

THE EDUCATION ISSUE

# AP classes: A problem for Massachusetts high schoolers?

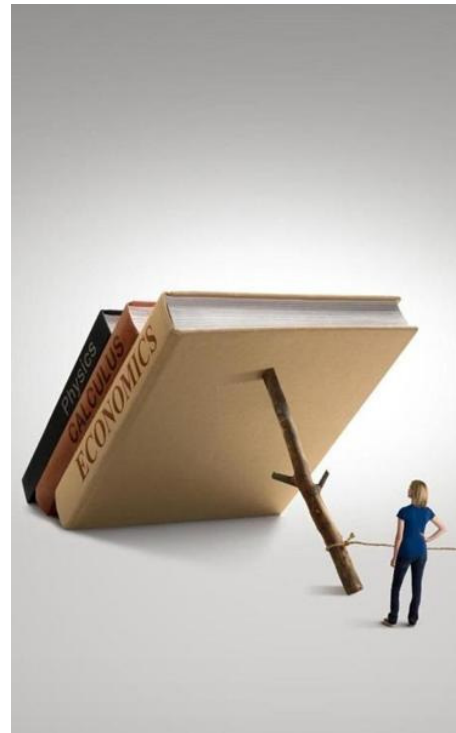
In an era when elite high school students are filling their days with Advanced Placement courses, counselors and admissions officers say there can be too much of a good thing.

By **Linda K. Wertheimer** | OCTOBER 07, 2012

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**CLAIRE HUANG**, a 17-year-old at Lexington High School, has crafted the kind of academic schedule that would put most college freshmen to shame. This year, the senior has almost entirely filled her day with five yearlong Advanced Placement classes — physics, calculus, statistics, French, and economics — as well as two semester-long English electives. Just about the only signs that she’s still in high school are band and gym.

This year represents Huang’s toughest AP lineup yet, but she’s been building toward it for years. As a sophomore, she took AP biology and scored a 5 — the highest grade possible — on the standardized exam at the end of the year. As a junior, she took AP courses in chemistry and US history, then studied the AP Chinese and psychology curriculums on her own. She



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took exams for all four of them that spring and scored 5s across the board. (For the record, she also recently earned a perfect 800 on a math SAT subject test, an exam she took on top of the traditional SAT.)

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- **Where more AP classes make sense**

So if all goes according to plan, Huang will graduate in June with perfect scores on 10 AP exams. And with a little extra luck, that record will let her skip a semester or two of introductory classes in college, giving her the chance to take more in-depth classes sooner. But Huang is focused on more immediate goals. She wanted to challenge herself with the toughest high school classes available, she says, but she also hoped to find a way to stand out among her peers on her college applications. She has her sights set on a handful of elite private colleges and universities.

It's no secret that going to a top-ranked high school like Lexington can give students a head start in the race to a top college, but the odds of winning are slimmer than ever. For one, admission rates to the country's premier liberal arts colleges have never been lower. In 2002, the Ivies accepted between 10 and 28 percent of applicants; by 2010, some of the schools' acceptance rates had dipped to as low as 7.2 percent. Meanwhile, at least 10 percent of Lexington's 500



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**The rise in AP course loads is “a runaway train,” says a former teacher.**

graduating seniors easily have what it takes to succeed in the Ivy League, says Gary Simon, the high school's recently retired math department head.

Huang knows all of this, which is why she hopes her AP classes will give her an edge. “Since there are so many students and no class ranking [in the school], there has to be a way that students can kind of show themselves off,” she says during an interview at Lexington's Russian School of Mathematics, a private tutoring operation where she has taken extra classes. (When calculating GPA, some schools give slightly higher weight to AP and honors classes, but Lexington does not.)

Not that long ago, Huang's academic accomplishment would have been a surefire way to show off to colleges. But in today's most competitive public and private high schools, schedules like hers are looking more and more common. State data show that at public schools like Newton North, Newton South, and Wellesley, about half of the juniors and seniors take at least one AP class. About 60 percent of Lexington High upperclassmen take at least one AP course. At Boston Latin School, 93 percent do.

With more students overall in AP classes, applicants struggle to stand out. Making the competition even stiffer, the most driven students, the ones like Claire Huang, are taking eight or more of them. And the more students who take eight classes, the less impressive eight classes begins to seem.

