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A+ College Ready program has more than doubled pass rate for Alabama students in advanced placement classes

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By **Kim Chandler -- The Birmingham News**

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MONTGOMERY -- In their first days in Susan Dial's AP biology class at Gardendale High School, students learned a date in addition to scientific processes such as mitosis and meiosis -- May 14, 2012.

That's the date of the upcoming Advanced Placement biology exam, in which the students can qualify for college credit.

"I tell them, 'Guys, May 14 is what we are striving for,'" Dial said.

The first year Dial taught biology, she had 25 students and one made a passing score on the AP exam. After participating in a program to boost AP participation and scores, she had 52 AP students and 12 passing scores -- including one score of five, the highest possible a student can make on the test.

The A+ College Ready program has resulted in a 108 percent jump in passing scores on the AP tests in math, science and English, among schools that use the program statewide. The program provides training and support for teachers, special Saturday study sessions for students, incentives to teachers and a \$100 bonus to students if they pass the AP exam at the end of the year.

"Amazing. We are astounded by the results," A+ College Ready President Mary Boehm said.

"We have proven that, when kids are willing to step up to the rigor with teachers that are willing to support them, they can absolutely succeed at AP," Boehm said.

AP classes are college-caliber classes that students take in high school. An exam taken at the end of the year gives students the opportunity to earn college credit. Students can earn a score of 1 to 5 on the exam and typically can earn college credit, depending upon the university they attend, if they score a 3 or above.

There are 43 high schools in 17 school districts participating in the program, which Dial said has been immensely helpful when trying to teach college-level material to high school students.

"She's very good at breaking things down on different levels so we understand what is going on and it's in terms that we can understand it," said Wayne House, a former student of Dial's who earned a 5 on the AP biology test. House, who thinks he might major in biomedical engineering or biochemistry, will be the first in his family to go to college.

At Buckhorn High School in New Market, teacher Matt Massey has 49 students in his AP calculus class and another 14 that study through distance learning. Massey said he has a personal goal that most of his students can pass the AP calculus exam at the end of the year.

"It's a really rigorous class. We hit the ground running with some of the hardest content in the

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class," Massey said.

As part of the program, Buckhorn has opened up calculus to more students, allowing them to transfer directly in if they made an A in algebra II.

"We had to kind of think out of the box a little bit," Massey said.

Massey has recruited kids who were taking elective classes to take calculus, instead -- selling them and their parents on what it could do for them academically and assuring them he will do everything in his power to not let them fail.

"We kind of advertise it as, you are already a success just by enrolling in the class," Massey said.

One facet of the program is that students are enrolled automatically in the AP exam at the end of the year. The program pays the \$87 exam fee for the students.

"Everybody takes it no matter what. It makes the kids be on the hook for something when they know they have to take that test," Massey said.

The program also provides financial incentives to students and teachers for passing the AP test. Students and teachers each get a \$100 bonus for each passing score, and teachers get other incentives for exceeding goals.

Buckhorn senior Taylor Jones, 17, said that, when she was a freshman, few students at Buckhorn took calculus. Now, she said, it's almost expected if you are on the college path.

"A+ College Ready is a proven investment that is preparing our students for college and the jobs of tomorrow," Gov. Robert Bentley said in a prepared statement about the test scores.

The program is funded with \$1.3 million a year from the Alabama Legislature, a \$13.2 million grant from the National Math and Science Initiative, a \$1.3 million federal grant awarded to Alabama from the U.S. Department of Education and additional matching funds from corporate donors.

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Where have you been for the past couple decades? At least this test will help you in college.

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sanlot

August 24, 2011 at 7:27AM

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It's never been about graduates - it's about learning. More than the standard education in Birmingham - which routinely sends most of their graduates to minimum wage careers in the service and/or food industry.

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bhamfornow

August 24, 2011 at 7:32AM

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"The program also provides financial incentives to students and teachers for passing the AP test."

So did the CRCT in Atlanta. Look what happened there.

"108 percent jump in passing scores" If this huge jump doesn't raise a flag, nothing will. Scores do not increase that much in one year by special teaching alone.

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sixpetdad

August 24, 2011 at 8:25AM

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Actually when they previously have had no help, yes the passing rate can jump that much. They are still in the steep part of the curve. Now, if it gets to the point where statistically things should be leveling out and they aren't, then it would bear a closer look. But in the meantime, here's a radical thought: maybe these kids are actually learning something. Why disrespect them by assuming they're too dumb to pass an AP exam without cheating?

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CaresaboutTCS

August 24, 2011 at 7:32AM

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@ truthbringin

If you pass the AP exam, you get college credit for the course. So, if teaching how to "pass the test" is offensive, just think of it as teaching the high school students how to pass an entire college course in calculus, biology, history, etc. When I started college years ago, the CLEP exams were offered more widely than today. I was very grateful for the background my high school teachers gave me because I CLEP'd 45 semester hours and started college as a mid-year sophomore.

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mightyhornets

August 24, 2011 at 8:12AM

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I would like to know the pass rate per district/school. Anyone know where that can be found ?

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LA

August 24, 2011 at 9:46AM

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ASHEVILLE, North Carolina — The South has a shortage of workers to fill middle-skills jobs such as medical technicians and computer support workers, even as many four-year graduates struggle to repay student loans, according to a study released Sunday.

Info above is from an article in Bham News two days ago. Every principal I know agrees that we're trying to send too many kids to college while closing more and more career tech opportunities. But we pat ourselves on the back for getting kids ready to go into lifetime debt so they can then look for jobs that aren't there.

But why worry when all of this gives some "do gooders" a warm and fuzzy feeling.

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