



CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

L.A. schools offer so few college-track courses that many students can't get them

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

Takoura Smith has been a National Honor Society scholar two years in a row, but the Washington Preparatory School student still came close to missing the path to higher education. "I didn't know how there are certain classes that I needed to graduate and go to college," the ebullient 11th grader says. It was just last year that organizers from the South Los Angeles nonprofit Community Coalition clued Takoura that she needed the Algebra II, Physics, and Geometry that form a baseline curriculum for most college admissions and were required to successfully apply to California's state college and university system. To get into the necessary classes, she says, "I immediately went to my counselor and I was on her, on her, on her."

But there was a problem: Too few college prep courses were offered at her school, and they're always full. She got in, Takoura says, after lots of pressure, and maintains "a stone B" in Algebra II, her diciest subject. She plans to apply to Texas Southern University so she can become an 8th grade teacher.

Things didn't go quite as well for Gabriela Perez - Gaby to her friends - at the Eastside's Garfield High. There were a few D grades in her academic mix - a couple of science classes, and freshman English, where, as she relates, there was a parade of substitutes along with a welter of worksheets and busy-work. "I was bummed about it," she says. "But my counselor was, like, 'a D is passing, you passed the class.'"

She got more seriously bummed a year later after she decided that she wanted to become a teacher and found out that Ds would knock her off the college track. She wanted to re-take those classes, but found them largely unavailable.

Now a senior slated to graduate in June, Gaby is resigned to a two-year hitch at East Los Angeles Community College before moving on to a four-year school. "I'm pumped about going. I want to get started and get through community [college] as soon as possible," she says. "My goal is to become a history teacher and a Chicano/Chicana studies teacher and come back to my community."

They seem just like two teenagers grappling with school slip-ups, but the experience of little guidance and unavailable curriculum fits a larger pattern, according to Luis Sanchez, executive director of the 10-year-old nonprofit Inner City Struggle. The organization, which helped Gaby decide to become a teacher, is one of the lead organizations in an alliance of groups known as Communities for Educational Equity (CEE) working to bring college-track classes to urban schools. Using data from Los Angeles Unified School

District, CEE calculates that only 66 percent of the classes offered at Washington Prep, Takoura's school, are college-track, while at Garfield High, where Gaby goes, only 57 percent of the classes offered would get a student considered at a UC or Cal State. There's no room for mistakes, even for teenagers: Mess up and you miss out.

But according to the coalition's figures, students outside the city may have an easier time correcting curriculum-related blunders - in Santa Monica, 80 percent of classes offered are college-track, in suburban Calabasas, 88 percent, in San Marino, 85 percent.

Sanchez, a former history teacher in the Pomona school system, calls it a two-tiered educational system that "didn't start yesterday," he says, harking back to the March, 1968 East Los Angeles school student walk-outs that involved as many as 15,000 students. "They were calling for an end to the two-tier educational system. They made some headway," Sanchez says. But inner city kids still don't have same access to school guidance and classes that others do.

In the California system, a high school student must pass 15 required courses to be college eligible for state schools - courses that educators and community members refer to by the letters A through G as short-hand to refer to the must-have curriculum. But in the Los Angeles Unified School District, as few as 60 percent of the classes the high schools offer are A-G. That means about 40 percent are more like cosmetology and Junior ROTC instead of chemistry and algebra, says CEE.

On average throughout the Los Angeles Unified School District, only 20 percent of high school students have completed A-G course work at graduation; in East L.A. and South L.A., it's 10 percent, according to CEE.

But that may be changing soon. School Board President Jose Huizar, in part responding to CEE's concerns, plans to introduce a resolution on April 26 that will ask the board and Superintendent Roy Romer to come up with a plan to align all LAUSD high school curriculum with A-G. Monica Garcia, Huizar's chief of staff, explains that they hope to phase in the curriculum so that the freshman class of 2012 begins the school year with the A-G classes firmly in place in all schools.

"We know we'll need to hire more teachers for math and language," she says.

The need for more teachers is one reason some education groups have been critical of instituting A-G as a state baseline standard - they fear that districts won't be able to meet the demand and the students will be set up for failure. It's too soon in the process to put a price tag on it at LAUSD, but everyone involved knows the A-G proposal is a potentially costly one.

Proponents are also sensitive to the notion that insisting on college prep may raise eyebrows in view of what seems to be a more far-reaching problem - the fact that 61 percent of Latino students drop out of school altogether, as do 53 percent of black students. But they cite studies that link higher expectations and more rigorous classes to higher graduation rates.

"The higher the level of challenge, the higher the degree of success," says Alberto Retana, director of organizing for the Community Coalition, another lead CEE organization. He and others refer to a study by the Education Trust-West, a nonprofit originally established by the American Association for Higher Education but now independent, which shows graduation rates in the San Jose Unified School District rising from 73 percent to 79 percent in four years after A-G curriculum was instituted for all students. The study

says test scores and graduation rates have been raised in other places, Texas, for one, where an A-G baseline curriculum has been initiated.

Advocates say that it's not just about college. Skilled manual jobs in the 21st century also require a grasp of math and science. "If you're going to become a plumber, you need to go through an apprenticeship program," Retana points out. The Building Trades Council is part of the coalition pushing A-G, he says, "because L.A. kids can't pass the math portion of the apprenticeship tests. A-G better prepares students for the workforce even if they don't go to college."

John Perez, president of United Teachers Los Angeles, says that the union is "all for making it possible for any student to pass the A-G requirement," but would like to see it balanced with hands-on vocational training in LAUSD schools. "As schools started getting starved for funding, people realized the cheapest education you can give a student is to put him in a classroom and give him a book and a piece of paper," he says, adding that facilities to teach wood shop, metal shop, and culinary arts are expensive but necessary.

Huizar's office remains focused on A-G. "The issue has been not keeping pace with the higher demands of the workplace," spokeswoman Garcia says. The culture of L.A. high schools have to change, she says, away from a system where one group has more options than the other.

She acknowledges the enormous challenge. "We can't be defined by the realities - we have to be defined by the vision."

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