"The numbers are rising, but at some point, there's got to be an upper limit," says Brad MacGowan, a college counselor at Newton North. "If it's college-level work, how can we expect all high school students to do it? If all of a sudden all high school students can do it, then it's not really college-level work."

And yet as the AP frenzy increases, few students are willing to become the first to cool it. So the enrollment numbers and full course loads just keep growing. "It's a runaway train," says Simon. But since the application process is so intense, says Huang's mother, Charlene Sui, with a hint of resignation, "there's no way to stop it."

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**IN 1955**, a group of colleges and elite high schools founded the Advanced Placement program. The high schools wanted AP course work to give their gifted juniors and seniors not only a bigger challenge but also the opportunity to forgo introductory college courses — though only, the colleges insisted, if students took a standardized test at the end of the courses proving what they had learned.

The first school year that AP courses were offered, 1955-1956, just 1,229 students around the country participated. But the numbers have been on the rise ever since: By the 2010-2011 school year, roughly 2 million students — nearly a third of all high-schoolers nationwide — were taking AP courses, sometimes several at a time.

The College Board, the nonprofit that administers both the AP program and the SAT test, is quick to point out that, on a percentage basis, few students take more than a handful of AP tests. Only 1.2 percent of students over the past four years took eight or more exams (nearly half of students in that period took just one). But the students that make up that 1.2 percent are often the ones competing for coveted slots in the nation's top colleges.

With so many ultra-high-achieving students to compare these days, college admissions officers suggest an astronomical number of AP classes is no longer a distinguishing characteristic on applications. "Taking eight AP classes your senior year instead of taking six AP classes is not going to make a difference to an admissions officer," says Peter Jennings, the director of college counseling at Concord Academy and a former Tufts admissions officer. "They're much more interested in the life of the mind and the quality of the work that students are doing. I think that message gets distorted, and that creates the AP mania."

Margit A. Dahl, Yale University's director of undergraduate admissions, agrees. "We don't go parsing, 'This student has had 7½ APs, this student has had six APs, and we should be looking at that student with the 7½,'" she says. "That student could be flat, dull, not a nice person, and we're not going to look at them as a candidate. I think some of the families think we're splitting hairs to that degree."



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**Lexington senior Claire Huang, with her AP study materials.**

At the same time, a full slate of AP courses does not even necessarily save incoming college freshmen time or money. Some colleges now cap the number of AP credits they will accept for placing out of classes; some no longer accept any. Haley Moulton, a 19-year-old from Marblehead, vividly recalls the stress of testing at the all-girls private Winsor School in Boston. She took four AP classes and six AP tests during her high school career; in the spring of her junior year alone, she took three AP exams, the ACT, the regular SAT, and three SAT subject tests. "I felt like I was constantly thinking about testing," Moulton says. "It was just not the happiest time." After she was accepted to Dartmouth College, the school said a 4 she got on her Spanish AP let her test out of the foreign language requirement, but the pair of 5s on English tests and the 4 on AP chemistry did not earn her any credit.

Part of the reason for not accepting credit is an attempt to get students to take fewer APs and lighten their high school stress loads. Another part, though, is a concern among college faculty that not all AP classes prepare students well enough to skip classes. This worry reached crisis levels not long ago when professors in several studies sharply criticized some AP courses' lack of depth (versus breadth) in the 2010 book *AP: A Critical Examination of the Advanced Placement Program*, co-edited by Philip M. Sadler, a Harvard astronomy professor.

In response to such criticism, the College Board recently introduced a new version of AP biology, which emphasizes more scientific inquiry. And a redesign of AP physics and US history is slated to be unveiled this month, though students won't begin taking those courses until next year. Both efforts address criticisms from colleges as well as high schools about course-work depth, says Trevor Packer, the board's senior vice president in charge of the AP program.

Nevertheless, private high school Concord Academy eliminated all its AP courses several years ago. "AP biology was the classic mile-wide, inch-deep curriculum, where students had to memorize on the run," says John Drew, who used to teach the course and is now Concord's academic dean.

“I literally had to tell students to put their hands down and not ask questions because we had to stay on schedule.”

