

From enrollment to completion

Supporting equitable outcomes in challenging coursework

CASE STUDIES IN HIGH SCHOOL REDESIGN

Abstract

Maloney High School, in Meriden, CT, has made significant strides in increasing underrepresented students' access to challenging courses, with content ranging from college preparation to career-oriented learning. Creative student-and-family-centered strategies, which incorporate quantitative data and individual counseling, have increased awareness of these courses and spurred dramatic enrollment increases among all learners, especially among Black and Latinx/Hispanic students and English Language Learners. Meriden district and school leaders know that equitable access to advanced courses does not always result in equitable outcomes from them. The team is now focused on ensuring that underrepresented students enrolling in these courses have the support to complete and excel in them. This case describes the school's current outreach and support strategies and concludes with important questions for school leaders and design teams seeking to address similar challenges.

Teaching note

Leaders and design teams engaged in high school redesign are hungry for relevant learning materials that build our collective capacity for innovation. This document is part of a [series of teaching cases](#) featuring real-life scenarios from high schools grappling with design dilemmas. The cases were researched and developed by the Center on Reinventing Public Education at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (CRPE) and the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University to generate a grounded, in-depth discussion of key issues related to innovation and equity in high school education. Common approaches to using teaching cases include:

- Asking participants to read the teaching case in advance.
- Using group time for discussion or presentations that focus on the questions at the end of the document. One set of questions invites participants to advise the school featured in the case, and a second set broadens the discussion to high school education.
- Concluding by asking participants to align themes in the discussion to the broader learning objectives they have as a group.

KEYWORDS

advanced courses, college and career readiness, educational equity

Introduction

Over the past five years, Maloney High School's leadership team has wrestled with how the school can best deploy its resources to support each student and help them consider challenging coursework—and to succeed in such courses after they enroll.

Evidence suggests the efforts are working. Maloney High School dramatically increased its 4-year graduation rate to 92% in 2020-21,¹ up from 76% in 2015-16.² At the same time, it increased enrollment in College and Career Ready courses (CCR courses), especially among traditionally underserved students. For example, the percentage of the school's Latinx students enrolled in at least one CCR course (a term used by the Connecticut State Department of Education to encapsulate Advanced Placement, honors and college-level courses, and career-focused courses such as accounting and business management) rose from 50% in 2015-16 to 82.5% in 2020-21. This increase is noteworthy given that Latinx students across the country continue to have unequal access to advanced coursework, which causes them to miss out on essential learning and skills often needed for college and career success. A range of systemic challenges, including resource inequities and educator and assessment biases, too often block Latinx and Black students from enrolling in these courses, according to a 2020 report by EdTrust.³

But when Maloney's school and district leaders examined disaggregated data on CCR course performance, they noticed that similar to nationwide trends, the school's Latinx students were not succeeding in these courses at the same rate as other students. A school leader noted that administrators' current focus is on identifying and deploying student-centered strategies that will scaffold learning and provide all students the opportunity to succeed in these courses:

"What we learned with open enrollment, you have all these kids that sign up for AP, but when they flounder it can't just be sink or swim. So we talk to parents about meeting with the teachers.... we are building resources for them." - School leader

Successfully completing advanced courses requires not only content mastery, but also the development and deployment of skills such as collaboration, teamwork, effective communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity. All of these are important factors, from college admissions to students' preparedness for postgraduate success. This case focuses on Maloney's efforts to increase enrollment in CCR courses among all learners, especially Latinx learners, and the school's subsequent efforts to help more students successfully complete and excel in the courses.

The context: Francis T. Maloney High School

Maloney High School is a comprehensive high school in Meriden, CT that enrolls 1,208 students. The district renovated its campus in 2016 to foster collaboration and creativity. Many teachers grew up in the same neighborhoods as their students, which contributes to a sense of community.

1 School Profile and Performance Report For School Year 2020-21: Francis T. Maloney High School, Meriden School District (Connecticut, 2022), 4, https://edsight.ct.gov/Output/School/HighSchool/0806111_202021.pdf.

2 School Profile and Performance Report For School Year 2015-16: Francis T. Maloney High School, Meriden School District (Connecticut, 2017), 4, https://edsight.ct.gov/Output/School/HighSchool/0806111_201516.pdf.

3 The Education Trust, "Black and Latino Students Shut Out of Advanced Coursework Opportunities," January 9, 2020, <https://edtrust.org/press-release/black-and-latino-students-shut-out-of-advanced-coursework-opportunities/>.

“Teachers at Maloney care about the kids. They want to see them grow. They want to see them excel.”
- *Mother*

Over the last decade, the demographic profile of Meriden, where the school is located, has changed. In 2015, Meriden’s Latinx population comprised about 25% of the town’s population.⁴ Five years later, that number increased to 33%⁵ as compared to Meriden Public Schools, where 52% of students identified as Latinx.⁶

The district has focused on recruiting more diverse teachers to reflect the diversity of the student body, and 35% of new teachers hired during 2021 identified as a race other than White. Meriden currently employs 13% teachers of color (compared to the state average of 10.6%) and plans to continue to increase the number steadily.

