

**Gifted Learners and
College Board® Advanced Placement Program**

Developed for the **Texas Association for Gifted and Talented**
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Introduction

Meeting the needs of gifted learners in the public school setting, while not an easy task, is certainly a worthy one. One program that can provide the rigor gifted students prefer and require as they pursue personal interests is the College Board® Advanced Placement Program. The position of Texas Association for Gifted and Talented (TAGT) is that

1. College Board® Advanced Placement Program (AP) is one element of a variety of services that meets the needs of gifted learners;
2. College Board® Advanced Placement Program provides content gifted learners may access to work toward the Distinguished Achievement Plan (DAP) and/or the Texas Performance Standards Project (TPSP); and
3. College Board® Advanced Placement Program may provide appropriate challenge in content and process for many gifted learners, but often fails to afford adequate opportunities for students to meet requirements for advanced products and rarely addresses the affective needs of the gifted. ¹

1. College Board® Advanced Placement Program is one element of a variety of services that meets the needs of gifted learners

Texas State Law, State Board of Education Rule (SBOE), and the *Texas State Plan for the Education of Gifted/Talented Students* (State Plan)² provide direction for educators of the gifted but do not define curriculum. *Program Design* of the State Plan directs educators to "... provide a learning continuum that is developed throughout the district and reinforces the strengths, needs, and interests of gifted/talented students."² This section requires that educators provide an array of learning opportunities in the four core academics areas. Teachers utilize the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) as a guiding document for content-based standards, but are expected to provide rigor through pacing, depth and complexity as students engage content in the core areas.

The section, "Curriculum and Instruction," addresses the requirement that curriculum concentrates on the four core areas and adds that districts offer "... an

array of appropriately challenging learning experiences for gifted/talented students in grades 1 through 12....”² The continuum also states that curriculum and instruction lead to “... the development of advanced-level products and/or performances.”²

Texas Education Agency (TEA), Gifted/Talented, also focuses on the issues surrounding AP in the “Question and Answer” section of the TEA website³. One question in this section asks whether the AP teacher must differentiate the AP curriculum for gifted students. The response succinctly states, “Yes.” The explanation includes rationale for doing so and adds, “Teachers will want to add depth and complexity appropriate for gifted/talented students ...”³

According to the State Plan, any program for the gifted includes more than one means of meeting needs. The array of services allows for Advanced Placement[®], but does not limit services to this or any one specific curriculum. Future Problem Solving (FPS), for example, is sanctioned by TEA for gifted students, but is not proposed as the only way of addressing the needs of the gifted.

In addition to the assertion that AP is not the only way to address gifted, the AP program also makes no claim to be designed for gifted students.

College Board[®] Advanced Placement Program

The College Board[®] AP Equity Policy Statement⁵ defines their beliefs about access to AP. In the statement quoted below, note the section in bold (added by authors of this paper).

College Board provides their policy statement to assist schools in developing an open enrollment policy that reflects the College Board's commitment to expanding access to AP for all students

*The College Board and the Advanced Placement Program encourage teachers, AP Coordinators, and school administrators to make equitable access a guiding principle for their AP programs. **The College Board is committed to the principle that all students deserve an opportunity to participate in rigorous and academically challenging courses and***

programs. All students who are willing to accept the challenge of a rigorous academic curriculum should be given consideration for admission to AP courses. The Board encourages the elimination of barriers that restrict access to AP courses for students from ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in the AP Program. Schools should make every effort to ensure that their AP classes reflect the diversity of their student population.
[AP Equity Policy Statement \(.pdf/137KB\)](#)

College Board believes their courses are for all who wish to access the rigor they offer. If the curriculum is for all students, it cannot address the academic or social/emotional needs of gifted learners.⁴ a program that serves the needs of gifted and talented students provides differentiation beyond that which is for all students. Curriculum differs in the areas of content, process, and product. Content differentiation includes elements such as a thematic structure, greater complexity, and a more problem-based approach. Processes encourage more creative thinking strategies, involve more open-ended activities, increase the range of student choice, and allow for more independent study. In addition, gifted curriculum includes product differentiation, such as that elaborated in the Texas Performance Standards Projects. This would include products reflecting more individuality and creativity and ones that are advanced and grounded in deep content expertise.

The State Plan requires districts to construct program options that allow gifted learners to “work together as a group, work with other students, and work independently” throughout the school day and year. AP classes that include high achievers as well as gifted learners assists with “work with other students,” but unless the teacher clusters the gifted within the class, working with other gifted students and independent study are not accommodated.

2. Advanced Placement[®] provides content gifted learners may access to work toward the Distinguished Achievement Plan (DAP) and/or the Texas Performance Standards Project (TPSP).

Texas Education Agency, Division of Advanced Academics,
Gifted/Talented developed the *Texas Performance Standards Project*.⁶ The

purpose of TPSP is to facilitate the continuum of services required in the State Plan and to meet the academic and social/emotional needs of gifted learners. The purpose of TPSP is stated this way:

The TPSP is a statewide standards and assessment system you can use to capture the high levels of achievement of gifted and talented students. The goal of the TPSP is for students to create work that reflects the professional quality that the Texas State Plan for the Education of Gifted/Talented Students requires. Student projects are TEKS-based and focus on the core content areas of English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies with interdisciplinary connections⁶.

