

Equity and Access in the Middle

As primary students progress to the upper grades, educators separate them into different tracks, some subtle and some not-so-subtle. We begin to apply labels from high-achieving to needing intervention, and as a result, opportunities begin to diminish for some students. Unfortunately, tracked classes typically reflect achievement trends in student race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other demographic characteristics. These separations—which are not always based on ability—are amplified by the time students reach the middle grades.

Jefferson Middle School, a large and diverse school in Los Angeles County, has a mix of students from many economic levels, educational backgrounds, and nationalities. Some students come from families in which both parents have graduate degrees, and other students have parents who are immigrants, work multiple jobs, and do not speak English. The majority of the student population is Asian (55 percent), followed by Hispanic (36 percent). Until two years ago, the eighth-grade honors English class did not resemble the demographic makeup of the school. Out of 36 students, about 85 percent of the class was Asian, and the remaining 15 percent included a mix of the remaining subgroups: Hispanic, white, and other.

The tracking systems and structures at middle schools, as well as family perceptions, act as barriers to student access. Many students believe they don't belong in certain classes because of the existing makeup. For example, when we asked Hispanic students why they did not try out for the honors classes, they responded, "Those classes are for the Asian kids." Conversely, when we asked struggling Asian students why they weren't enrolled in classes for students in the middle, they said, these classes "are for Hispanic students." After much reflection, Jefferson Middle School educators worked to develop a system to begin a slow climb toward a more equitable honors program.

Three Steps Toward Greater Equity

We began by implementing a three-step process to help identify and recruit students for the eighth-grade honors English classes.

1. Recruit with a purpose. We used a multiple measures assessment process that gave us a snapshot of the students who applied for the program, and found that many underrepresented minority students weren't applying for honors classes. As a result, we examined data and conducted a search midyear for seventh-grade students who might fit the honors profile, but did not

apply for the class. Using our student database system to search for students who scored proficient or above on the previous year's state test, and who were earning at least a B in their current English class, we found 48 matches. The eighth-grade honors English teacher then spoke to all seventh-grade classrooms about the program, explaining benefits of the class and the application procedures. All students received the same information.

2. Involve parents. Our community liaisons called the parents of the 48 identified students—in their home language—to invite them to an honors parent information session where the honors teacher, school counselor, school principal, and translators presented information about the honors application process. We focused the presentation on the importance of simply trying the program as well as the benefits of a rigorous curriculum, using higher-level thinking skills, and having more inside knowledge of higher expectations. About 75 percent of the parents attended one of two meetings, and phone conferences were conducted for

STRATEGIES THAT WORK

ANALYZE THE DATA. Middle school students can't be expected to take initiative and apply for an honors program on their own. The school should identify students, reach out to them, and encourage them to apply.

CONDUCT TARGETED OUTREACH TO PARENTS. Use all stakeholders to publicize the program and the application process. Parents were receptive to the school's personalized invitation to learn more about the honors program.

ENSURE THAT THE APPLICATION PROCESS RECOGNIZES ACHIEVEMENT IN DIFFERENT WAYS. Create an application method that honors different types of students. Our application process reflected multiple measures as indicators of potential. Because some students are not strong test takers, provide an impromptu writing task for deep thinkers or conduct a Socratic seminar for orators. Also, do not put too much weight on any one measure. A teacher recommendation might have a lot of value, but remember that students respond to and perform differently for different teachers. Bubble tests are easier to score and equitable in some ways, but do not allow you to see true potential from those whose strongest quality is communication.

GET THE RIGHT PEOPLE ON THE TEAM. Counselors must encourage and support students when they apply for an honors program. Community liaisons must be able to articulate the program to parents in a nonthreatening manner. Teachers must be willing to try new approaches and advocate for underrepresented students. Finally, administrators must ask the difficult questions of why honors classes are homogeneous, and be willing to work with the team to implement structural, perceptual, and procedural changes to the system while also honoring the standards of the program.



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those who were unavailable. Throughout the meetings, we encouraged parents and students to go through the process, as it was a powerful learning experience that could help the student feel comfortable undergoing future application processes.

3. Provide supports. We provided supports to help retain underserved students in the honors program. Some students missed the traditional honors criteria by a few points, but showed great work ethic and desire to challenge themselves, and had supportive parents. These students were given an opportunity to participate in the honors program, but also had to take a concurrent AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) class. The support class helped reinforce concepts, taught students study and organizational skills, provided students with additional strategies for reading and writing, and offered students another teacher advocate.

Results

A more targeted and equitable recruitment process resulted in an increase in applications from Hispanic and other underrepresented students. After implementing the new process, the number of highly qualified Hispanic students in the eighth-grade honors English program nearly doubled, from 8 in 2013 to 15 in 2014. The underrepresented students had grades of at least a 3.3 (B+) or higher in the class.

The removal of barriers to honors classes also increased integration between social groups and increased awareness that all students can achieve. By taking three steps to change our process, our school and our program became, dare we say, more honorable. 

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