Maloney High School Demographics

	Count	School Percent of Total	District Percent of Total
Female	606	50.2%	*
Male	602	49.8%	51.6%
American Indian or Alaska Native	*	*	*
Asian	44	3.6%	2.1%
Black or African American	134	11.1%	10.7%
Hispanic or Latinx of any race	626	51.8%	58.2%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	*	*	*
Two or more races	48	4.0%	4.0%
White	354	29.3%	24.8%
English Learners	155	12.8%	16.2%
Eligible for free or reduced-price meals	862	71.4%	77.1%
Students with disabilities	187	15.5%	20.9%

Given the school’s increasingly diverse student body, the Maloney team has focused on developing and deploying strategies to leverage students’ strengths, meet their individualized needs, and urge them to seek out challenging coursework aligned with their interests.

Those goals required Maloney staff to build structures, routines, and tools aimed at distilling each student’s preferences, challenges, and aspirations. One such tool is the school’s student interest survey, which every incoming freshman completes. Staff review the results of that survey, along with students’ grades, to suggest extracurriculars and courses that would be interesting and appropriately challenging for each student.

At regular intervals throughout the year, teachers and counselors meet individually with each student for “on-track conferences.” To prepare, each adult facilitator, who might be a teacher, principal, or district leader, reviews the student’s responses to the interest survey along with

4 “DP05 | ACS DEMOGRAPHIC AND HOUSING ESTIMATES,” U.S. Census Bureau, 2015, <https://data.census.gov/table?q=Meriden+town,+New+Haven+County,+Connecticut&tid=ACSDP5Y2015.DP05>.

5 “DP05 | ACS DEMOGRAPHIC AND HOUSING ESTIMATES,” U.S. Census Bureau, 2020, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Meriden%20town,%20New%20Haven%20County,%20Connecticut&tid=ACSDP5Y2020.DP05>.

6 District Profile and Performance Report For School Year 2020-2021: Meriden School District (Connecticut, 2022), 1, https://edsight.ct.gov/Output/District/HighSchool/0800011_202021.pdf.

information on the student’s behavior, attendance, and academic performance. The facilitator invites students to share challenges they are facing, and together they create a plan for how students can best seek out tailored supports based on their target areas for growth.

Every 11th grader also participates in a junior year “roundtable” designed to nudge students towards challenging coursework in their senior year and to help them develop a post-high school plan. Students reported that these high-touch, individualized strategies boost their confidence and increase their willingness to take academic risks.

“I really like an environment where you’re able to speak your mind, where you’re able to say an answer without [any] judgment.... If you need help, you could get it from anyone around the room. Everybody’s just really helpful and collaborative.” - *Student*

To increase enrollment in upper-level classes and career-focused courses, especially among the school’s traditionally underserved students, the Maloney team replaced traditional barriers with bridges. First, the team removed the requirement for students to obtain a teacher recommendation before signing up for an advanced course. Today, any Maloney student can enroll in an advanced class without that prerequisite. Then, Maloney staff concentrated on promoting such options and helping students (and their families) understand how they could take advantage of them, starting in ninth and 10th grade. Students who perform well on the PSAT and have strong academic records receive personalized, congratulatory letters from the superintendent that encourage them to enroll in advanced coursework. The school also invites students and families to a dinner with school and district leaders that features a discussion about advanced courses. The event encourages questions from families, and staff explain the academic supports available to students who choose to enroll. This effort is noteworthy in light of recent research highlighting that districts’ lack of communication with families, including a lack of communication in families’ home languages, often makes it challenging for families and students to track down information about advanced course enrollment.⁷ Maloney staff also tap upperclassmen to share their experiences in advanced classes with underclassmen who might be considering the same courses.

“I’ll have different students speak to the athlete that’s taking AP classes, the band kid, the art kid, the club kid.” - *School Administrator*

As the table below illustrates,⁸ enrollment in 12th grade CCR courses increased for all student groups at Maloney between 2015-16 and 2020-21. For 12th grade English Language Learners, enrollment in advanced courses skyrocketed to 87.5% in 2020-21, up from 28.6% in 2015-16. .

Percentage of 12th graders enrolled in college-and-career readiness courses

	2015-16	2020-2021
Black or African American	59.3	91.4
Hispanic or Latinx of any race	49.5	82.5
White	75.3	87.5
English learners	28.6	87.5

7 The Education Trust (2020).

8 Maloney School Profile and Performance Report, [2015-16](#) and [2020-21](#)

The challenge: Increasing equitable outcomes in advanced courses

While the percentage of traditionally underserved students enrolling in CCR courses has dramatically increased, the percentage of these students completing and succeeding in CCR courses remains a focus area for school and district leaders. Specifically, staff noticed that the school's percentage of Latinx students meeting a benchmark on at least one college readiness exam (e.g., a 3 or higher on at least one AP exam) remained relatively flat. Increasingly, the school is enacting strategies aimed at closing the gap between the numbers of students enrolling in advanced courses and the numbers actually excelling in the classes.

