

Empowering Students Nationwide through Data-Driven Transformation

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Most educators believe that every student needs to be seen, engaged, and resourced in order to excel academically and achieve their full potential. Yet, year after year, up to a million public high school students from marginalized communities miss out on enrolling in advanced academic pathways with a proven track record of accelerating post-high school opportunities- opportunities that are, literally, right across the hall from them in their current high schools.

For over a decade, we have partnered with high schools to uncover the barriers that perpetuate this inequity. [Equal Opportunity Schools](#) (EOS), a nonprofit that has worked with over 900 schools across the country, to delve deep into the institutional, instructional, and interpersonal factors that combine to “[shut out](#)” capable and ready students who are currently under-challenged and under-resourced.

During the pandemic, the education landscape underwent significant changes, shedding light on an undeniable truth: an aspiration gap exists in our education system. This gap refers to the disparity between student aspirations and the availability of opportunities to achieve those aspirations. Through our surveys of 1.75 million students, we have discovered that, on average, only 15% of students of color and low-income students not in advanced coursework feel challenged by their current classes. Shockingly, over 40% of students of color express interest in STEM courses and careers, yet only 3% are enrolled in corresponding classes. Furthermore, while more than 80% of students express their desire to attend college, less than half do so within six years after high school. These statistics paint a clear picture of the aspiration gap we face.

Advanced academic pathways have been around for generations but have consistently remained inequitable. It is crucial to recognize the language we use when discussing this issue. For decades, the education system framed the problem as an achievement gap, focusing solely on performance metrics that unfairly placed the blame on students. This approach failed to acknowledge the systemic conditions that paved the way for such outcomes. Gradually, the conversation shifted towards admitting education inequities and the notion of an opportunity gap, emphasizing the lack of equal

opportunity. While this was an important step, "opportunity" alone is too vague to bring about true transformation. Merely providing equal opportunities without addressing the responsibility placed on students falls short of meaningful change.

If the statistics paint a clear, sometimes dismal picture, it's the small stories of real kids that reveal the power of these opportunities. Meet Demar, an aspiring trumpeter and a student at a high school that initially thought they didn't need EOS. At the start of our partnership, 28% of students of color and low-income students were enrolled in at least one Advanced Placement (AP) class, and this put Demar's school on the high end of success in their district. Demar was not among them. However, two years later, we met him during a focus group at his school. By then, using EOS tools, data, and coaching, the percentage of students taking AP classes had risen to 67%, without any decline in overall grades or pass rates. By then, Demar had completed his second AP course and told us how much taking advanced science classes had changed how he thought about himself and his education.

"I never knew these courses existed, and I spend 8 hours a day here," he said. "I am so much better prepared for college now. When I went on my college visit, they only wanted to show me the music studio, the equipment, the instruments, but I made them take me to junior-level physics. I never would've done that before taking these classes."

More importantly, Demar's principal is seeing the effect on the work of educators' academic assumptions about their students. "It wasn't until we had the EOS Student Insight Card, along with trusted adult and mindset data, that we were able to see our students as students," he explained. "This transformative shift changed our school's functioning, and we will never be the same."

Imagine if every student had the same chance as Demar. Envision a world where every school possesses the tools to see, engage, and resource students equitably. Picture a reality where no administrator ever has to say, "We just didn't know." The most effective way to change outcomes is by transforming inputs. When we introduce new data, tools, and practices into the education system, we witness the transformative power of these changes.

But how do we do that at scale? Enter [GreatSchools](#), a nonprofit that has helped hundreds of millions of parents better understand the schools in their communities by giving them data that highlights academic success and equity gaps, along with the context to make sense of the numbers. GreatSchools has long understood that how schools manage advanced academic pathways is a crucial sign of success. [Research](#) on their [College Success Award](#) recipients — an award given to public high schools

excelling at preparing students for college — found that winners were far more likely to reduce barriers for AP and other advanced classes. The most successful schools did not simply remove barriers to access but actively recruited students from all backgrounds and with wide-ranging academic records.

