

What academic challenge is missing for American high school students? If Jay Mathews had his way, more of them would, as he puts it, “go one-on-one with Michael Jordan.” But Mathews, national education columnist for the Washington Post, isn’t talking about basketball—he’s focusing on Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate exams as the ultimate, and the too often missed, opportunity for our students to test their academic mettle against the best and most rigorous competition.

Even if they don’t receive a qualifying grade on the exams—about 40% of those taking AP tests fall into this category annually—these students have gained a great deal, Mathews and others assert. Recent research from the U.S. Department of Education, Clifford

## Jay Mathews: Continuing the Class Struggle for Access to Rigorous Courses

By Rob Gira, *AVID Director of Program Development*

Mathews estimates that, based on interviews at 75 schools, at least 20,000 students per year are denied admission to AP courses at elite U.S. public schools. The situation is worse, he says, at less ambitious schools, and Mathews estimates that the grand total of students who would have done well in AP but are denied entrance could top 100,000 annually.

Mathews’ 30-year career as a journalist has taken him throughout

grant students that surpassed those of most elite U.S. schools in wealthy communities. What began as an article became the book *Escalante: The Best Teacher in America*.

After profiling Jaime Escalante and learning about the challenges he faced, Mathews moved to the east coast and began to study some of America’s finest public high schools, figuring that these institutions would provide some answers as to how more students could succeed in rigorous curriculum. As Mathews discovered, and subsequently detailed in *Class Struggle*, schools, no matter their reputation, often had barriers impeding what Clifford Adelman has called our most basic objective: the opportunity to learn. In fact, some of America’s “finest high schools” had developed elaborate systems for screening capable students out of AP coursework to preserve their passing rates and the elite status of AP courses.

Mathews asserts that more students should not only be enrolling in AP and IB courses, but that more of those enrolled should be encouraged to take the exams. To that end, he developed his “Challenge Index,” a ranking system based on the percentage of a school’s graduates that actually take the AP exam. First published in *Class Struggle*, as well as in *Newsweek* and the *Post*, the ranking generated more than a few harsh letters and other communications to Mathews from schools that had previously considered themselves as elite academic institutions. Instead,

“I like the image of going one-on-one against the greatest basketball player of all time. Nobody feels bad about being stomped on by Michael Jordan. And the best AP teachers present their course, and the big final test, in the same way. ‘Here,’ they say, ‘is a college level course and a college level exam. You will find it tough, you will tear out your hair. It will beat you to the basket, it will leave you gasping for air. But at the end of the course, if you try your best, you will have learned far more than you ever would in a regular course.’”

Adelman’s “Answers in the Toolbox,” indicates that completion of rigorous coursework is the overriding factor in graduation from college and that students who take AP classes are even more likely to attain a degree.

However, as Mathews has noted with regularity in his Washington Post column, “Class Struggle,” many capable students are denied the opportunity to enter AP classes (see “Motivated Students Miss AP, IB Opportunities,” from the Oct. 30th 2001 ACCESS edition). In fact, in his book *Class Struggle: What’s Wrong (and Right) with America’s Best Public High Schools* (Times Books),

the world as a foreign and business correspondent, and he has a master’s degree in Asian studies from Harvard. How did he gain an interest in education in general and AP and IB exams in particular? In the early 1980s, while working as the Los Angeles bureau chief of the *Post*, Mathews picked up a story on some East Los Angeles students from Garfield High School who had been accused of cheating on their AP exams. Looking for the “story behind the story,” Mathews discovered that their teacher, Jaime Escalante, a maverick calculus instructor, was getting results from poor and immi-

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they were relegated near the bottom of the list because not enough of their graduates actually take the AP exams.

In the years since Mathews first began to examine AP and IB access, a number of states have begun to address the issue on a wide basis, in some cases because of legal challenges regarding limited opportunities for students to enroll in AP courses. In California, for example, the AP Challenge Grant Initiative, which features AVID as a key component, resulted from the fact that some students were denied admission to the top University of California campuses because they lacked enough AP courses. Their schools offered limited AP options, and, since the UC system gives additional grade points for AP courses, they were at a disadvantage. The ACLU also brought suit alleging that minority students were being denied access to AP courses. To settle the issue, the State of California allocated \$30 million in the next year's budget to foster the growth of AP courses and to support student success in those courses. Texas and Florida also have AP initiatives with annual budgets of \$11 million, focusing on increased AP offerings and more students testing.

Jay Mathews, who has been a featured keynote speaker at AVID Summer Institutes, is married to Linda Mathews, the cover story editor for USA Today. They have three children, the oldest of whom, Joe, is a writer for the Los Angeles Times who has covered issues of AP access in California.

Mathews was interviewed for the fall/winter ACCESS of 1998. Following his recent column "Motivated Students Miss AP, IB Opportunities," the time was right to ask him to assess the opportunities that American students are given today to take challenging courses.

AVID does the most vital job. It gets kids ready for AP and IB long before they reach their junior and seniors years in high school. Many good educators are throwing kids into AP and IB without much preparation.

