

## AP, IB to be the Next SATs?

By Jay Mathews

Washington Post Staff Writer

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This has been a rough year for Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB), the college level courses and tests that have become increasingly popular in American high schools. Take, for example, the uncomfortable moment I had with my daughter about her American history course.

Katie said it was an AP course, but I wondered. Her teacher, Bryan Garman, had done original research on the evolution of American cultural images in his book, "A Race of Singers: Whitman's Working Class Hero From Guthrie to Springsteen." His course dug into literature, religion and the lives of ordinary Americans, particularly women, minorities and poor people.

That struck me as a long way from the wars and elections that thrilled me when I took U.S. history in high school. So I gave Katie a quiz. I asked her to tell me the significance of the battles of Vicksburg, Antietam and Gettysburg. She sighed and raised her eyebrows, a sign that there were limits to the love she had for the interfering oaf who was her father. She politely informed me that they hadn't gotten to that yet.

This worried me. I noted in my [March 12](#) column the blows AP and IB had taken this year. Harvard announced that it would give sophomore standing only to students who had the top AP grade, a 5, the equivalent of a college A, on all their AP tests. The Ethical Culture Fieldston School in New York City said it was removing the AP label from its courses in order to let its teachers be more creative. A committee of distinguished scholars assembled by the National Research Council of the National Academies of Science said AP and IB courses should become deeper and more conceptual.

Supporters of AP and IB, like me, wondered what was going on. Was this some errant backwash from the negative reaction to a different issue, the new state achievement tests being given to all students? Were the private schools, desperate for marketing devices, thinking they could lure more students by saying they were better than AP? Was this the outbreak of fear and loathing that hits every educational program that gets bigger than expected?

Perhaps it was a bit of all that. But despite my worries, it seemed to me that each allegedly negative development was actually a healthy sign that college-level courses were succeeding in high school to such an extent that more and more educators were accepting that reality and adjusting to it. These were growing pains, good for everybody.

American high schools gave 1,585,516 AP tests to 937,951 students in 35 subjects in May, the largest numbers ever. I think AP tests will someday supplant SAT tests as the great measure of high school learning, and American education will be better for it. AP's younger European-based counterpart, IB, gave only about 70,000 tests to about 27,000 students in 36 subjects this year in the United States, but it is growing fast and has become just as impressive to college admissions officers as AP.

If you can think of an academic program in the last decade that has had as positive impact on American public high schools as AP, I would like to hear what it is. I can't think of any that even come close. The College Board's first AP conference drew 1,600 educators to Chicago last month when only about 1,000