

# *Participation and Success in the Advanced Placement Program Continue to Grow in SREB States*

## SREB

*“All groups of students have enrollment and ‘passing’ rates that exceed national averages in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses.”*

One indicator of state progress toward achieving the SREB *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education

**SREB states continued the growth of the last decade in participation of high school students in the Advanced Placement (AP) program, outpacing the national rate for the eighth straight year in 2009.** Even with this growing population of students participating, the percentage of graduating seniors in SREB states who passed an AP exam while in high school matched the national rate for the third year in a row.

SREB’s *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education recognize the AP program as key to introducing more high school students to rigorous, college-preparatory courses. The AP program continues to be a critical activity states can use to increase the number of college-ready high school graduates. The *Challenge to Lead* goals call for SREB states to increase enrollment and “passing” rates in AP courses until all groups of students exceed national averages.

## Increased participation and success in AP program

The College Board’s *The 6th Annual AP Report to the Nation* shows the percentages of the public school graduating class of 2009 who took at least one AP exam while in high school and who earned a score of 3 or higher on at least one AP exam. A score of 3 or higher is considered “passing” because most colleges award course credit to students who achieve this score.

High school students in the SREB region continued to succeed at the same rates as the nation in academically challenging AP courses, even as overall participation increased in every SREB state. The number of seniors in the United States who had taken at least one AP exam while in high school increased by 46 percent, from 550,000 students to almost 800,000, from 2004 to 2009.

Nationally, more than a quarter of all seniors in the Class of 2009 took at least one AP course while in high school. As in previous years, AP participation among these students in SREB states rose at an even faster rate — 55 percent — over the five-year period, from almost 200,000 seniors to more than 300,000.

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October 2010

Southern  
Regional  
Education  
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In SREB states, the percentage of seniors *taking* at least one AP exam in high school rose by 8 percentage points from 2004 to 2009 — topping the national increase by 2 points. Every SREB state increased its participation rate over the five-year period. In fact, four SREB states — Arkansas, Florida, Georgia and Maryland — did so by double digits. (See Table 1.)

The number of seniors who *passed* at least one AP exam by the time they graduated also increased nationwide and in the region from 2004 to 2009. Nationally, about 130,000 more students passed at least one AP exam by the end of the five-year period — a 37 percent increase. Almost 50,000 more seniors — a 42 percent increase — passed at least one exam in SREB states. These increases resulted from increases in participation rates and *not* from increases in passing rates.

Table 1  
**Percentage of Seniors Who Took and Passed<sup>1</sup>  
 At Least One AP Exam in High School**

	Took At Least One AP Exam			Passed At Least One AP Exam		
	2004	2008	2009	2004	2008	2009
United States	20	25	26	13	15	16
SREB states	21	27	29	12	15	16
Alabama	9	14	16	5	7	7
Arkansas	13	<b>33</b>	<b>34</b>	6	11	11
Delaware	19	27	27	11	14	14
Florida	<b>28</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>21</b>
Georgia	<b>22</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>34</b>	12	<b>16</b>	<b>18</b>
Kentucky	15	20	22	8	10	11
Louisiana	4	8	10	2	4	4
Maryland	<b>29</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>25</b>
Mississippi	7	13	13	3	4	4
North Carolina	25	<b>28</b>	<b>29</b>	15	17	17
Oklahoma	17	20	20	8	10	9
South Carolina	20	23	26	12	14	15
Tennessee	13	16	18	7	9	9
Texas	<b>22</b>	27	<b>29</b>	13	15	15
Virginia	<b>27</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>23</b>
West Virginia	13	15	17	6	7	8

Percentages that exceeded the national percentage are shown in **bold**.

<sup>1</sup> A score of 3 or higher is considered passing because most colleges award course credit to those who achieve this score.

Source: The College Board.

