

# Ready for Rigor: Expanding Access to Rigorous Coursework in Michigan



## **Equity Driven • Data-Centered • Student Focused**

EdTrust-Midwest works for the high academic achievement of all Michigan students in pre-kindergarten through college. Our mission is to make Michigan a Top Ten education state for all groups of students, no matter their background, socio-economic status, or race.

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# I. Executive Summary

By Charlotte Pierce, Senior Policy Analyst

Every Michigan student deserves to graduate high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in their post-secondary pathway, whether that be attending college, enrolling in a skilled trade program, or going directly to the workforce. Those skills are outlined in Michigan's 'Profile of a Graduate,' a collective vision that clearly outlines the skills, competencies, and traits students need to succeed, setting the expectation that all students leave high school with college- and career-ready skills.<sup>1</sup> Ensuring access to a broad range of challenging, workforce-relevant coursework is a fundamental part of a strong high school education. Research shows that when students are given access to advanced coursework, it leads to increased engagement, fewer absences and suspensions, and higher graduation rates.<sup>2</sup>

Yet for too many Michigan students, access is out of reach.

In *Ready for Rigor*, EdTrust-Midwest unpacks the barriers students face to accessing the rigorous coursework opportunities that make them college- and career-ready. Through new analyses of publicly available data and a review of existing research, EdTrust-Midwest articulates how students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and students in rural and urban districts face additional barriers to opportunities like Advanced Placement, dual enrollment in college-level courses, and career and technical education.

Michigan high schools are not setting every student up for post-secondary success, and many lack the resources to meet the vision of the state's 'Profile of a Graduate.' The data reveal the ways that Michigan students are being underserved:

- Michigan students are falling behind national high school graduation rates and college attainment rates.<sup>3</sup>
- In 2023, 12% of students at Michigan's community colleges and four-year universities needed to take remedial coursework, signaling a lack of preparedness in their high school education.<sup>4</sup> For Black students, 23% needed to take remedial coursework.<sup>5</sup>
- Research consistently demonstrates that lower student-to-counselor ratios are associated with improved attendance, discipline rates, and graduation rates, yet Michigan trails the nation in student-to-counselor ratios.<sup>6</sup> While the recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250:1, Michigan schools faced an average ratio of 565:1 in the 2024-25 school year, which has dire consequences for the amount of attention and resources each student receives.<sup>7</sup>

These foundational challenges exacerbate a troubling opportunity gap across Michigan schools. Research shows that even when prior academic achievement is controlled for, qualified Black and Latino students are less likely to enroll in advanced courses than their white peers, further driving opportunity gaps.<sup>8</sup>

Michigan students, particularly students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, lack access to a breadth of rigorous coursework offerings. And when Michigan students pursue rigorous coursework, they have fewer options, on average, than their peers in other states.<sup>9</sup> This is particularly striking in the case of STEM offerings: in 2024-25, only 42% of Michigan high schools offered at least one AP STEM course, compared to 55% of U.S. high schools overall.<sup>10</sup> This leaves Michigan students who are interested in STEM careers, like engineering and

healthcare, shut out from a major rigorous coursework opportunity.

Opportunity gaps are striking among students living in districts with the highest concentrations of student poverty for rigorous coursework opportunities, including advanced placement courses, dual enrollment, and career and technical education (CTE). New EdTrust-Midwest analyses found:

- Students in the lowest poverty districts have, on average, over 7 times more AP course options than students in the highest poverty districts.<sup>11</sup> Students with the greatest needs also enroll in AP coursework at lower rates than their peers.<sup>12</sup> This disparity is troubling, and it comes with consequences: fewer AP opportunities means less competitive college applications and college credit-earning opportunities.
- Michigan falls far behind the national dual enrollment rates, and Michigan’s dual enrollment does not reflect the diversity of the student body. Students of color made up just 22% of dual enrolled students but comprised 34% of high school enrollment in the 2021-22 school year.<sup>13</sup>
- Students of color, English Learners, and students with disabilities pass Algebra I at lower rates than the state average. For instance, in the 2021-22 school year, only 64% of Black students passed Algebra I by 10th grade, the lowest rate among all reported groups and well below the statewide average pass rate of 74%.<sup>14</sup>