Parents and educators need to see the vivid reality of advanced academic pathways at their schools for two reasons. First, the data clearly shows that access to rigorous classes, such as AP, IB, Dual Credit, or other college-aligned courses, accelerates post-high school opportunities. Second, the gatekeeping of "readiness" for advanced academics, often determined by narrow metrics like test scores, is emblematic of how students, especially Black, brown, and low-income students, are seen, engaged, and resourced. In many schools, as was the case at Demar's, access to AP courses is primarily determined by a metric called [AP Potential](#), which relies solely on a student's PSAT scores. While advanced course enrollment is not the only solution, these courses remain tangible, existing, and proven opportunities for students to access the ladder to college, where equitable and unequivocal access can accelerate their talents and opportunities.

The current state of the data

We all know that what we measure matters. By closely tracking and quantifying specific metrics, we increase the likelihood of improvement. However, when it comes to advanced course enrollments, there is no national system of accountability, tracking, or real-time insights. This lack of transparency means that students and their families have limited opportunities to see, understand, and influence enrollment patterns.

While some nascent systems exist, such as the College Board's annual test-taking reports, but we need more comprehensive efforts to truly help schools focus on improvement and deeper visibility into enrollment patterns. The [Civil Rights Data Collection](#), hosted by the federal government, is invaluable, but its importance can easily be deprioritized by subsequent administrations. District and state scorecards might include this data, but it is often outdated and difficult to locate. This lack of transparency exacerbates the challenges we face.

We firmly believe that the management, oversight, and accountability of advanced academic pathways exemplify the wider education system's strengths and weaknesses. By changing how we approach this aspect of education, we can set the stage for broader transformation. However, the current data presents three significant problems:

- ***It's outdated and limited:*** Most data is based on previous years' test-taking rates or outdated enrollment figures that fail to reflect student population size and demographics. Moreover, with no consistent national data infrastructure and norms, it is challenging to find simple, standardized information about individual schools and districts. And, there is a lack of third-party accountability and oversight, meaning that most reporting is left to districts and states whose interest does not necessarily align with greater data transparency.
- ***It lacks clear criteria for best practices:*** There is no standardized tracking of the criteria used to determine access, nor is there a universal definition for managing enrollment. For instance, information about AP Potential and its deployment within districts is notoriously difficult to find.
- ***It fails to account for student experiences:*** There is a dearth of data that captures how students experience advanced courses. Without such data, schools struggle to identify and address the conditions necessary for student achievement.

Proposed solutions and the problems they solve

To this end, we propose a new data set is needed — one that lives outside political administrations and tells a bigger story than test-taking rates. With over 35 years of collective experience in the field of educational data, we believe that in partnership, GreatSchools and EOS are poised to be the curators of such a data set.

However, a reliable national data set goes beyond helping states and schools see aspiration gaps more clearly. It also empowers parents and students to make better decisions about academic trajectories. The current data vacuum has created fundamental problems that EOS and GreatSchools are prepared to address together.

Problem 1: Parents aren't aware that there is a gap in access to rigorous courses and that students with every potential to succeed in advanced courses are regularly denied access.

Many families, like Demar's, have no idea that these courses exist. Without readily available information, students and their parents can't make informed choices about the best pathways to meet their academic aspirations.

An easily interpreted, publicly available data set is a step forward in making advanced academic pathways more visible to all. Additionally, by developing supporting content to help students and parents see the options and opportunities in their high schools, we'll be able to activate families to request these programs in their schools where absent and

demand their right to be included in these programs where they already exist. We theorize that students and their parents will begin to ask for more information about advanced courses and access enrollment at a higher rate.

Problem 2: Parents and administrators do not understand what actions schools should take that create more access and opportunities to advanced coursework for students of color.

Data serves as a diagnostic tool, but much like a trip to the doctor's office, practical action steps are required to change conditions. A set of guiding principles accompanying the national data set and dynamic data visualizations will help parents identify schools that will provide their students the greatest access and opportunities. Additionally, these principles will help schools experiencing aspiration gaps—specifically for their students of color and low-income students—enact change.

Problem 3: The existing AP course participation data (currently available on GreatSchools via the 2018 CRDC data set) is not easily interpreted to highlight the disparities in access amongst sub-populations.

Better data enables the invention of better data visuals that make the problem easily understandable. We believe making [EOS opportunity charts](#) available to any family in any public high school in the country will create a heightened awareness of how much access exists and for whom in specific regions, districts, and schools. A school may have a high participation rate in advanced courses, but who is participating? Are students of color participating at the same rate as their white peers? Are low-income students accessing the courses at the same rate as middle- and high-income students? Making this information visible allows families to pick schools that best match their values and to interrogate their current programs where access is not as equitable.

