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OUR VIEW: Alabama's A+ College Ready program is great, let's get it in every high school

Published: Sunday, August 28, 2011, 5:45 AM

By Birmingham News editorial board

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Give A+ College Ready an A+. And a standing ovation.

A+ College Ready's Advanced Placement Training and Incentive program has resulted in a 108 percent average jump in passing scores on AP tests in math, science and English for Alabama high schools in their first year of the program. You read that right: 108 percent. That's 13 times the national average increase. And among minority students, qualifying scores'

average increase was even higher -- 119 percent -- suggesting that Alabama high schools are moving toward closing the troubling achievement gap between white and black students.

The program offers training and support to teachers, special study sessions for students and financial incentives for both. Students and teachers get a \$100 bonus for each passing score, and teachers receive other incentives for exceeding goals.

Obviously, it works.

"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."

AP classes are college-level classes students can take in high school. At the end of the year, they take an exam that gives them a chance to earn college credit. Students can score from 1 to 5. Depending on the university they attend, they typically earn college credit for scoring a 3 or higher.

Students who take AP classes are more likely to experience academic success and graduate on time, research shows. And, passing AP exams for those classes will save students and parents money. Over the three years of the program, students have earned 5,119 qualifying scores on

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math, science and English AP exams, Boehm said. As she pointed out, if a passing score on an AP exam is worth three credit hours, based on the average cost of those hours at state universities, Alabama families save more than \$9 million.

The results announced this past week are for 43 high school in 17 school districts across Alabama. Twenty-one more schools in 10 more districts are beginning the A+ College Ready program this fall. That brings to 64 the number of high schools taking part in A+ College Ready.

That's 20 percent of the 314 public high schools in Alabama. Quite obviously, that is not enough.

This extraordinary program needs to be in every public high school in the state. The good news is that, finally, through the ACCESS distance learning program, every high school offers at least 14 AP courses to students. That at least gives students a chance to take rigorous, college-level courses. A+ College Ready would prepare them to pass the AP exams for those courses.

But growing A+ College Ready, especially during tough economic times, has been a challenge, and will continue to be. Gov. Robert Bentley in trumpeting the results said he wants to find more money for the program. We hope he does.

As it is, most of the funding for A+ College Ready comes from sources other than the state: The National Math and Science Initiative awarded a \$13.2 million grant over five years to get the program off the ground and keep it running. A+ College Ready also relies on private donors, including the Alabama Power Co. Foundation, Regions Bank, Boeing Co. and others. All told, private money totals \$1.2 million, Boehm said, and the group is still fundraising. State and federal governments have given \$6 million over the first three years of the program, she said.

Truth is, the state's contribution to date is piddling compared to the overall education budget, which this coming year will be \$5.6 billion for K-12 schools, colleges and universities. Bentley and the Legislature must find more money for such a stellar program. (How about starting with the \$4.1 million in community service grants -- pork -- that lawmakers will spend in their own districts next year?)

A+ College Ready is showing A+ results for the state. It deserves A+ funding from the state.

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