The SREB region continued to keep pace with the nation in the percentage of seniors who passed at least one AP exam in high school in 2009. This means that **states in the region are poised to meet the *Challenge to Lead* goal that calls for students' passing rates on AP exams to exceed national rates.** Five SREB states — Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina and Virginia — met this indicator of progress in 2009, the same states that did in 2008. All 16 SREB states increased the percentage of seniors passing at least one AP exam from 2004 to 2009.

Maryland ranked first in the nation in pass rates in 2009 for the second year in a row. Florida had the largest single-year increase in the nation of the percentage of seniors who passed at least one AP exam. Virginia had the largest five-year increase. These accomplishments show that SREB states are leading the nation in AP success. Yet, some SREB states lagged behind others in AP participation and pass rates. In 2009, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee and West Virginia had fewer than one in five seniors taking an AP exam in high school. These states continue to lag behind other states in participation and passing rates.

As the number of seniors *participating* in the AP program has increased over the last decade, the number of students *passing* has not kept pace. In 2004, nearly 60 percent of students in SREB states who took an AP exam passed. By 2009, that pass rate had dropped to less than 55 percent. As participation in the AP program has increased in the region, success on AP exams has declined. Some argue that students planning to take AP courses should take a more rigorous curriculum before enrolling. Research indicates that students who take preliminary courses aligned with the AP curriculum are more likely to succeed in these college-preparatory courses. To help more students do well in AP courses, **states need to provide greater access to rigorous preliminary courses.**

Research indicates that students are better prepared for college if they take AP classes and the accompanying exams, even if they do not score high enough to earn college credit. These findings argue for offering *more* students access to AP courses across the region. States such as Florida and Arkansas that have expanded students' access to AP courses have experienced significant increases since 2004, both in the number of seniors who *take* at least one AP exam while in high school and in the number who *pass*. Without these expanded programs, some of these students would have graduated from high school without strong preparation for the academic rigor of college — and without college credit.

## Movement toward greater equity in AP

The College Board has worked to ensure that more underrepresented minority students and students from low-income families participate in AP courses. Many SREB states have opened AP classes to more students from these underrepresented groups, and these efforts have led to higher participation and passing rates for these students in recent years.

The College Board considers states to have reached “equity” when the proportion of black or Hispanic seniors who are successful on AP exams in each state equals or exceeds their proportion in the overall graduating class in that state. AP participation and pass rates for Hispanic seniors in many SREB states have equaled or exceeded their proportion in the graduating class over the last several years.

From 2004 to 2009, SREB states led the nation in the percentage of seniors *passing* at least one AP exam who were Hispanic. During this period, the percentage of seniors who passed at least one AP exam and who were Hispanic increased or remained the same in all SREB states. Since 2008, 13 SREB states have closed the gap entirely between the percentage of Hispanic seniors who passed at least one AP exam and the overall percentage of Hispanic seniors in the state — reaching “equity” for these students. (See Table 2.)

While Hispanic students have reached equity in passing rates in most SREB states, black students still have not. **From 2004 to 2009, black students continued to be underrepresented in AP courses in every**

Table 2  
**Percent of Seniors Who Passed<sup>1</sup> at Least One AP Exam Who Were Hispanic Compared With Percent of Hispanic Students in the Graduating Class**

	Total Graduating Class			Passed At Least One AP Exam			Gap		
	2004	2008	2009	2004	2008	2009	2004	2008	2009
United States	13	15	16	14	14	14	No gap	1	2
SREB states	13	15	16	15	16	16	No gap	No gap	No gap
Alabama	1	2	2	2	3	3	No gap	No gap	No gap
Arkansas	3	5	6	5	6	6	No gap	No gap	No gap
Delaware	4	6	7	3	5	5	1	1	2
Florida	18	22	22	27	28	28	No gap	No gap	No gap
Georgia	3	5	6	4	6	6	No gap	No gap	No gap
Kentucky	2	2	2	1	3	2	1	No gap	No gap
Louisiana	2	2	2	4	3	4	No gap	No gap	No gap
Maryland	4	6	7	6	7	8	No gap	No gap	No gap
Mississippi	1	1	1	1	2	2	No gap	No gap	No gap
North Carolina	3	5	6	3	4	5	No gap	1	1
Oklahoma <sup>2</sup>	5	7	7	7	7	7	No gap	No gap	No gap
South Carolina	2	3	3	2	3	3	No gap	No gap	No gap
Tennessee	1	3	3	2	4	4	No gap	No gap	No gap
Texas	35	38	39	30	32	32	5	6	7
Virginia	4	6	6	5	6	7	No gap	No gap	No gap
West Virginia	1	1	1	1	2	1	No gap	No gap	No gap