Concord replaced the AP courses with advanced classes of its teachers’ own designs. Each unit in the biology curriculum, for example, is project-based — rather than test-focused — including one on the flu and another on climate change. In addition to the hands-on work, students in each course must conduct yearlong research on a topic they choose. Concord labels its courses Advanced Curriculum and tags them with an asterisk on transcripts so college admissions officers can spot them easily.



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**John Drew, academic dean at Concord Academy, which no longer offers AP courses.**

Although relatively few schools have made changes as dramatic as Concord’s, plenty are working on a hybrid approach. Milton Academy, which bills itself a believer in AP moderation, and Noble and Greenough School in Dedham both offer a mix of AP and non-AP accelerated classes.

Nobles, as the school is known, now offers 14 AP courses. “We think we’ve struck a pretty good balance at Nobles. We don’t actually have that many AP classes,” says Michael Denning, director of college counseling. “While it’s possible for kids to take five or six exams, even the top students can’t really take more than four or five AP classes during their entire career.”

At Lexington High, 15-year-old Annie Ma is part of a younger cohort of students that is trying not to overdo it with AP courses. The sophomore could have taken two this year, but signed up for just AP biology, with the blessing of her mother, Ping Shen.

Shen, an ultrasound technician who worked in China as an obstetrician and gynecologist, says many families have a misconception about what students must do to get into a college. “The colleges, when they accept you, there is no solid line, no clear line,” she says. “My husband and I, we don’t push her. I want her to view learning as a happy thing to do, not as a burden.”

At the most, Ma predicts, she will take three AP classes a year as a junior and senior. “I know a lot of kids at LHS push themselves so hard that they start to overwhelm themselves, then they crash and go into depression,” she says. “You shouldn’t take so many just so you can compete with other people. You should do whatever is right for you personally.”

But then again, Ma is only a sophomore. There’s still plenty of time for her to get swept up in her school’s competitive culture.

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**FOR THE LAST THREE YEARS**, Lexington High has had a policy that bans teachers from assigning homework for the first week of classes. The school wants to stress the theme “that we’re human beings” before the academic year begins in earnest, explains new principal Laura Lasa, who has worked at the school as a teacher and administrator for three decades. For a similar reason, she stood up in front of students at an assembly last year and said, “Perfection is not a standard that you should be striving for. It’s unreasonable to strive for that, and we’re not asking for perfection from you.”

It’s an admirable message, but even Lasa isn’t sure how well it’s getting through to the school’s most driven students. She has heard about Facebook pages, for instance, where AP students try to top one another with announcements about how many hours they’ve studied. And when she’s held meetings with students to discuss ways to reduce stress, some of the feedback has alarmed her: “A couple of meetings, students just spoke up: ‘No, no, no, don’t try to structure things for us to have fun. That’s not what we’re here for. We’re here to get an education and get into a high-performing college,’ ” Lasa says. “It was so disheartening. It was chilling.”

One challenge is that national and regional magazines often factor things like AP participation into their top-school rankings,

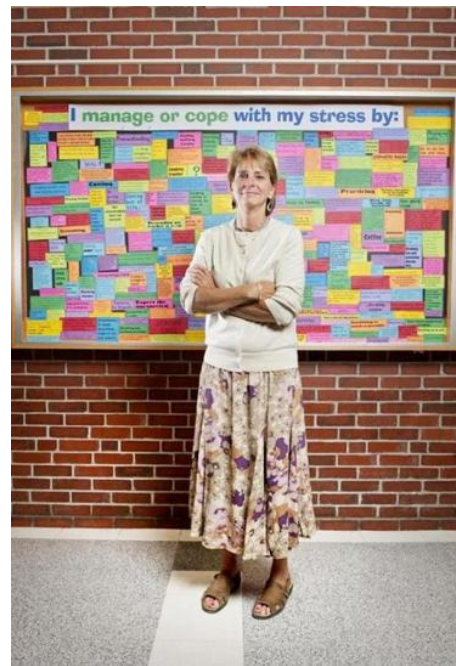
muddying the message of moderation from other places, explains David Hawkins, the director of public policy and research at the National Association for College Admission Counseling. (Lexington ranked second, after Weston, in Boston Magazine's recent list of the state's top public high schools.) "It's a tough sell to students to say, 'Hey, ease up on the accelerator a little bit,'" Hawkins says.