**You seem more determined than ever that more students should have the chance to take AP and IB exams, to "go one-on-one" with Michael Jordan, as you put it. Aren't there some inherent dangers in this, including the risk that students will suffer humiliation if they do poorly on the AP and IB exams?**

It depends on the way you present the challenge. That is why I like the image of going one-on-one against the greatest basketball player of all time. Nobody feels bad about being stomped on by MJ. And the best AP teachers present their course, and the big final test, in the same way. 'Here,' they say, 'is a college level course and a college level exam. You will find it tough, you will tear out your hair. It will beat you to the basket, it will leave you gasping for air. But at the end of the course, if you try your best, you will have learned far more than you ever would in a regular course, and have a deep appreciation of what you have to do to succeed at college.' And sure enough, students who are taught that way finish the course with a fitting sense of accomplishment, even when they flunk the AP test.

**You must have some lively email exchanges from parents, teachers, and students when your "Class Struggle" column appears. What are you hearing from the field regarding your stance that more students should have access to AP and IB?**

I thought I would get a lot more criticism than I have. Most of the letters are from students, and former students, telling me about being denied opportunities that they realize would have helped them, or how they managed to get such an opportunity against the odds and how much it strengthened them academically. Most of the criticism comes from educators, particularly principals and teachers in private or public schools with very high standards. They do not criticize the need to challenge kids, but attack my insistence on summing each school up with a number and then, even worse, ranking the schools on my list. I do it because it is the best way to catch readers' attention, and that it is what we try to do in journalism. And to such high-performing schools I say, well, if you are as good as you say you are, what is the harm in measuring yourself in this way? It is a much more useful gauge of what you are doing than your average SAT scores.

**We have seen some significant education reports lately, including one that cited poor performance in science by U.S. students and another from the Education Trust that indicates poor students can indeed perform at high levels. What have you read or heard that cheers you up?**

The poor science performance is disheartening, although the top quarter of our students hold their own against the world, and AP and IB students perform particularly well. The Education Trust study shows that there are lots of Garfield High Schools out there. Low-income kids have plenty of

brainpower. You just have to find a way to get them the time and the instruction they need to use it.

**Your Challenge Index generated a lot of responses when it came out. If the index came out today, in what ways would it look different?**

The number of schools moving to the top of my list is still very small, but has increased tremendously, and I think the list, by focusing attention on the worth of AP and IB, has helped make that happen. In the Washington area, the number of schools with a Challenge Index rating of 1.000,—averaging one AP or IB test for every graduating senior—increased 39 percent in just one year. Nationally, I can only estimate because I have not recently done a full national list, but the reports I am receiving indicate that perhaps as many as five percent of U.S. high schools now have a 1.000 rating, compared to only one percent when I did the first list based on 1996 data. Five percent is only about 1,300 schools, but it is a lot more than we used to have, and schools further down on the list are getting better each year.

**How do you think the AVID program supports opportunities for more students to succeed in rigorous curriculum?**

AVID does the most vital job. It gets kids ready for AP and IB long before they reach their junior and senior years in high school. Many good educators are throwing kids into AP and IB without much preparation. They have no choice. The groundwork was not done for them in the earlier grades. Those kids can get something out of AP and IB, but it is much better for each student to be nurtured in the lower grades, shown how to study, how to think, how to write. That is the way Jaime Escalante built his program. He looked for 9th graders with some promise, and

brought them along so they were ready for AP Calculus their senior year. That is what AVID does, but with tens of thousands of students.

**What do you think of the AP initiatives that have developed in states like California, Texas, and Florida? In what ways are these efforts going to open access to AP and IB?**

Money opens doors. Those states are rewarding schools that tell every student—‘come try a hard course, take a chance, it will be a thrill ride for you.’ That is the way you sell this to kids, and with the extra money, they don’t have to worry about

testing fees, their teacher will be well trained, and they will have the backup they need to succeed.

**Why do you think it might be important for the AVID program to work in a joint venture with The College Board on these state initiatives?**

It is a partnership that makes sense. The College Board realizes it needs help in getting kids ready for AP and that is what AVID does so well. Both organizations want to help young Americans succeed, and that is an exciting mission that brings lots of good people together.

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## Swanson Receives McGraw Prize

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dedicated themselves to improving education in this country and whose accomplishments are making a difference today. Winners must have demonstrated results in helping more students build the capacity to meet higher standards.

“There is a need to recognize more of the heroes in American education. In selecting Prize winners, our judges single out individuals whose efforts merit special recognition. We hope that their leadership will attract others to follow their examples,” said McGraw, Jr.

Past recipients of the McGraw Prize include: Secretary of Education, Dr. Rod Paige; Dr. Nancy Grasmick, Maryland State Superintendent of Schools; US Secretary of Education, Richard Riley; Dr. Thomas Payzant, Superintendent, Boston Public Schools; and Barbara Bush, founder of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy.

This isn’t the first time AVID’s ability to improve student performance has been

honored. This past September Mary Catherine Swanson was named “America’s Best Teacher” by TIME Magazine. Swanson is also the only public school teacher to receive the Charles A. Dana Award for Pioneering Achievement in Education.

Such recognition for AVID and Swanson proves what common sense tells us—that you cannot allow average students to slide by without crushing consequences to individuals and to our country.

“When Mrs. Swanson and her organization (AVID) arrived on the scene, she was armed with two important insights: (1) that average kids were being overlooked, and (2) that most of them had the intellectual capacity to learn at much higher levels, if given the support and encouragement to do so,” stated Jay Mathews, national education columnist for the Washington Post. “Her organization, AVID, is the only national group that I know of that has found a way to help those kids learn how to reach their full potential.”

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