Research also supports that students from low-income backgrounds, Black, and Latino students have less overall access to CTE and are less likely to attend schools with at least one CTE program.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, while students with disabilities participate in CTE at the same rate as other students, they are less likely to complete CTE programs compared to students without disabilities.<sup>16</sup> This gap is particularly concerning, since research shows that sustained



engagement in CTE is associated with positive outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly those with learning disabilities.<sup>17</sup>

These challenges, while troubling, are not unsolvable. The following are recommendations to expand access to rigorous coursework and ensure that every Michigan student graduates high school with the resources and skills needed to be college- and career-ready:

1. Districts should adopt an automatic enrollment policy to place qualifying students in advanced coursework. Students would still be able to take the regular course if they choose. Using an “opt-out” policy rather than “opt-in” process reduces the risk of gatekeeping practices that can inhibit qualified students from enrolling in courses they would succeed in.
2. The state should continue to reimburse Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) testing fees for qualifying students and streamline qualifications for high-poverty districts. To best serve students from low-income backgrounds, the state should automatically waive test fees for students in districts in Opportunity Index Bands 5 and 6, which are districts with the highest concentrations of poverty. This will reduce potential stigma and student burden that may serve as a barrier to testing.
3. The state should commit dedicated resources to expand its dual enrollment capacity in high schools across the state, particularly in districts with high concentrations of student poverty. This includes establishing a statewide funding mechanism for dual enrollment that eliminates the cost burden on the student and does not require use of Foundation Allowance funds.
4. The state should continue to invest in expanding career and technical education opportunities for all students, particularly students with disabilities and districts serving high concentrations of students from low-income backgrounds and students of color.
5. Policymakers should invest in the school counselor pipeline through increased funding for districts to hire counselors and career advising positions.
6. The state should implement Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion as a graduation requirement, with guardrails and supports in place to provide accurate, timely information and assistance to families.

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*Many staff and partners contributed to the research and development of this report, including Senior Director of Strategic Communications and External Relations Jennifer Mrozowski, Senior Data Consultant Jacqueline Gardner, and EdTrust Policy Lead Aileen Ma. Special thanks to former EdTrust-Midwest Director of Policy and Research Jen DeNeal for her foundational development of ETM’s college and career readiness workstream and to EdTrust-Midwest intern Emily Atkinson who contributed invaluable research, analyses, and insights for this report.*

## II. Ready for Rigor: Expanding Access to Rigorous Coursework in Michigan

Every Michigan student deserves an education that prepares them for their future pathway into college and careers. At the same time, in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world, Michigan needs to develop a competitive workforce, and that starts with a strong and dynamic K-12 system that responds to these needs. In order to be college and career ready, students need relevant, rigorous coursework that prepares them for tomorrow's challenges. Research shows that when students are given access to advanced coursework, it leads to increased engagement, fewer absences and suspensions, and higher graduation rates.<sup>18</sup>

Yet too few students are graduating with the experiences and resources they need to thrive after high school. And too many Michigan students, particularly students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, lack access to rigorous coursework opportunities in high school. This puts them at a disadvantage, especially when they are considering their post-secondary journeys, whether that be pursuing a college degree, earning a certificate, entering the workforce, or some combination of opportunities in a non-linear pathway. Many students change course in their postsecondary journey, and their high school preparation can determine their set of options down the line.



As policymakers, communities, and families begin to reimagine what a high-quality and future-forward secondary education looks like for Michigan students, equity must be at the center of every call for education reform. This is especially important for our students as they enter a dynamic and diverse world.

In this report, *Ready for Rigor: Expanding Access to Rigorous Coursework in Michigan*, EdTrust-Midwest uncovers opportunity gaps in access to rigorous coursework, including disparities in Advanced Placement (AP) offerings, enrollment, and performance, dual enrollment, and career-connected learning opportunities. The report also provides policy recommendations that call upon state and district leaders to make needed reforms to the college and career readiness ecosystem in Michigan.

When Michigan prioritizes equity-centered practices, every student is provided with the opportunity to explore their post-secondary options, take relevant and challenging coursework to prepare them for that journey, and graduate high school with the resources needed to succeed and contribute to Michigan's economy.