Additionally, schools will benefit from such data visualizations. In our experience, many schools think they have equitable enrollment and equitable practices and even attempt to take a look at their data. However, when our professional data scientists pull the numbers in a consistent way on a national scale, often schools are surprised by what is uncovered by our analysis of their enrollment data. Not only does an opportunity chart show the disparity in enrollments, but it also provides schools with actionable targets for the number of students to enroll to reach more equitable participation. In essence, good data visualization can help take abstract information and make it actionable.

Looking toward an asset-based future

Our students have aspirations that go beyond the opportunities provided to them by the current school system. However, this isn't an unsolvable problem. It's an issue that

educators and administrators can tackle with the help of parents. Too many students like Demar don't know what they don't know. What if every student and parent knew the academic opportunities available to them and what those opportunities might mean for their future educational trajectories? What if, as educators, we didn't know students by their race, income, extracurricular activities, sibling's reputation, or last semester's report card? What if we could see their dreams, their goals, and the assets they are bringing to the classroom?

A consistent, national data set curated by an entity outside of politics and outside the Advanced Placement system would be a significant step towards realizing such change in American education. Accompanying visualizations that take data and bring it to life layered with guiding principles and action steps schools can take to create more equitable learning environments would transform the reality of high school as we know it. Like Demar, never again should a student have to say, "I never knew these courses existed."

Outline

Introduction

- Included “hook” with one paragraph compelling student or school story that demonstrates the problem (we’ll wrap back around to this story at the end with how they solved the problem).
 - From the State of Maryland?
- Impact of advanced courses on student trajectories

The Problem Redefined

- Access to advanced classes is poorly understood and lack of access for students of color and low-income students is widespread
 - Demonstrate with data
- In the past, this was defined as an achievement gap
 - Why?
 - Why this is not the right way to think about this problem?
- Culturally, we now think of this as an opportunity gap
 - Why?
 - Why there is more to the problem than opportunity
- Through years of experience, EOS has redefined this as an aspiration gap
 - Why? (Include data such as if a student scores a 1 or higher on the AP test they are have a 16 pt increase in college completion)
 - What this means for students

The Current State of the Data

- The data we currently have available
 - The impact of inconsistent data sets leave students invisible
 - CRDC data
 - What happens when schools are left to look at this data by themselves
 - Why this is a problem of public good/why the public should care
- What is possible if we were able to see every student across the nation
- How have data, tools, and coaching (EOS) helped schools
 - How can this been an asset to all schools nationwide

Proposed Solutions and The Problems They Solve

- **Overall Solution:** GreatSchools and EOS should be the curators of a national data set

- Demonstrate what this would look like (before and after) with Maryland data set.
- **Problem 1:** Parents aren't aware that there is a gap in access to rigorous courses and that students who have every potential of succeeding in advanced courses are denied access.
 - **Sub-Solution 1a:** If we develop content distributed to parents and schools, we'll help activate parents to ask for programs in their schools? Parents will ask for information about and access to these courses
 - **Sub-Solution 1b:** If we show parents an opportunity/aspiration chart describing the problem, they will understand how much access exists in a school and choose a school that has more access (equate quality with high-access to rigorous coursework)
- **Problem 2:** GreatSchools currently shows AP course participation (CRDC 2018), but the data is not easily interpreted to highlight that there is a disparity in access amongst sub-populations.
 - **Sub-Solution 2a:** If we adjust the visual treatment to highlight disparities, parents will choose more diverse schools
 - **Sub-Solution 2b:** If we adjust the visual treatment to highlight disparities, schools will be more receptive to messaging that encourages/helps to close those gaps (as measured by?).
 - **Sub-Solution 2c:** If we layer in EOS' participation information, parents would choose more diverse schools because more diverse populations are participating in advanced courses.
- **Problem 3:** Parents do not understand what actions schools should take that create more access and opportunities to advanced coursework for students of color
 - **Sub-Solution 3a:** If we provide parents with guiding principles of schools that have greater access and opportunity, we will help parents know what questions to ask of schools
 - **Sub-Solution 3b:** If we provide schools with guiding principles for equitable access to advanced course work, they will be able to make changes to the way they currently function

Conclusion

- Link back to "hook" story to show success
- Restate new vision for closing the aspiration gap across the nation
- Restate the proposed public good and the hypothesized impact

