

The Great *DIVIDE* Performance gap is biggest challenge for school

by **TYLER SNELL**
print editor-in-chief

The alarm clock rings. He lazily climbs out of the bed, puts on some clothes and trudges to school. The bell rings, and it's test day. But he didn't study. He doesn't care. He just wants to take the test and go back to bed.

The alarm clock rings. She pulls herself out of the bed, puts on some clothes and rehearses strategies for the test as she makes her way to school. The bell rings, and it's test day. She did study. She does care. She is ready to make an A.

One student failed. The other passed with flying colors. One student repeats this for other classes. The other is active, alert and ready to pass each exam. This difference between students passing their exams is commonly referred to as the performance or achievement gap.

The only area that Texas High School did not receive a distinction was in closing the achievement gap in a report produced by the Texas Education Agency each year. The school finished 23 out of 41 schools. In order to receive distinction, schools must place in the top 10 in the state.

"It's the toughest one that we have had to face, and there are different factors involved in why we haven't done it," principal Brad Bailey said. "It's been a little bit slower, but it could be due to gaps in learning from earlier years. [Students] get so ahead as [they] advance in grades that it overwhelms [them.]"

A peer mentoring program has been instituted by the school in order to help students who are struggling to understand class material. This was previously attempted with outside teachers and

experts in the field, but did not receive the results administration was looking for.

Instead, administration turned to staff located on the campus and had students come in for tutorials during the teacher's conference period. The REACH program is also a small group of students that work together to understand concepts they originally did not comprehend to help close the achievement gap.

"It's not necessarily the same thing [students] get in the classroom," Bailey said. "It's more hands-on, very targeted instruction where it is one on one."

Advanced Placement/Dual Credit Classes

Peering inside the classroom, an outsider sees a class with a high level of white students and no or low amount of minorities. Recently, the AP Ambassadors program was started to reverse this trend and is directed by Coordinator for Academic Advancement Charlotte Leon.

"We are trying to help promote and encourage [the] subpopulations to be involved in AP and DC classes to help them reflect closer to our demographics," Leon said. "They can prove it to their parents or get that step ahead. That is what we are trying to do."

AP Ambassadors include high achieving minority students that Leon hopes will connect to other students better than she can. Leon is bringing Ambassadors into classes that are making their

"[Students] perked up when [an ambassador]

went in the class. They listened. They asked her questions," Leon said. "You could kind of see in their faces 'I can do that too.' It just registered."

Some students however choose not to be in advanced classes because of a dislike of the teaching styles.

"The teachers seemed to try to make it hard that way once you get to college it will seem easier, but it wasn't really [them] teaching," junior Keyondra Gamble said. "It was just [them] giving a bunch of work and not really giving a lesson, so it made it difficult for me, and I had to get out of the class."

In order to solve the teacher problem, Bailey says they are attending instructional training sessions and offering training to the teachers over how to solve the gap in performance.

"We've been attending training over instructional strategies that will target those areas of improvement that we need to look at," Bailey said. "We are working on better instructional strategies to help target the needs of our students."

Economic/Social

In a school that is classified as a low-income school, 55.9 percent of the students were classified as economically disadvantaged for the 2013-2014 school year. The free and reduced lunch program is also used as a way to lower the cost of AP tests, bringing the cost from \$90 to \$7 along with two free tests. However, some students won't encounter the economic problem at school but will meet it at home.

"I wouldn't be able to get internet connection at home," junior Marques Alexander said. "The timing would also be different because I wouldn't

get home in time to do most homework projects."

For some who choose regular classes over advanced ones see it more as a social issue rather than an economic one.

"There aren't a lot of minorities in [advanced classes,]" Gamble said. "There aren't a lot of black kids in there. I guess it's because you don't look cool being in an advanced class."

Social stereotypes include a student's drive to succeed, and Bailey says that this can only be combated from within each student.

"We can put a lot of responsibility on ourselves as administration and as a campus, but our students have to be motivated to accept help and want to get better," Bailey said. "We've got to continue to motivate, continue to encourage, try to make class interesting and try to catch them up as best we can."

Grades are not the only use of motivation for students. Some choose not to participate in advanced, harder, more pressured classes because they want to participate in their favorite clubs or sports.

"I felt like I wouldn't meet the standards to play football," Alexander said. "I wanted to have a good grade, but [AP classes] are harder and have more pressure."

While students are struggling to pass harder classes, overcome social stigmas, and economic barriers, administration is working to find a clear cut, foolproof program to accomplish the daunting task of closing the achievement gap.

"We are not giving up by any means," Bailey said. "If anyone has any suggestions to make, I am always willing to take them. We are continuously working on that and going to keep trying."



Thoughts on being a minority in the majority

It's not all black & white

by **RICKY COOKS**
staff writer

Go to school. Work hard. Make good grades. Be competitive.

Those four things have been my main goals since the third grade when I didn't feel like the smartest kid anymore. I started school at Martha and Josh Morriss Elementary School in the third grade – a school full of the district's brightest kids. It was when I went to Morriss that I realized: I had to work hard to succeed. Other people were going to work harder. I was one of five minorities out of my class of 60 kids.

