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The future of advanced learning starts with student goals



INTRODUCTION

Advanced learning is entering its next phase

For years, making rigorous coursework accessible to more students has been one of the most important goals in advanced learning.

While this remains essential, increased access without the right conditions for student success isn't enough.

That becomes especially important as districts expand advanced learning programs.

Advanced Placement (AP), Honors, Dual Enrollment (DE), Career & Technical Education (CTE), International Baccalaureate (IB), and other options are increasingly part of a broader landscape rather than isolated programs.

What's next for advanced learning programs is building coherent systems that align to a student's individual goals—whether that's college credit, postsecondary preparation, career readiness, or personal interest—while providing the structure and support they need to succeed.

The Journey Toward Advanced Learning

When each step works together, more students can achieve a more successful and enriching future.





OPPORTUNITY

A chance to propel a new generation

Shifting from offering programs to making them work together

Advanced learning has historically been organized around distinct programs, each with its own structure, requirements, and ways of measuring success. AP was AP. CTE its own path. And honors courses offered another form of academic challenge.

Those distinctions still matter. But from the student's perspective, the boundaries are increasingly less important than the opportunities they create.

Students now encounter a wider mix of advanced-learning options and increasingly combine different forms of accelerated classwork. AP, Honors/Electives, DE, and other experiences can contribute differently to college preparation, career readiness, credit attainment, and exploration. And together, they create an environment where an advanced learner can pursue a path that's unique to their goals.

As districts built advanced learning programs, they appropriately focused on expanding access and program offerings to create more opportunities for students.

The emerging question is this: **How do districts ensure advanced learning opportunities complement each other to support the goals each student has for their future?**

Participation trends make that question increasingly important. Among U.S. public high school graduates, the share taking at least one AP exam rose from 34.3% to 37% in the class of 2025.[1] DE has also become a significant part of the secondary and postsecondary landscape. Approximately 2.5 million high school students are taking college courses, including 1.8 million at community colleges.[2]



75%

of public schools serving grades 9+ offer advanced academic courses.[3]

Access is the starting line, not the finish

Growth in participation is meaningful because it can extend advanced learning to students who might previously have been excluded. But making an opportunity available does not necessarily mean a student will benefit from the experience.

As participation broadens, advanced classrooms can include a wider range of preparation levels, prior experiences, learning needs, and ambitions. That makes what happens around the course so important.

Expanded access delivers the most value when it is paired with intentional pathways that make coursework meaningful, informed guidance that helps students understand their options, strong instruction that maintains rigor, and academic support that helps students overcome challenges. Together, these elements turn access into meaningful opportunity.

Many choices. One integrated experience for the student.



NAVIGATION

Choice is only empowering if students know what each choice means

Students and families are encountering more complicated advanced-learning decisions

A student considering advanced learning may now be choosing among AP, DE, Honors, CTE, electives, or some combination of each. That abundance is valuable. It can give students more ways to pursue challenges, explore interests, earn credit, and prepare for post-high school life.

But more choice also creates a navigation challenge.

Without clear guidance, the burden of understanding different programs, requirements, and outcomes can shift to students and families. Two courses may both be considered "advanced" while serving very different purposes. One option may be particularly useful for a student seeking college credit. Another may provide deeper preparation for selective college admission. Another may allow a student to explore a career field before committing to it.

The role of a strong advanced-learning system, therefore, is not simply to present students with choices. It's to help them understand what those choices mean.

That begins by connecting opportunities to interests, goals, readiness, and intended outcomes.

There is no universally best pathway for advanced-learning students, because they aren't all heading in the same direction. Increasingly, students may also combine those experiences rather than selecting one path exclusively. A coherent system doesn't require uniformity. Instead, it enables multiple pathways and helps students make informed choices.