TPSP is not required, but is an option districts are encouraged to consider both for differentiation and as a tool to evaluate program quality. It is designed for gifted students who may express their interests through a self-selected project that facilitates efforts toward the DAP or for scoring that accompanies TPSP.

For students who choose to graduate with the DAP, whether they earn credits through AP or through TPSP or a combination of both, AP courses offer the rigor of content required by each program. The next statement elaborates on the part that AP plays with work toward the DAP or in the TPSP.

3. Advanced Placement[®] may provide the appropriate content and process, but not opportunities for meeting product requirements and affective needs of the gifted.¹

In 2001 the “AP Task Force” was organized for the purpose of defining elements of pacing, depth and complexity that are present in AP course objectives and guidelines that make it appropriate for gifted learners and to serve as a resource for AP teachers and consultants.

The analysis and conclusions of this group reinforces the need for AP teachers to differentiate within their course and understand the nature and needs of the gifted learner. While only four (4) specific courses were analyzed, the process is applicable to any AP course. This paper references information from the “AP Task Force” to add legitimacy this position.

AP Task Force

Each course analysis evaluated only documents that are made available through College Board for **ALL** AP teachers. Course syllabi, *Building Success*® documents, and varied course outlines distributed through week-long AP Institutes were not included. The documents analyzed were the *Teacher's Guide to the Advanced Placement (course name)*, Course Description for (course name), called the ACORN book, and teacher and student lab manuals for AP Biology, all available online.

The aim of the task force was to analyze what is overt, found in ACORN books and Teacher's Guides, not what may be implied or what individual teachers and/or AP consultants may incorporate. This work provides a baseline for AP consultants and AP teachers to meet the needs of gifted learners enrolled in AP courses.

A checklist was developed to reflect current research and best practices for gifted learners. The checklist used by the four content areas, AP Biology, AP Calculus AB, U.S. History, and English Language and Composition, was divided into Content, Process, Product and Affect⁴ and based on resources found at the end of this paper. Each content area used the checklist to determine if the descriptor found that 1) the element is not present, 2) that there is potential in the lesson, but the inclusion of the element is not overt, or 3) that the element is present. The descriptor was assigned a "1," "2," or "3" according to their findings. Conclusions were based on these numeric designations.

Using this scale, the overall generalizations were drawn for each content area analyzed. The summaries are found in the original document which may be retrieved from regional Education Service Center Advanced Academics consultants. The following recommendations to meet the needs of gifted learners within an AP course stem from the work of the AP Task Force.

Thematic Presentation of Content

Thematic organization of each content area and/or integration of content areas around a broad-based theme or issue would strengthen AP course

strategies. This approach meets the learning characteristics of gifted and allows for personal choice and interests across all socioeconomic levels.

Curriculum Compacting

The issue of time was brought up in each content area. All subject areas expressed the lack of time to delve deeply into the content or the time for gifted students to develop their interests through self-selected topics. While more rigorous in content, AP is no different than any subject area for gifted students.

One strategy that accommodates the learning needs of gifted is curriculum compacting. A determination of what the student already knows about the subject with advancement into the unknown is the essence of curriculum compacting. If the subject area falls into a content area learning strength for the student, (s)he knows a great deal about the subject and can add to his/her knowledge base through self-directed learning.

Texas Performance Standards Project and Distinguished Achievement Plan

Throughout this document references have been made to the Texas Performance Standards Project. Services for gifted students build from and expand on the general school program provided to all students. Through the TPSP, districts provide opportunities for students to create innovative products and performances that reflect individuality and creativity in advanced ways when compared to their peers and build on the general school curriculum, including AP courses. TPSP, Exit Level, coupled with the DAP, offer an opportunity for gifted students to develop their strengths and to express their interests.

Interdisciplinary Approach

When two or more content subjects are combined for study, the gifted learner's nature and needs are accommodated. An interdisciplinary approach allows for the complexity gifted learners prefer. AP designs each course to be offered independently. The depth or rigor of content AP offers can facilitate gifted learners if the school provides opportunities for two or more courses to be integrated.

Giftedness in Poverty

The original “AP Task Force” document includes a separate section for “Giftedness in Poverty.” While not addressed in this paper, the educator must not ignore this subpopulation of gifted learners. The reader may find this section in the original work.¹

Conclusions

The AP Task Force found strengths and weaknesses in College Board® Advanced Placement Program strategies for gifted students. At its core, the findings indicate that, while the rigor of content is present in AP coursework, differentiation for gifted learners is frequently overlooked and must be directly addressed.

The educator who is aware of the nature of gifted learners will accommodate their learning needs. Whether through thematic presentation, curriculum compacting, differentiation of strategies, or integrated courses, an overt attempt must be made in order for differentiation to occur.

A combination of AP coursework with Texas Performance Standards Project work would be optimal for gifted students at the high school level. The Exit level TPSP model should be incorporated into the gifted students’ coursework to assure curricular rigor and to allow fulfillment of the Distinguished Achievement Plan.

AP Institutes to provide educator training with the deep and rich content for all students, the educator’s application of strategies for gifted learners, and Professional Development opportunities with TPSP will create an atmosphere of learning that meets their needs and will provide learners who are ready to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

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