And even when students try to largely opt out of the race, they tend to make an effort to cover their bases by taking AP exams.

Despite its faith in its Advanced Curriculum courses, Concord Academy still offers the exams, as well as some test review sessions, because families want assurances that there will be a way of comparing their kids with other applicants, explains John Drew. The school was not "running from the AP curricula," he says. "We were simply saying that we trust our faculty to make the best choices about the courses they could offer to our students. It's not like we were stopping having students take the exams."

Students probably wouldn't accept that. Kate Nussenbaum, a 2011 Concord Academy graduate, says her alma mater's unique classes helped her choose it over Newton North. Newton had lots of AP courses, but Concord offered "Comic Spirit, which was about comedy in writing," Nussenbaum says. "I took Literature of War. I took a Balkan history class." Nussenbaum, though, also took five AP exams before graduation, and she got into Brown University, where she's now a sophomore.

About six years ago, Boston Latin School began limiting the number of AP classes students could take to three a year. "Kids were overdoing it," says Jim Montague, director of guidance. "We're protecting kids from themselves." Yet Latin this year added world history, its 24th AP course. The maximum a school can offer is 34.



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**At Lexington high, principal Laura Lasa has been asking students to take it easier on themselves.**

At Newton North, the administration also now recommends that students take no more than three AP or honors classes a year, but it's been hard to make the recommendation stick, says MacGowan.

Lexington's guidance counselors offer similar advice to their students, but not all of them are listening. "They really want to tone it down in Lexington. They want to say, 'Take less and chill,'" Huang says of initiatives like the no-homework rule. "But I feel like students just go out there and challenge themselves."

She hopes her AP classes, plus everything else she has done — including playing percussion in the band and belonging to a few clubs — will help her get into her top college pick, but for now she's focused on doing well in all her courses.

Her mother, a chemist, worries about the stress her daughter and her classmates are under, but sees it as an unfortunately necessary part of the routine today. "I hope Claire could enjoy the school life more, but I'm not sure," Sui says. "So many APs, the college application process."

Still, she's encouraging her son, a Lexington freshman, to follow in his sister's footsteps, even though his schedule is looking to be even more densely packed. After all, he plays soccer.

"Claire is OK. She doesn't do sports," Sui says. "That helps her a little bit."

## **HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?**

### *Tips from college admissions experts*

Six AP classes overall is ample to prepare a student well for college, says the College Board's Trevor Packer. Packer, who bases that number on one researcher's conclusion, says, "I don't like it when I hear that a student is choosing a 10th AP course instead of doing an extracurricular activity."

Balance matters, says Margit A. Dahl, director of undergraduate admissions at Yale — which accepted just 2,043 of 28,997 applicants for its newest freshman class. On top of that, she wants to see that applicants have chosen the most challenging route available in their schools.

Lee Coffin, Tufts' dean of undergraduate admissions, suggests using the selection of AP classes to create what he calls an "intellectual fingerprint." Students who are passionate about history, for instance, can take AP history to explore the subject and have success in the course documented on their record.

"It's things in moderation," says Kevin Kelly, director of admissions at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. "My rule of thumb here is to get good grades in good courses."

### **THE OVERACHIEVERS**

15 Massachusetts Public Schools With The Highest Percentage of Their Upperclassmen Enrolled in AP Courses (2011-2012):

BOSTON LATIN SCHOOL (92.7%)

MATCH PUBLIC CHARTER (86.9%)

ACADEMY OF THE PACIFIC RIM CHARTER (81%)

BOSTON COLLEGIATE CHARTER (69.4%)

JOHN D. O'BRYANT SCHOOL OF MATHEMATICS & SCIENCE (67.4%)

WESTON HIGH (66%)

HOPKINTON HIGH (64.6%)

NORTHAMPTON HIGH (62.3%)

EDWARD M. KENNEDY ACADEMY (61.6%)

MILTON HIGH (61.3%)

BELMONT HIGH (60.8%)

LEXINGTON HIGH (59.4%)

MASHPEE HIGH (59%)

SALEM ACADEMY CHARTER (58.8%)

BOSTON LATIN ACADEMY (58.4%)

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