there is a greater equity in education and students are eagerly rising to the challenge. We have moved from an academic culture where students aspire to meet the minimum requirements and graduate from high school to a culture where students expect to graduate from high school and take Advanced Placement and college credit with them.

In a district with a high population of second language learners and great poverty, we have worked hard to not only overcome the language barriers but to raise the bar for all students and encourage them to aspire to higher academic achievement. The process begins early in high school. As students enter the ninth grade they are exposed right away to the opportunities they have available to them over the course of the next four years. Teachers of the Advanced Placement courses and the college English courses talk with the students and their parents about the opportunities and the benefits to taking advantage of those opportunities. Recent high school graduates and current upper classmen also address these students and discuss the doors which have opened for them and the advantages they have had because of their willingness to take the challenge and work hard in both Advanced Placement and college level courses while in high school. A great deal of time is spent explaining college and its importance to a successful future for students. Once this is understood, students begin to see the relevance and the need for them to take advantage of these academic opportunities. Students understand that such opportunities will give them a head start in the competitive world of academia.

The financial barrier has also been removed for these students. Through grants and waivers, Advanced Placement exam costs and college tuition and books have been taken care of for the students. The inability to pay the required fees for these courses is no longer a deterrent for these students. Early on, students are shown that finances do not have to be an insurmountable hurdle to a higher education. By taking advantage of the Advanced Placement and college courses, students can

graduate from high school with upwards of 30 college credits. These are credits their families did not have to pay for. Once students and their parents understand college and the credit system, these students are much more likely to continue their education beyond our doors since we have already given them this tremendous head start.

The fear of failure and the hesitation to take a chance can be great when a student is unsure about what he or she is getting into. To alleviate some of the students' anxiety, familiarity is emphasized. These students know their teachers, their peers, and their environment prior to enrolling in Advanced Placement and college courses, and are therefore more comfortable in taking chances. This is why trust and solid student-teacher relationships are so important. While still in the early years of high school, students develop a rapport with the teachers who offer the advanced courses. Students see that they can meet the challenges and be successful in the standard courses, and trust the encouragement of their teachers when they are told they can meet the standards of the Advanced Placement and college courses. Students also trust their peers who have taken the challenge before them and have succeeded. Without the student-teacher relationship and building trust early on, these second language learners may not have the courage to enroll in these classes. Once in the Advanced Placement and college classes, students know that the courses will be rigorous but have developed a confidence in themselves to feel safe in taking that challenge.

Teachers of the Advanced Placement and college classes are also highly qualified. A great deal of time is spent on course preparation and professional development in each of the Advanced Placement and college level courses. Students have confidence that their teachers are well prepared to help them meet the demands and the rigor of these challenging courses. It is important to note that the school district's support of professional development and training has been crucial in the expansion of these programs.

The sky is the limit as we continue to cultivate this culture of higher expectations for students regardless of background, circumstances, or finances. Students are meeting the challenge and gaining confidence in their ability to go on beyond the safe surroundings of their high school. High school graduation is no longer the end goal. Students are seeing graduation as just a beginning to what they can accomplish, especially since they are leaving high school with more than a diploma, they have already begun creating a college transcript.

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