Note: “No gap” means the percentage of students passing at least one AP exam who were Hispanic students equaled or exceeded the percentage of Hispanic students in the total graduating class.

**How to read this table:** For example, in Alabama in 2009, 2 percent of the graduating class was Hispanic, and 3 percent of all seniors who passed an AP exam in high school were Hispanic. Because the percentage of Hispanic seniors passing at least one AP exam equaled or exceeded the percentage of Hispanic students in the graduating class, no achievement gap existed for Hispanic students.

<sup>1</sup> Most colleges award credit to students who score a 3 or higher on an AP exam.

<sup>2</sup> American Indians in Oklahoma made up 20 percent of the total graduating class and 8 percent of seniors passing an AP exam in 2009.

Source: The College Board.

**SREB state.** No state reached equity in the percentage of black seniors passing at least one AP exam while in high school. Three SREB states — Alabama, Delaware and Maryland — increased the percentage of AP students who were black and who *passed* at least one AP course by 3 percentage points in the five-year period, the largest increase among SREB states. Yet double-digit equity gaps remained.

The gap between the percentages of black seniors in the graduating class and black seniors passing at least one AP exam in high school has held mostly stable at both the national and regional levels since 2004. Four SREB states — Alabama, Arkansas, South Carolina and Virginia — narrowed the gap since 2004 between the percentage of *all* black seniors and the percentage who passed at least one AP exam while in high school. However, no SREB state narrowed this gap by more than 3 percentage points. (See Table 3.)

**Table 3**  
**Percent of Seniors Who Passed<sup>1</sup> at Least One AP Exam Who Were Black Compared With Percent of Black Students in the Graduating Class**

	Total Graduating Class			Passed At Least One AP Exam			Gap		
	2004	2008	2009	2004	2008	2009	2004	2008	2009
United States	14	14	15	3	4	4	11	10	11
SREB states	22	23	23	5	6	6	17	17	17
Alabama	32	32	32	5	7	8	27	25	24
Arkansas	21	21	21	3	4	4	18	17	17
Delaware	27	28	30	5	6	8	22	22	22
Florida	20	21	20	6	6	6	14	15	14
Georgia	32	34	34	9	11	11	23	23	23
Kentucky	9	10	10	2	3	3	7	7	7
Louisiana	40	35	36	12	8	8	28	27	28
Maryland	32	34	35	7	9	10	25	25	25
Mississippi	46	48	49	11	11	11	35	37	38
North Carolina	27	29	30	6	6	6	21	23	24
Oklahoma	9	10	10	3	4	3	6	6	7
South Carolina	39	39	38	8	8	8	31	31	30
Tennessee	20	21	22	7	8	7	13	13	15
Texas	14	15	15	3	4	4	11	11	11
Virginia	23	24	24	5	6	7	18	18	17
West Virginia	4	4	4	1	2	1	3	2	3

**How to read this table:** For example, in Alabama in 2009, 32 percent of the graduating class was black, and 8 percent of all seniors who passed an AP exam in high school were black. Because the percentage of black students passing at least one AP exam did not equal or exceed the percentage of black students in the graduating class, a gap in achievement existed for black students.

<sup>1</sup> Most colleges award credit to students who score a 3 or higher on an AP exam.

Source: The College Board.

In 2008, the College Board reported on participation and passing rates for students from low-income families for the first time. These students also have been generally underrepresented in AP programs, and the College Board has encouraged states to increase their participation and provide a rigorous high school curriculum for more of these students.

