

## The 2025 State of Advanced Course Access

### Book 2

# A Blueprint for Expanding Access



# Turning insight into action

What's working to increase access to advanced coursework.

In Book 1 of our 2025 State of Advanced Course Access series, we explored the Access Equation Mismatch. Drawing from Equal Opportunity Schools' 2024–25 survey of more than 275,000 high school students, along with national datasets, we found:

**An aspiration–access gap:** 89% of students want to attend college—but only 38% are enrolled in courses like AP, IB, Dual Enrollment, or Cambridge AICE.

**Variances across groups:** We explored the variances in advanced course access for different groups based on income and race, underscoring that visibility into differences is critical for crafting outreach strategies that work.

**A system design issue—not motivation:** Students are clear about their ambitions. What too often stands in the way is how schools identify, encourage, and support them.

**Advanced course access gaps have long-term impacts:** Finally, we traced how these gaps affect not just student outcomes but also school climate, educator mindsets, and long-term economic mobility.



In other words, the problem isn't down to a lack of ambition. It's the way systems are built.

## From problem to possibility

This second eBook, Blueprints That Work, shifts focus from problem to possibility. It's about how systems—districts, schools, and states—can evolve to meet student ambition through smart strategies.

Our aim is simple: to provide district leaders, educators, and policymakers with actionable practices they can use today. Practices that turn awareness into action, insight into strategy, and aspirations into opportunities.

And the strategies we'll explore aren't abstract. Many are being actively tested and proven every day by district leaders working with their teams or ecosystem partners like EOS, who are committed to opportunity and access.

**Whether you're just beginning this work or seeking to go further, we hope you'll learn practical steps you can take to close access gaps and set more kids up for success.**

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# Designing systems for readiness

Traditionally, access to advanced coursework has been treated as an “opt-in” experience. Students—or their families—must self-nominate or be identified by staff to gain access based on specific criteria.

Every year, that design structure excludes capable students who may not have advocates or necessary information in time to make the leap.

Districts are now flipping the script, redesigning systems using three strategies:



**Defaulting to inclusion,  
not exclusion**



**Broadening  
placement criteria**



**Tailored, culturally  
responsive messaging**

## Opt-in vs Opt-out. Defaulting to inclusion.

Dallas Independent School District’s **Advanced Placement Incentive Program** automatically enrolls middle school students meeting readiness indicators into pre-AP courses. Within three years, AP participation among Black and Latino students rose by 75% ([EdWorkingPapers, 2020](#)).

In Washington state, **Spokane Public Schools** adopted an opt-out model for dual credit. Students are placed in advanced courses unless they or their families decline. The result: participation rose across all groups without lowering performance ([Spokane Public Schools, 2023](#)).

By designing access to advanced coursework as an “opt-in” experience, more capable students — who may not have advocates or information in time to make the leap — get access to the rigor that sets them up for future success.

## Broadening Placement Criteria

Traditional reliance on GPA cutoffs or teacher recommendations leaves tons of students out.

Studies show teacher referral disproportionately under-identifies students of color, even when controlling for academic indicators ([Grissom & Redding, 2016](#)).

## Forward-looking districts use multiple measures:

Test scores and growth metrics

Middle school performance trends

Student interest surveys

Family outreach in multiple languages

In Colorado, **Denver Public Schools** created a centralized dashboard blending academic, attendance, and aspiration data. ([DPS.org](https://dps.org))

Counselors now use it to flag students likely to succeed in AP or IB—even if no adult nominated them. The approach increased equitable enrollment in advanced courses by over 40% (DPS Equity Office, 2023).

## Culturally Responsive Messaging

Eligibility alone doesn't drive access. Students and families must feel these pathways are for them. In book 1 we connected this directly to the need to understand who's currently in the advanced course seats, because it helps schools create more tailored messaging and outreach strategies.

EOS partner **Chicago Public Schools** developed an "AP Belonging" campaign using peer ambassadors, multilingual outreach, and family-facing workshops. Within two years, participation among first-generation college-goers rose 12 percentage points (Chicago Public Schools, 2022).

At EOS we've specifically focused on the ways that better data and insight can influence both of these most recent system design tactics, leading us to develop tools like EOS's [Student Insight Card](#) to add value.

Our work has demonstrated that creating a more rounded picture of student readiness expands the pool of students that are identified for advanced coursework.

Including self-reported student data—on interests, aspirations, and perceived barriers—can be a powerful input that helps schools flag promising students earlier and intervene sooner with personalized encouragement, mentoring, and academic planning.

### Key takeaway for chapter 1



System readiness is about engineering **inclusion** rather than assuming students will find their way. By flipping defaults, broadening criteria, and reshaping outreach, districts demonstrate that readiness can be built, not just presumed.



# From sorting systems to early support systems

Across the country, districts are rewriting the rules by shifting toward supporting, not sorting.

For decades, the American school system has quietly sorted students into different pathways—often based on teacher recommendation, parent advocacy and important but ultimately limiting indicators (test scores, GPA).

This has reinforced inequities rather than addressed them.