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## Definition of rigorous coursework

Rigorous coursework holds many definitions across states and contexts. This report focuses on opportunities for high school students to engage deeply with course material that will make them college- and career-ready. These include opportunities to earn college credit through Advanced Placement (AP) courses, International Baccalaureate (IB), dual enrollment with local community colleges and four-year universities, and College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) exams.<sup>19</sup> Michigan also has a vast network of Early Middle Colleges (EMCs) in which students take 5 years to earn both a high school diploma and complete either 60 college credits, an associate's degree, a professional or technical certificate, or a registered apprenticeship.<sup>20</sup> Another facet of rigorous coursework includes career-connected learning, which students can engage with through career and technical education (CTE) courses that blend hands-on and experiential learning opportunities with classroom instruction.<sup>21</sup> Other examples of career-connected learning include job shadowing, pre-apprenticeships, and internships.<sup>22</sup>

EdTrust-Midwest focused this report primarily on access to rigorous coursework, recognizing that Michigan has other key programs like Early Middle College, career academies, and advising programs to support college and career readiness. Future briefs will spotlight these different offerings across the state.

Additionally, while there are a number of schools designed to serve the needs of gifted and talented students, Michigan does not have a statewide gifted and talented program.<sup>23</sup> However, students designated as gifted and talented are encouraged to be academically accelerated in a particular subject or subjects.<sup>24</sup>

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### III. Gaps in Readiness Leave Michigan Students at a Disadvantage

Strengthening the college and career readiness ecosystem is critical to making Michigan a top ten state for education. Consider how Michigan is behind national averages in 4-year high school graduation rates, according to the most recently available federal data. In 2022, only 81% of Michigan students graduated high school in four years, compared to an 87% national average.<sup>25</sup> Michigan's 2025 graduation rate has since increased to 84%, which still lags the 2022 national rate.<sup>26</sup>

It is critical that students leave high school having received a rigorous education, whether that includes advanced courses or standard offerings. Every Michigan high school graduate should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to succeed in post-secondary education. Yet for too many students, that is not the case: only 27% of high school students were considered "college ready" according to the 2025 SAT. Only 7% of Black students and 15% of Latino students met this benchmark.<sup>27</sup> Further, students of color are more likely to need remedial coursework in college, which puts them at a disadvantage. In 2023, 12% of students at Michigan's community colleges and four-year universities needed to take remedial coursework, signaling a lack of preparedness in their high school education.<sup>28</sup> For Black students, 23% needed to take remedial coursework.<sup>29</sup>

Students' success rates in high school and post-secondary education also have ripple effects on Michigan's economy, which depends on more adults earning college degrees. In 2024, only 33% of Michigan adults had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 37% of adults nationwide.<sup>30</sup> Michigan adults of color are further behind: 21% of Black and 24% of Latino Michiganders have a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>31</sup>

These numbers have consequences: They signal that Michigan's education system is failing to prepare all its students for what comes next, whether that be post-secondary education, a skilled trade, or the workforce. We also know that for many students, their post-secondary path is not linear, and they may move between these options – meaning that their education must be flexible and dynamic to meet ever-evolving workforce needs.<sup>32</sup> Students deserve access to opportunities that give them choices in their chosen academic and career journey – not a prescribed path dictated by limited course and career exploration options. In the pages ahead, EdTrust-Midwest explores the barriers that students face to accessing rigorous coursework and opportunities that would equip them to meaningfully contribute to tomorrow's economy.

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*Students deserve access to opportunities that give them choices in their chosen academic and career journey – not a prescribed path dictated by limited course and career exploration options.*

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## IV. Michigan's Barriers to Rigorous Coursework Access

### Lack of AP course offerings limit student opportunity

For students to succeed in high school, they must have a variety of options and opportunities to study rigorous material that aligns with their career interests. Yet Michigan students have fewer options to pursue rigorous courses, on average, than their peers in other states.<sup>33</sup> This is particularly striking in the case of STEM offerings: in 2024-25, only 42% of Michigan high schools offered at least one AP STEM course, compared to 55% of US high schools overall.<sup>34</sup> This leaves Michigan students interested in STEM careers, like engineering and healthcare, shut out from a major rigorous coursework opportunity.