Being less than 10 years old, I never truly understood what it meant to be someone who wasn't in the majority. In elementary school, I was never approached with any stigmas or negativity about the color of my skin. However, deep down, I felt as if I had to prove that I was better, if not equal, to the white kids all around me.

I'm comfortable with the way I live, and I am so thankful that I was able to grow up with parents who got me everything I needed, and almost everything I wanted. Surrounded by kids who acted like me for three years, I didn't realize a major difference between any students until I went to middle school.

In the sixth grade, I realized that there are significantly different types of people who attend school. Texas Middle School was a melting pot of different personalities, backgrounds and races. TMS also had a much larger number of minorities. I finally felt as though I could prosper as someone who didn't have to prove himself.

What I didn't expect in middle school was to feel apart from nearly every other black person at the school. Growing up with primarily white children, I dressed differently, spoke differently and took different classes than the majority of other black kids.

Because of this, I saw the pointed looks and eye

rolls from other black kids across the hallway. I felt insecure and almost like a traitor to my own race, but being so young, it's hard to branch out and meet new people who aren't in the same classes.

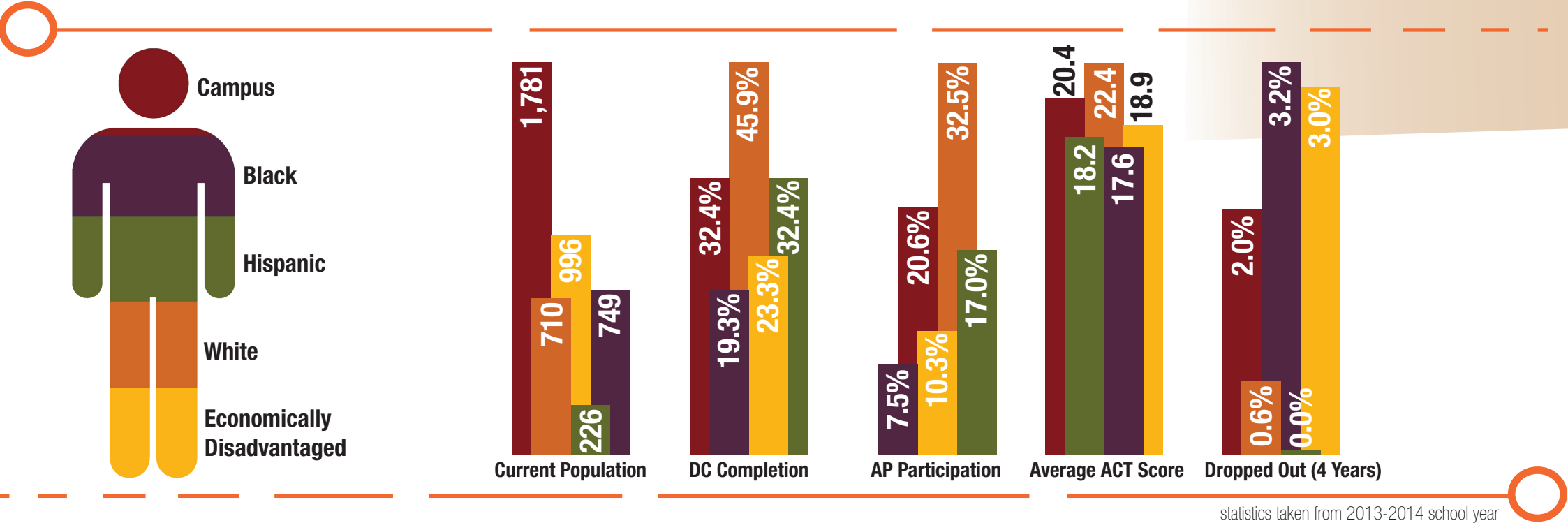
Now that I'm in high school, I am a lot more comfortable with who I am. However, in my advanced courses, I am one of the few (if not the only) black people. Regardless, I'm a successful student because of the person that I am, not who my friends are or the color of their skin.

Sure, it kind of hurts that I hear about black kids who don't want to take AP courses because they're "white people classes." It's alarming to me that two years ago, only 7.5 percent of black students at Texas High School were in AP classes, while 32.5 percent of white students took AP courses. Black students could be less competitive for jobs in the future against white students that took AP courses in high school.

As senior year approaches, it's no easier to identify with the majority of black students, but I'm content with the black person that I am. The past year has been phenomenal: I was elected class president, vice president of the Texas Association of Student Councils and have managed to keep my grades up in the midst of it all. I'm an involved student, and race isn't a factor anymore – not to me at least.

I've realized that my insecurities and self-doubt came along with comparison and envy for white and black students everywhere. Now, I try to be a role model; not only for African-Americans all over, but for everyone that I encounter. I've accomplished so many things as myself— not as the "white kid in a black body," or the "black kid with white friends." I'm happy with who I am, where I come from, the color of my skin and the people I'm friends with.

Life goes on after high school, and you can bet I'll keep going, too.



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