In SREB states, the percentage of seniors from low-income families who *took* at least one AP exam rose by 5 percentage points from 2004 to 2009 — matching the national rate. Every SREB state except one increased the participation rate for students from low-income families during the five-year period, and three SREB states — Alabama, Mississippi and South Carolina — had double-digit gains. Five SREB states — Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Mississippi and South Carolina — ranked in the top 10 nationally in the growth of the participation rates for these students during the same period. (See Table 4.)

The percentage of seniors from low-income families in SREB states who *passed* at least one AP exam trailed the national rate by 1 percentage point in 2009. Three SREB states — Florida, Oklahoma and Texas — had rates that exceeded the national rate. In fact, every SREB state except one increased or maintained the percentage of seniors from low-income families who *passed* at least one AP exam from 2004 to 2009. Six SREB states ranked in the top 10 nationally for increases in the passing rates of these students during the period: Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi and South Carolina.

**Strong schools make a difference.** In addition to reporting on overall student participation and success, the College Board recognized 15 high schools that led the nation in “helping African American and/or Latino students to succeed in particular AP subjects.” Twelve of these 15 schools were located in SREB states: Florida (with seven schools), Georgia (with one school), Maryland (with one school), and Texas (with three schools). These schools in SREB states are leading the nation in participation and success of underrepresented minority populations.

## Recent initiatives promote success for underrepresented students

The College Board reported on the progress of two major initiatives intended to close the equity gaps often found in the participation and success of minority and low-income students in the AP program. The National Governors Association (NGA) launched its Advanced Placement Expansion Project in 2005 as part of a national initiative to redesign the American high school. Fifty-one pilot schools in six states — including three SREB states — received grants to expand AP courses and increase access for minority students and students from low-income families. The grants also helped to build “teacher and student capacity” and create “incentives for schools and students.”

Of the six participating states, the College Board and the NGA commended Alabama, Georgia and Kentucky for efforts to expand access and praised Kentucky specifically for its work to create incentives for increasing AP participation and performance. *These SREB states more than doubled the number of minority students in AP courses from 2006 to 2008, accounting for nearly one-third of the overall AP enrollment growth in participating rural and urban districts in the project.* Of the top 20 increases in overall AP enrollment at the pilot schools, *half* were in SREB states.

Table 4  
**Percent of Seniors from Low-Income Families  
 Who Took and Passed<sup>1</sup> At Least One AP Exam in High School**

	Took At Least One AP Exam			Passed At Least One AP Exam		
	2004	2008	2009	2004	2008	2009
United States	14	17	19	12	13	15
SREB states	14	17	19	11	13	14
Alabama	5	9	18	3	4	5
Arkansas	14	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	11	<b>14</b>	14
Delaware	6	10	14	5	7	10
Florida	9	14	18	9	12	<b>16</b>
Georgia	9	13	15	5	8	9
Kentucky	12	15	18	7	9	12
Louisiana	12	16	17	9	<b>15</b>	13
Maryland	8	9	13	6	7	10
Mississippi	<b>20</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>34</b>	7	13	14
North Carolina	8	9	10	6	6	7
Oklahoma	<b>23</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>18</b>
South Carolina	3	11	14	2	7	8
Tennessee	8	14	15	4	8	9
Texas	<b>27</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>26</b>
Virginia	5	5	6	4	4	4
West Virginia	<b>18</b>	11	9	<b>14</b>	9	8

Percentages that exceeded the national percentage are shown in **bold**.

<sup>1</sup> Most colleges award credit to students who score a 3 or higher on an AP exam.

Source: The College Board.

## How your state can increase student success in AP courses

Policy-makers should continue to monitor the participation and success rates of all groups of students in the AP program, set targets for increasing these rates, and establish programs to increase access and success in these college-preparatory courses — including offering courses through statewide virtual (or online) schools, professional development for teachers and supplementing exam fees for students.

## References

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