Percentage of Public High Schools Offering AP Coursework, 2024-2025		
Course Offerings	National	Michigan
At least 5 AP courses	47.0%	34.0%
At least 10 AP courses	33.0%	22.0%
At least 1 AP STEM course	55.0%	42.0%

Source: College Board, 2024-2025 AP Availability Report

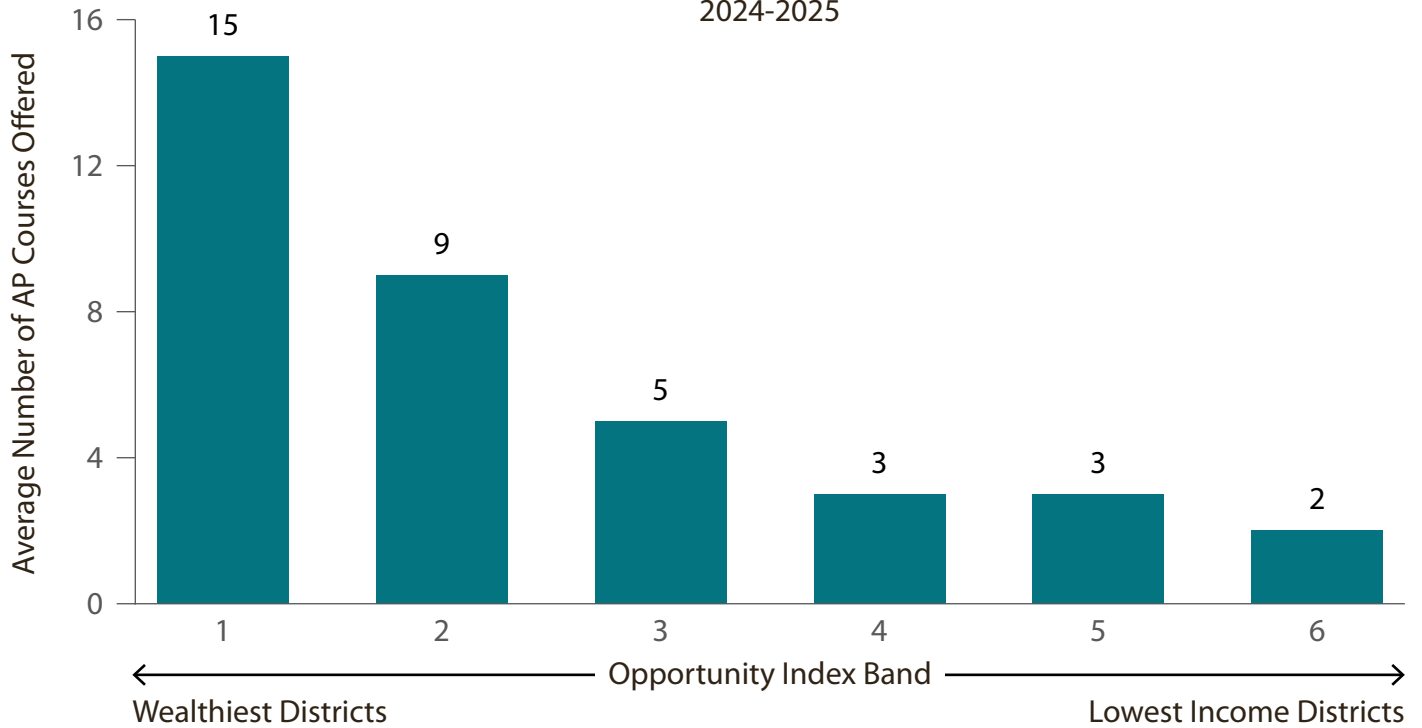
The picture is worse for students attending districts with high concentrations of poverty.

An EdTrust-Midwest analysis found that students in the wealthiest districts have, on average, over 7 times more AP course options than students in the highest poverty districts.<sup>35</sup> This disparity is troubling, and it comes with consequences: greater AP access means more competitive college applications and college credit-earning opportunities. When students from low-income backgrounds lack access to advanced coursework opportunities like AP, they are put at a disadvantage not only in their high school education, but also in their post-secondary opportunities. Further, research shows that when students are given access to advanced coursework, it leads to increased engagement, fewer absences and suspensions, and higher graduation rates.<sup>36</sup>

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## Average Number of AP Courses Offered in Michigan Public Schools by Opportunity Index Band

2024-2025



**Source:** Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI), MI School Data, School Services and Offerings, 2024-2025

**Note:** The Opportunity Index drives greater state investment in students who qualify for at-risk funding based on a school district’s concentration of poverty, regardless of region. The Index divides school districts into six bands based on the concentration of poverty within each district. In each band, districts are given an additional percentage of the foundation allowance – or more funding – based on their concentration of poverty. Districts with higher concentrations of poverty are placed in higher bands and are given a larger percentage of the foundation allowance to be able to meet the additional needs of their students.