> "One student might choose AP to raise their GPA to apply to a prestigious college or get a scholarship. Another might choose dual enrollment to decrease their time in college.
>
> -Megan Smith
> Head of Product for AP, Honors Electives & Dual Enrollment, Pearson

64%

of Texas students combining DE + AP/IB earned a bachelor's degree within six years, compared with 46% of AP/IB students without DE and 24% of DE-only students.[5]

38%

of CTE-focused Texas students who also participated in DE earned a bachelor's degree by age 24, compared with 7% of CTE-focused students without DE.[5]

Different opportunities serve different student goals:

- AP may support demonstrated rigor, GPA, or selective college goals
- DE can reduce college cost or time to degree
- Honors/Electives may provide exploration or deeper study in areas of interest

Rather than recommending one route over another, the starting point should be the student: **What do they want to accomplish, and which combination of experiences can help them get there?**

That requires districts to put the purpose and tradeoffs of advanced-learning opportunities out in the open. Students and families need enough information to understand how options differ, where they can lead, and what will be expected along the way.

Research with predominantly Black, Hispanic, and low-income DE students reinforces the importance of that guidance. Participants expressed interest in courses aligned with their academic and career goals, earlier information about available opportunities, and access to well-informed advisors.[4]

Navigation is about much more than course selection—it's about helping students connect present choices to future possibilities.



PREPARATION

Readiness should be developed, not just measured

A stronger system asks what it takes to help a student succeed in advanced learning

Readiness has often functioned as a gate in advanced learning.

Grades, test scores, prerequisite courses, and recommendations can all be meaningful indicators of readiness—however, when readiness is the only criterion for identifying advanced learners, districts may miss students who have the potential to succeed but have not yet demonstrated the skills advanced coursework requires.

Treating readiness as a fixed designation obscures an important reality: students can become ready.

Identifying potential and developing student skills can start early, in lower grades, and continue throughout a K-12 education.

Districts can identify potential earlier, build the foundational knowledge and academic skills that students need before they reach high school, and recognize that readiness can develop over time. Traditional markers of advanced achievement can serve as indicators of what students need to succeed rather than endpoints that determine future opportunities.

Early identification is especially important. If districts wait until high school to determine who is capable of advanced work, they may be evaluating the result of years of preparation rather than students' underlying potential. Creating opportunities for challenge earlier in a student's education gives schools more time to recognize emerging strengths and develop them.

And preparation doesn't end when a student enrolls. New levels of rigor create new demands, making ongoing instruction, feedback, and support part of readiness itself.

Keep the bar high and lift more students toward it

Expanding participation and maintaining academic rigor do not have to be competing objectives.

AP and DE should continue to maintain rigorous, externally meaningful standards even as students enter with different levels of preparation.

The goal should be to maintain a high bar while becoming more intentional about helping students reach it.

In this model, preparation is part of the design of the advanced-learning pathway itself.

Improve your readiness pipeline

Look for potential as well as demonstrated achievement.

Districts can identify students who may benefit from advanced opportunities even before they are already performing at an advanced level.

Don't let one early label become permanent.

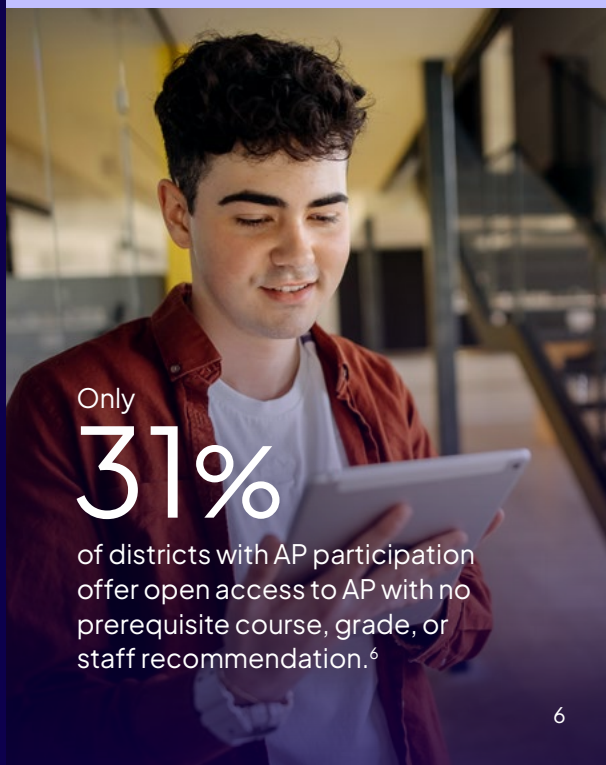
Because readiness changes, repeated identification is more useful than a one-time decision that follows a student for years.

