

Mansfield High students flourish in AP courses



Sunday, December 27, 2015

BY RICK FOSTER / SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

MANSFIELD — Advanced placement courses allow high school students to do rigorous, college-level work while potentially gaining college credit, and Mansfield High School students appear to be thriving on them.

Success in the courses, which range from English to science, history and mathematics, is measured by annual tests from the College Board that grade students on a scale of 1 to 5.

Students who achieve the highest grades may qualify for college credit or to skip an equivalent course when they enter college.

Results from last spring's AP exams showed that 86 percent of MHS students who took the tests received grades of 3 or higher.

While all high schools do not offer the same array of courses, that's the highest percentage of any area school district, including charter schools, school officials say.

"We always want to offer rigorous advanced placement courses where we have the staff to support them, and our students do very well," Principal Mike Connolly said. "Of course, we also need to provide courses that serve the needs of students at every level."

A total of 219 MHS students took some form of AP course last year, many taking multiple courses. Advanced placement offerings include English language and composition, English literature and composition, calculus, biology, chemistry, physics, U.S. and European history, Spanish and French language and composition, and art history.

Teachers say the courses, which require more study than traditional lessons, challenge students and help prepare them for the more demanding world of higher education.

"It's an opportunity for students to get a first exposure to college level work in a high school setting," chemistry teacher Larry Ferreira said.

Students seem to agree.

"It was definitely good exposure," said senior Megha Koul, who has taken advanced placement chemistry and biology courses. "You felt you were really learning something. And I think the rigor will benefit me in college."

But students also say taking on tougher courses hasn't turned them into all-work, no-play robots.

Senior Lucy Zhou said she still had time to participate in clubs and hold down a part-time job.

A total of 125 Mansfield students took some form of AP English course last spring, the largest single subject area at Mansfield High. English department head Cindy Carli said student test grades averaged 3.8 on the 1 to 5 scale, high enough to earn advanced placement at many colleges and universities.

“Students do very well because of the strong teachers and curriculum we have here,” Carli said. She said the challenging coursework is a confidence-builder for students who go on to excel in their subjects in college.

“We get a lot of feedback from students who have gone on to college who say they felt very prepared for college work,” she said. “In some cases, students have said their high school AP courses were harder than what they had in college.”

Student participation in AP English has continued to grow in recent years, so much so that the school recently had to expand from offering four sections of the courses to six sections. There’s also plenty of enthusiasm among students for science-related courses, department head Janet Hogan said, with 122 electing courses in AP biology, chemistry and physics last school year.

The number of students selecting AP math courses fluctuates from year to year, mathematics department head Christine Kalinowski said, depending on students’ individual goals. “It really depends on where their interests lie,” she said.

Kalinowski said Mansfield students tend to do well on their rigorous AP calculus exams, in no small part because the coursework is equally tough.

“You really have to give credit to the teachers and the curriculum,” she said. Mansfield’s foreign language AP courses, meanwhile, have turned out a small but steady stream of high achievers.

World Language Department head Carolina DiBiase said enrollment in AP French and Spanish classes has remained steady in recent years at about 20 students. Last year, every one of them who took the AP test received at least a grade of 3, with many receiving top grades of 4 or 5. “It’s a very rigorous course,” she said. “To do well, you really have to do it all — reading, writing, listening and speaking.”

She said language programs have received consistent support over the years from the school committee and administration, as well as parents. She said the community seems to appreciate the importance of foreign languages in an ever more diverse world.

“Language is a great connector,” she said.