

## How to Build a Better High School

The Test: The measure is controversial, but students who take AP exams—even if they don't do well—are better prepared than those who don't.

By Jay Mathews

Newsweek

May 16 issue - Morgan Wilbanks was in for a series of shocks when he transferred to the Jefferson County International Baccalaureate (IB) School in Alabama at the beginning of his sophomore year. The little-known school near Birmingham, which tops NEWSWEEK's list of America's Best High Schools, is on the leading edge of a growing movement to make secondary education much more rigorous. Wilbanks, then 16, found himself taking tough courses right from the start. In his Advanced Placement (AP) European-history class, teacher Jeffrey Clayton gave startled students this initial assignment: memorize the map of Europe and be able to draw every country, along with 10 capitals, 10 rivers and 10 bodies of water. And that was just a warm-up. Clayton and other teachers told Wilbanks that he would be tackling nearly a dozen similarly demanding courses before he received his diploma. A few of the school's 325 students fled, preferring a less strenuous life at a regular public school. But Wilbanks, looking back this month a few weeks before graduation, says it was a "great experience" that prepared him well for the University of Alabama—where he'll major in chemistry and aim for medical school.

Parents and even some educators might cringe at the idea of turning adolescence into a forced march toward college. What about time for fun, football games and memories of life beyond test scores? But even the most relaxed among them agree that *something* needs to be done to reform the American public high school, a 184-year-old institution that has been as resistant to change as a teenager ordered to clean his room. U.S. high schools generally score low in international comparisons. Unlike elementary and middle schools, high schools haven't made significant gains in reading achievement and have been erratic in math. Almost a third of all students—and half of blacks and Hispanics—fail to graduate. This dismal performance has captured everyone's attention. "There is a growing consensus behind high-school reform," said U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings. "Never before have so many groups—governors, business leaders, children's advocates—been so united on the need to act."

United on the need, perhaps, but not on a course of action. The Bush administration, as part of its No Child Left Behind program, wants more accountability from high schools by requiring them to give annual tests in core subjects and show regular improvement in their results. At the National Education Summit in February, governors and business leaders focused on aligning the high-school curriculum with the demands of college and work. One of the speakers at that summit was Microsoft's Bill Gates, who called high schools "obsolete." He has made another approach, smaller schools, a major target of his philanthropy, with \$734 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation going to support 1,500 new high schools with more personal attention. It's a tough sell, Gates says, in part because breaking up big schools "really messes up the football team."

As a college degree becomes ever more essential in the workplace, much of high-school reform centers on getting as many students as possible ready for higher education. That's what the NEWSWEEK List tries to measure by ranking schools based on participation in AP and IB tests written and graded by outside experts. In these courses, students prepare for the demands of college and can earn college credit if their scores are high enough. NEWSWEEK omitted schools with strict academic admission standards that exclude average students. Although there's much debate about the value of standardized tests and AP in particular, NEWSWEEK's List is based on the conviction that no other standard works as well to measure a high school's success at challenging all students to perform at a high level. AP is the better known of the two programs and is used all over the country. IB is less common. It's a series of college-level courses and tests, similar to AP, originally designed in Geneva for the children of diplomats and international business executives preparing for baccalaureate exams but now used in a range of U.S. schools to energize students.

Some new small charter schools, like the BASIS school in Tucson, Ariz., and the Pacific Collegiate School in Santa Cruz, Calif., require all students to take AP courses. The Bard Early College High School in New York City and other similar schools enroll high-school juniors in full college programs. But even with energy and creativity behind high-school reform, it won't be easy to change things. The vast majority of high-school

students are following a pretty leisurely path. One of the largest studies of teenage behavior, the 400,000-student survey of college freshmen by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, reported that only 34.3 percent of incoming college freshmen in 2004 said they did six or more hours of high-school homework a week, down from 47 percent in 1987.

And not everyone applauds efforts to raise those standards, especially the NEWSWEEK List's emphasis on AP. Critics say requiring advanced courses stresses kids, dilutes quality and doesn't always make them readier for college. Patrick Welsh, an author and AP English teacher at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Va., favors challenging students, but contends that taking AP tests is only one tiny measure of whether a school is stretching students. "You have image-conscious public-school officials so intimidated," he says, "that they're putting as many kids as possible—and I am not talking about average kids who are willing to do the work—into AP courses so that they can get a higher ranking on your index."

A few private high schools have discarded AP altogether. Bruce Hammond, director of college counseling at Sandia Preparatory School in Albuquerque, N.M., has found a dozen schools, including his own, that have rejected, or are about to reject, AP in favor of designing their own courses. Many teachers agree that instead of focusing on a standardized curriculum like AP, they should concentrate on making lessons exciting, well taught and linked to students' lives. "The troubles that arise in high schools are precisely an extension of the lack of intellectual vigor—forget rigor—in the elementary-school curriculum and pedagogy," says Deborah Meier, founder of a small East Harlem high school that succeeded in motivating low-income students by emphasizing discussion and writing.

But superintendents, principals and many teachers in districts that have increased their commitment to college-level courses say even with their shortcomings, AP and IB are the most effective ways to take a demanding curriculum to the widest range of students. The tests have an incorruptible high standard, since a teacher cannot dumb down the final exams, and some AP and IB courses appear to be better than the college courses they substitute for. Luther Spoehr, lecturer in education and history at Brown University, says the AP American-history course "is one of the last places where students can get a survey course that really insists that they try to understand change over substantial periods of time." Jon Reider, guidance counselor at San Francisco University High School and a former Stanford admissions officer, believes that because of smaller classes, better student motivation and more-experienced instructors, "calculus is almost always better taught in high school than in college."

The message is getting out ... slowly. This month, 1,173,000 students are scheduled to take 2,050,000 AP tests. That's double the number of students and triple the number of tests since 1995. Still, the new total of AP test takers is only about 15 percent of high-school juniors and seniors, and some studies suggest that may be one reason that so many students who start college find they do not have the academic muscles to survive and get a degree. University of California researchers Saul Geiser and Veronica Santelices, for instance, reported last year that 54.9 percent of California students who took the SAT in 2002 had not taken advanced classes in high school, including AP, IB or honors courses.

That's a major problem because some large studies, such as an analysis by the National Center for Educational Accountability of Texas state-college data, suggest that even students who do poorly on AP tests have significantly higher college-graduation rates than those who do not take AP tests at all. In public schools where average parental income is low and minority students are numerous, enthusiasm for AP and IB has never been greater. "Only 17 percent of our parents have attended college," says Brian Rodriguez, the AP coordinator at Encinal High School in Alameda, Calif., "but AP has had a tremendous impact here, as we regularly send kids to Stanford, Brown, Dartmouth, Harvard, Berkeley and UCLA who never would have had a chance to go there even six years ago."

Raising expectations clearly inspires many students. Sharon Alford, a junior at the Jefferson County IB School, looked at the regular high school in Cullman, Ala., when her father, a Methodist minister, was transferred there in 2003. Cullman High had no AP courses, and though it started AP chemistry the next year, and plans on adding more courses, that was too late for her. So at 6:30 a.m. each school day, Alford climbs into the family's white Ford Explorer, with her mother at the wheel. She finishes her homework while chewing on a Pop-Tart or cereal bar during the hourlong drive to Jefferson County IB. On the ride back in the afternoon, she tries to nap. Adults who hear of her two-hour commute to and from high school are astonished. Her friends make fun of her. But, she says, her response is always the same: "I really, really wanted to go there." It's just the first stop on a journey that she hopes will someday take her as far as she wants to go.