Think K–12, not just AP or Dual Enrollment.

The advanced-learning pipeline can begin well before high school, and weak links between early identification and later opportunities can limit who arrives ready.

Use prerequisites carefully.

They can signal meaningful readiness requirements, but restrictive policies can also keep capable students out.





69%

of districts with K-8 advanced programs report that fewer than one-quarter of their teachers have an endorsement or credential in gifted or advanced education.[6]

EXPERIENCE & SUPPORT

Expanded access creates new capacity demands

More opportunity requires more support for both students and educators

Student success depends on more than enrollment policy. It requires the conditions needed for meaningful student support, including feedback and opportunities to practice and improve.

As advanced learning expands, districts need the capacity to serve a broader range of student needs—not just add seats in more courses. That includes qualified educators, strong instructional resources, time for feedback and grading, and collaboration that helps students practice, improve, and persist.

In this way, growth creates a new responsibility. If districts invite more students into rigorous coursework, they have to ensure that the instructional environment can meet the demand. Every decision to expand opportunity is also a decision about the infrastructure required to support it.

And capacity extends beyond teacher headcount. It includes the professional learning that prepares educators, the advising and planning that help students stay on track, the partnerships that make programs possible, and the technology and data that enable districts to understand where support is needed.

That capacity challenge is especially visible in DE, where geography, instructor availability, and access to community college partners can limit what districts are able to offer. Credentialing is another visible constraint, particularly as districts look to expand programs while maintaining the level of instruction students need to succeed.

Goals, design choices, and measurement must be intentional from the start

Ideally, program expansion starts with clear goals, success measures, and design choices—not simply more courses. Districts can consider what they want an advanced-learning program to accomplish, what students and educators will need to achieve those goals, and how success will be measured before expanding it.

But not every district is starting from scratch. Advanced-learning programs may have already grown independently, without a larger structure connecting them.

That means looking beyond individual programs to the system surrounding the student. Advising and academic planning matter alongside enrollment. Instructional resources and teacher support matter alongside access. Together, these elements help determine whether an expanded opportunity becomes a successful student experience.

Technology can help extend reach and improve visibility into student progress, but it is most valuable when it strengthens—not replaces—the instructional and support system around students.

A strong system is measured not only by the breadth of its offerings, but by the quality and purpose of that experience. As districts expand advanced learning—or bring greater structure to programs that have already grown—the goal is the same: ensure the support surrounding students is strong enough to deliver on the opportunity they have been given.





OUTCOMES

Student success is a shared responsibility

Advanced learning works best when no one part of the system is asked to carry it alone

A system built around the student means responsibility is shared across students, families, educators, district leaders, postsecondary partners, and, in some cases, states.

Each group controls a different part of the journey.

Students	Bring effort, motivation, self-awareness, and agency to their own learning.
Families	Help students understand choices and expectations, while keeping those choices aligned with goals and readiness.
Educators	Provide rigorous instruction, feedback and differentiation.
Districts	Give educators the time, training, resources, and coordination needed to do that work well.
Postsecondary partners & states	Shape course quality, capacity, funding, and access—especially in Dual Enrollment.

Build the system around the student for successful outcomes

Advanced learning can prepare students for future learning, rewarding work, and personal growth.

It can strengthen skills including critical thinking, reading and writing, source evaluation, and document analysis while giving students practice operating at a higher level of academic expectation.

It can also build more transferable capabilities: judgment, reasoning, and adaptability.

Stronger advanced-learning systems begin earlier, help students choose intentionally, build readiness, strengthen experience, and look beyond enrollment as the only measure of success.

In the end, it's about organizing advanced learning around the student's goals—then making every part of the journey strong enough to help achieve them.



Pearson Field Guide coming soon.

1. College Board. "AP Program Results: Class of 2025." March 2026.
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3. National Center for Education Statistics. "School Pulse Panel: College and Career Readiness." U.S. Department of Education, January 2025 data collection.
4. Garcia Tulloch, Aurely. "What Do Dual Enrollment Students Want? Elevating the Voices of Historically Underserved Students to Guide Reforms." Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, September 2024.
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