Maloney's "AP Lounge" is an example of the school's efforts to challenge and support all students. Created after the extensive school renovation in 2016, it features a college-style set-up with individual and group workspaces designed to foster collaboration and peer-to-peer support. Available to all students enrolled in CCR classes, the lounge is supervised by a staff member, often called a "cheerleader," who supports students and helps them stay on top of deadlines. The lounge supervisor is not a subject expert in the AP courses offered. Instead, he or she encourages students to problem solve and coach each other.



The AP lounge at Maloney High School offers students enrolled in advanced courses a place to collaborate and problem solve with peers.

"[Students] get to spend time with each other and figure out things together, which to me is really good for them." - Teacher

This type of peer-to-peer support is consistent with research that finds high school students in advanced courses benefit from study sessions that feature direct collaboration with peers.⁹ Maloney also now requires students in advanced courses to meet with their teacher three to five times during a term to address obstacles before they can request to drop an advanced course. The principal also meets with every student who requests to drop a course. For those who persist and need help preparing for exams, teachers now offer intensive study sessions

⁹ Roby Chatterji, Neil Campbell, and Abby Quirk, "Closing Advanced Coursework Equity Gaps for All Students," June 30, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/closing-advanced-coursework-equity-gaps-students/>.

called “AP Bootcamps.” Maloney staff leverage the school’s data dashboard and information gleaned from on-track conferences and other counseling sessions to steer students who may need more support into those study sessions.

“Anyone who wants to take an AP course can take an AP course. That’s all well and good, if you’re motivated to take an AP course. And like any typical high school kid, sometimes you need a little nudge or encouragement to say you could stretch yourself. A lot of times we hear like, ‘Oh, I don’t know if I can do the work’. You absolutely can, with AP bootcamp and the support we have in place, if you’re interested, you can do the work.” - *District leader*

Maloney staff have noticed that some students who enroll in CCR courses have not had previous opportunities to master the content knowledge and skills needed for success, largely because many have not previously taken fast-track courses. As a result, they may lack the study habits and routines that can help them thrive. Some students have the potential to succeed, but may lack a deep understanding of an AP class workload.

“It’s not just good enough to offer the AP classes and to have students in them, it’s providing the family and the students all the information necessary as to what it’s like to be in an AP class.” - *District leader*

Maloney has taken several steps to demystify both the content that will be taught in advanced classes and the student effort that will be required to succeed in them. For example, Maloney created an “AP Open Seminar Day” for students and families to explore course offerings and meet individual AP teachers. The event is designed to promote the ways in which families, students, and teachers can collaborate to support students’ learning and growth.

“They really pushed on the tutoring and getting help. Before that it wasn’t really getting noticed as much as it does now. So I think that was what really changed, because I feel like they want to see more kids pass.” - *Student*

Maloney’s teachers, administrators, and staff continue to strengthen strategies aimed at helping students seek out and succeed in challenging coursework and experiences. This work in Maloney and elsewhere requires a deep commitment to high standards for all, coupled with creative strategies for engaging and supporting students’ diverse needs.

To determine the effectiveness of recent efforts, Maloney staff plan to continue to monitor several key data points related to student success in advanced coursework over the coming years, including student survey data regarding students’ sense of belonging and support in challenging courses, class passage rates, and the percentage of each student subgroup meeting a benchmark on at least one college readiness exam.

Discussion

On Maloney High School

1. Maloney is using quantitative student data and fostering deeper relationships to understand individual students' circumstances, strengths, needs, and interests. **How do these design choices connect to Maloney's goal of supporting all students to enroll and succeed in advanced courses?**
2. While more students at Maloney are enrolling in advanced coursework, not all have had ample opportunities to build and practice the skills and/or study habits the courses require. **In addition to the strategies Maloney already has in place, what new mindsets, routines, and structures might staff need to embrace to ensure all students are better prepared for these courses?**
3. Consider what you know about evidence-based strategies to support success in advanced coursework, especially among traditionally underserved students (see suggested reading below for an example). **What additional ideas would you encourage Maloney to explore to help more students excel in these courses? What are some barriers to consider?**

On high schools in general

4. What advanced courses does your school offer, and in general, what types of students enroll in them? Explain what you know about course success rates.
5. What could your school do now or in the near future to increase the number of diverse students enrolling in, and succeeding in, these courses?
6. What are the barriers to taking those actions? How might you address them?
7. In addition to supporting students to be successful in advanced coursework, what steps would your school need to take to ensure that every student has access both to rigorous instruction and appropriate scaffolding?

Additional Reading

- Chatterji, Roby, Neil Campbell, and Abby Quirk. 2021. "[Closing Advanced Coursework Equity Gaps for All Students.](#)" June 30, 2021.