## Meeting workforce demands

Looking ahead to the future, the U.S. will need millions more workers with advanced skills in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Yet we are still under-identifying talent.



Nearly **800,000** new STEM jobs projected by 2031—more than 2x the rate of non-STEM jobs

([Bureau of Labor Statistics](#))



**Over 70%** of jobs will require postsecondary education by 2031

([Report from the Georgetown University Center](#))

The talent pipeline must be diverse, skilled, and ready—not just in terms of knowledge, but in terms of confidence, identity, and opportunity. Yet data shows we aren't on track and [we're leaking talent from both ends](#).

Only **21%** of Black and **16%** of Hispanic students met college readiness benchmarks in all four ACT subject areas in 2023 (ACT, 2023).

Fewer than **3%** of low-income students participate in AP STEM courses nationally (Ed trust)

Our current system treats student readiness as a fixed attribute—something a student either has or doesn't. **But readiness isn't innate. It's cultivated by the environment.**

When students from backgrounds with fewer resources aren't invited into advanced coursework early, they fall further behind on college readiness benchmarks.

But there's growing recognition that these systems can change. And across the country, districts are rewriting the rules by shifting toward supporting, not sorting.

# Middle school really matters

Most access strategies begin in high school. But many educators now point to middle school as the place where mindsets form—and pathways start.

Students' sense of identity as “college material” often begins before high school.

Research from the University of Chicago’s Consortium on School Research shows that 8th-grade GPA is a stronger predictor of high school success than test scores (UChicago CCSR, 2017).

Districts expanding access to advanced coursework are now doing so earlier by:

- ✓ Starting algebra studies for students in 8th grade
- ✓ Using middle school data to forecast advanced course readiness
- ✓ Offering pre-AP and honors pathways in 7th and 8th grade

## Key takeaway for chapter 2



The U.S. talent pipeline must be diverse, skilled, and confident. Meeting workforce needs requires shifting earlier—into middle school—and creating support systems that cultivate readiness instead



# Adults as gate-openers, not gatekeepers

Students often cite encouragement from an adult as the spark that changed their path.

Yet, too many never receive it. Educators—teachers, counselors, advisors—play an outsized role in shaping access to advanced courses. Their encouragement (or absence of it) is often the deciding factor in whether a student takes on rigorous coursework.



## The weight of assumptions

When it comes to students taking a more rigorous course, EOS survey data shows:

**30%**

report being encouraged by an adult at school

VS

**Only 23%**

for low-income students

Research confirms the impact. One study found counselors were less likely to recommend equally qualified Black female students for AP Calculus compared to White peers ([Francis et al., 2019](#)). Another study showed educator assumptions disproportionately affect placement decisions ([Grissom & Redding, 2016](#)).

These aren't issues of intent but of support. **Educators want students to succeed but often lack tools, training, or time to see potential beyond traditional metrics.**

## Solutions in Practice

Districts making progress invest in:

### Professional learning

on identifying untapped potential and addressing implicit bias.

### Collaborative placement teams

that use multiple data points to make enrollment decisions.

### Student voice

tools that provide insights about the student base that may have been overlooked.

As one EOS partner principal shared: **"When our teachers saw that 90% of our sophomores wanted to attend college, it reframed who they believed belonged in AP."**



### Key takeaway for chapter 3

Adult expectations are powerful, and adults hold the keys to opportunity. To close access gaps, we must equip educators to act as gate-openers not gatekeepers. Training, data, and collaboration protocols help ensure that adults help expand, rather than limit opportunity.



# Building Student Belonging and Confidence

Even when students are academically ready, belonging and confidence determine whether they persist in advanced coursework. Too often, students from underrepresented groups report feeling isolated or out of place.

## Why Belonging Matters

A [2023 Learning Heroes report](#) found that students who feel out of place in advanced classes are significantly less likely to enroll—even when academically qualified.

Research by Finn & Zimmer confirms that students who feel unsupported are more likely to disengage and eventually leave school ([Finn & Zimmer, 2012](#)).

Belonging also drives persistence: research from the Mindset Scholars Network shows that when students feel connected to peers and supported by teachers, they are more likely to stick with rigorous coursework ([Mindset Scholars Network, 2018](#)).



## Practices That Build Belonging

Districts are addressing this through:

- Peer mentoring and cohort models that ensure students enter advanced courses with allies
- Cohort models that build community among AP/IB/DE students
- Culturally relevant instruction that reflects students' identities and experiences
- Advisory supports where counselors help normalize challenges and celebrate progress

In Chicago, schools have paired AP enrollment with peer ambassador programs that link new AP students with experienced ones, creating social bridges that reduce isolation.

One EOS partner district in California matched AP enrollment with advisory workshops on resilience and college-style study habits. Within two years, persistence rates rose across all groups, with particularly strong gains for first-generation college-goers.

### Key takeaway for chapter 4



Belonging isn't just a feeling—it's an academic factor. When students believe they belong in advanced spaces, persistence rises. Schools that pair expanded access with supports that build identity, confidence, and belonging ultimately boost participation and access that sets more students up for success.

