High schools are pushing AP courses and some students are pushing back

By Orlando Sentinel, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.29.15
Word Count 978

Kyana Julian, an AP honors student, is pictured in her home in Orlando, Florida, Sept. 24, 2015. Schools in Orange and Seminole counties in Florida are pushing to put more students in advanced honors courses.

Photo: Tom Benitez/Orlando Sentinel/TNS

ORLANDO, Fla. — Kyana Julian was only a freshman at her Florida high school when she enrolled in her first Advanced Placement (AP) course. The class was human geography, and she says she took it because her guidance counselor told her that she should take tough courses to get into a good college.

Florida schools are not alone in encouraging top students like Kyana to take demanding classes. Some students and parents say there is too much pressure to load up on difficult courses. Kyana says she feels frustrated because administrators and guidance counselors seem to give the same advice to every student, whether their grades or interests merit it or not, and that “they don’t look at a student as an individual.”
School leaders say they have good reason to push students; they want all teens to know about the advantages of taking tough classes. They especially want to get the message out to those from lower-income families, and others who do not have the same opportunities as their more privileged peers.

**Push To Be Better Prepared**

Gordon Chavis, the associate vice president for enrollment at the University of Central Florida, says that if students do well in AP courses, it shows that they are ready for college. He also says that if guidance counselors are "pushing them to take more difficult courses, it's because they want the students to be better prepared."

A GPA is the average number of grade points earned for each high school class. Each letter grade equals a number on the grade-point scale. GPA is calculated by dividing total grade points by total course credits.

AP classes are worth more. Chavis says public universities in Florida adjust GPAs so hard classes earn more points. The process is called weighting.

**Schools Benefit From AP Enrollment**

Mary Bridges is the guidance director at a Florida public school. She points out that counselors want to make sure students have as many options as possible. “What we’re trying to look at is every student having a post-secondary plan and then making sure they’re in the right courses to get to the next step,” Bridges says.

Florida also gives incentives to high schools that run AP and other accelerated courses. It exempts them from class size requirements, and gives better ratings to schools that enroll more students in those classes.

AP classes are not required, but Bridges says that students might find themselves automatically enrolled. Guidance counselors often look at scores on state tests and the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT), to determine who might be a good fit. The PSAT is a primer to the SAT college placement test.

“What we don’t want to do is miss students who could do well,” Bridges says. “If you’re not the teacher pet type or you’re not very vocal, you might not get the experience.”

**Students Say Some AP Courses Are Too Easy**

Kyana is now a high school junior with a weighted GPA of nearly 5.0, and that makes her a strong candidate for more AP courses. However, Kyana feels the AP classes that she has already taken were not challenging enough. She
earned A's in the classes, but did not do well enough on the AP exams to earn college credit. Kyana says that for her, “The sole purpose of taking the AP class was completely lost.”

Are the classes too easy or too tough? Bill Sublette, the board chairman of another Florida public school, says parents have told him that their children are being pushed too hard. “I personally don’t want any child in an AP course who doesn’t want to be there,” he says.

Either way, schools continue to apply pressure and seek out potential AP candidates. Walt Griffin is the superintendent of yet another Florida school district, and this summer, he met with every one of his principals to review data and pinpoint students who could use an extra push. “I want to make sure that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, their ethnicity, have opportunities for advanced coursework,” Griffin says.

**Guidance Counselors Have A Role**

Parent Angie Gallo says she recognizes that some students will not enroll in tough classes unless somebody pushes them, yet once students are enrolled, it is difficult to drop the class. Gallo says she had to speak to several people at her daughter's high school to get her removed from an AP class. “If the child is in an AP class, and they can’t handle it or they’re stressed out, there should be a fail-safe,” she says. “These classes are important, a C is still a C, even if it's an AP class.”

Mary Bridges agreed that guidance counselors should speak with parents who are concerned about their children's schedule. She also cautioned that educators want to make sure students are not held back by light course loads. “I think it’s educational malpractice to not give a student an opportunity, if they’re capable of doing well in a rigorous class, to put them in an easy class or not push them at all,” she explains.

**Student Individuality Also Plays A Role**

The number of Florida students taking AP exams is still going up. The College Board, which runs the AP program, says more than 200,000 Florida students took at least one AP test this year, up 10 percent since 2011.

John Williamson is vice president of AP curriculum and instruction for the College Board. He says parents, students and counselors should determine what is best for each individual. Williamson also says that even students who do not score well enough on the AP exam to earn college credit, are still more likely to graduate from college on time. “Ultimately, what I’ve seen is schools are trying to provide more and more opportunities for students, and they’re trying to allow students to have more choices later on,” he says.