# Equipping educators to sustain change

Even the most well-designed system reforms depend on the adults charged with implementing them. Educators—teachers, counselors, advisors, principals—are the frontline of advanced coursework access.

Yet while most believe strongly in the value of AP, IB, Dual Enrollment, and AICE, many report lacking the training, tools, and time to support students equitably.

## The Confidence Gap

EOS' educator surveys reveal:

**79%**

say AP prepares students well for postsecondary success

**80%**

say the same for IB courses

**Only 66%**

of educators feel equipped with strategies to support underrepresented students in these courses.



And nationally, fewer than half of teachers report receiving training in culturally responsive pedagogy ([Education Week, 2020](#)).

## Why Adult Expectations Matter

Research confirms that teacher expectations influence student outcomes.

In the study by [Grissom & Redding \[2016\]](#) cited in chapter 1, the researchers found that teachers were less likely to recommend Black students for advanced programs even when they had identical academic records to peers ([AER, 2016](#)).

[Francis et al. \[2019\]](#) showed similar under-identification for low-income students.

This is not about blame—it's about equipping educators. When adults see evidence of student aspiration, their recommendations change. In one EOS partner district, showing staff that 90% of sophomores aspired to college shifted who teachers thought belonged in AP, leading to broader enrollment.

# Strategies that are working

Districts making sustained progress are investing in:

- ✓ Professional learning on spotting readiness beyond GPA/test scores.
- ✓ Collaborative placement protocols where teams—not one teacher—make recommendations.
- ✓ Student voice data that reveals aspiration and belonging signals (e.g., EOS's Student Insight Card).
- ✓ Ongoing supports such as coaching, peer cohorts, and family engagement strategies.



## Key takeaway for chapter 5

Expanding access is not just about policy—it's about people. When educators are equipped with training, data, and collaborative systems, they shift from being gatekeepers to becoming powerful enablers of opportunity.

# Policies, practices, and partnerships

While individual classrooms and schools can make changes, sustained transformation requires alignment across **policy, practice, and partnerships**. These three levers ensure that equity in advanced coursework access becomes systemic rather than episodic.



## Policy Shifts

Districts and states are adopting bold policy changes, such as:

- **Opt-out enrollment** (e.g., Spokane Public Schools' Academic Acceleration policy) ([Spokane Public Schools, 2023](#)).
- **Eliminating unnecessary prerequisites** that bar students from AP/IB entry.
- **Removing cost barriers** by covering exam fees or subsidizing Dual Enrollment tuition (e.g., [Colorado's Concurrent Enrollment program](#)).



## Practice Shifts

Schools are redesigning daily operations to promote equity:

- Using **student-level data** to drive invitations to AP/IB.
- Restructuring schedules to avoid conflicts between advanced courses and required classes.
- Launching **inclusive outreach campaigns** in multiple languages.
- Chicago Public Schools' AP Belonging campaign increased participation by 12 percentage points among first-generation college-goers in two years ([Chalkbeat Chicago growth AP](#)).



## Partnerships

Finally, districts are building **ecosystem partnerships** to sustain change:

- **Partner organizations** help districts align systems with student aspirations through tools, technology and advisory.
- **NACEP (National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships)** ensures program quality and equity in Dual Enrollment ([NACEP, 2024](#)).
- **Higher ed institutions and community organizations** provide mentoring, early college awareness, and financial supports.



## Key takeaway for chapter 6

Policy, practice, and partnership must align to make access expansion durable. Districts that address all three see the strongest, most sustainable improvements in participation and outcomes.



# A call to action

**The stakes are clear. Students are ambitious. The workforce of 2030–2040 demands more diverse, highly skilled talent. And our schools hold the keys to bridging the gap.**

We know the problem: The Access Equation Mismatch showed us that this is not about motivation—it's about systems.

And we know that solutions can be found, with districts across the country proving that access can be engineered, belonging can be cultivated, and educator capacity can be strengthened.

At [Equal Opportunity Schools](#), we've seen this work firsthand. By integrating data, student voice, and leadership strategy into daily practice, districts can close opportunity gaps at scale. Even against the backdrop of a shifting education landscape, the opportunity to expand access and prepare more students for postsecondary success has never been greater.

The challenge now is not whether this can be done—but how quickly and how boldly we choose to act.

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**Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS) partners with school districts nationwide to expand access to advanced high school programs for all students, particularly students that are under-identified or represented in these classes.**

With more than a decade of impact, EOS has supported hundreds of districts in transforming access into opportunity.

Learn more about our work to close the ambition-access gap [at our website](#) or using the links below.



### **Our Solutions →**

Tailored district strategies that align policy, practice, and culture with student aspirations. [Learn more](#)



### **Student Insight Card →**

A tool that surfaces student aspirations, barriers, and supports to help educators act on overlooked talent. [Learn more](#)



### **Trusted Adults →**

Building strong adult-student relationships to encourage and support enrollment in advanced courses. [Learn more](#)



### **District Partnerships →**

Learn how EOS collaborates with districts nationwide to expand opportunity. [Learn more](#)



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