### Students of color are underrepresented in AP enrollment

Increasing course offerings across the board is an important first step, but Michigan students with the greatest needs are also not enrolled in AP coursework at the same rate as their peers. Students of color, English Learners, and students with disabilities are underrepresented in AP enrollment, while white students are overrepresented.

AP Enrollment Share in Michigan, 2021-2022		
Student Group	AP Enrollment Share	Share of Student Body
White Students	73.9%	68.5%
Black Students	7.6%	14.8%
Latino Students	5.6%	8.3%
English Learners	2.1%	5.9%
Students with Disabilities	1.5%	11.2%

**Source:** Civil Rights Data Collection, AP Enrollment, 2021-2022

Some practices act as barriers to fair representation by using subjective measures, like teacher and counselor recommendations, rather than more objective measures like test scores and grades. Those practices can function as gatekeeping policies that keep students out of rigorous courses.

One barrier to enrollment for students of color is whether a school allows students to self-select into an AP course. Self-selection allows for a student to enroll in a course without obtaining a teacher or counselor recommendation. An EdTrust-Midwest analysis found that the share of Black students enrolled in AP was higher when students were allowed to self-select. This finding suggests that allowing for self-selection is one way to dismantle gatekeeping policies and ensure greater access to rigorous coursework for students who are up to the challenge.

Black Student Enrollment Share in AP Courses in Michigan, 2021-2022	
Self-Selection Not Allowed	Self-Selection Allowed
5.7%	8.5%

**Source:** Civil Rights Data Collection, AP Enrollment, 2021-2022

Another barrier to expanding access to advanced coursework is the use of “opt-in” enrollment policies, which put an undue burden on the student to self-advocate and can result in qualified students not enrolling in advanced courses. Traditional “opt-in” models for advanced courses can create systemic barriers for some qualified students, particularly students of color or students from low-income backgrounds, who may lack necessary information or self-advocacy skills.<sup>37</sup> This enrollment process typically requires students to first demonstrate ability through objective measures like assessments or in prerequisite courses. However, it then relies on subjective gatekeeping mechanisms like teacher recommendations and parental requests to move a student to an advanced pathway. These practices can be harmful because they depend on access to information, advocacy, and resources that are not distributed equitably across all demographic groups. Research shows that even when prior academic achievement is controlled for, qualified Black and Latino students are less likely to enroll in advanced courses than their white peers, further driving opportunity gaps.<sup>38</sup>

Beyond formal enrollment practices, school culture and student perceptions are a powerful factor in addressing opportunity gaps in advanced coursework. It is important that students see themselves represented in advanced classes, including students of color, English Learners, and students with disabilities. The demographic composition of advanced courses can create a self-perpetuating cycle of underrepresentation. Research reveals that, in diverse schools, when slightly more Black juniors and seniors take advanced math classes, other Black students who are prepared for those classes are much more likely—about 22 percentage points more likely—to take them too.<sup>39</sup> This effect is even larger for Black male students. This suggests that the visible presence of peers of color in advanced classes may reduce feelings of isolation or provide positive role models, encouraging greater participation.

Michigan’s use of the College Board AP Potential Tool is one promising step the state is taking to identify and encourage qualified students to enroll in AP coursework, but stronger policies can be implemented to increase access across student groups.<sup>40</sup> Michigan is only one of two states to leverage the tool, which notifies families of their child’s capacity to succeed in advanced coursework. The Michigan Department of Education (MDE), in partnership with the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP), sent over 80,000 letters to families in 2026 to families with students in grade 9 or higher who might have success

with AP courses.<sup>41</sup> MDE credits the state’s use of this tool for contributing to overall growth in the state’s AP exam participation rates: data on the Class of 2025 ranked Michigan ninth in the nation in student participation growth from 2015 to 2025 with notable growth among Black and Latino students.<sup>42</sup>

The AP Potential Tool, while an important lever for parent and student awareness, is not sufficient to increase equitable enrollment practices, and AP participation rates for Michigan students of color still remain far lower than their white peers. Additionally, notification letters still place the burden on students and families to advocate for themselves to enroll in advanced coursework, which may be easier for some families than others. In addition to sending letters home, schools and districts can use the AP Potential Tool to support automatic enrollment in advanced coursework. Doing so does not disempower students and families from having the final say in course selection, but it takes the burden of self-advocacy off the student.

### Disparities in AP exam scores: Setting students up for success in advanced coursework

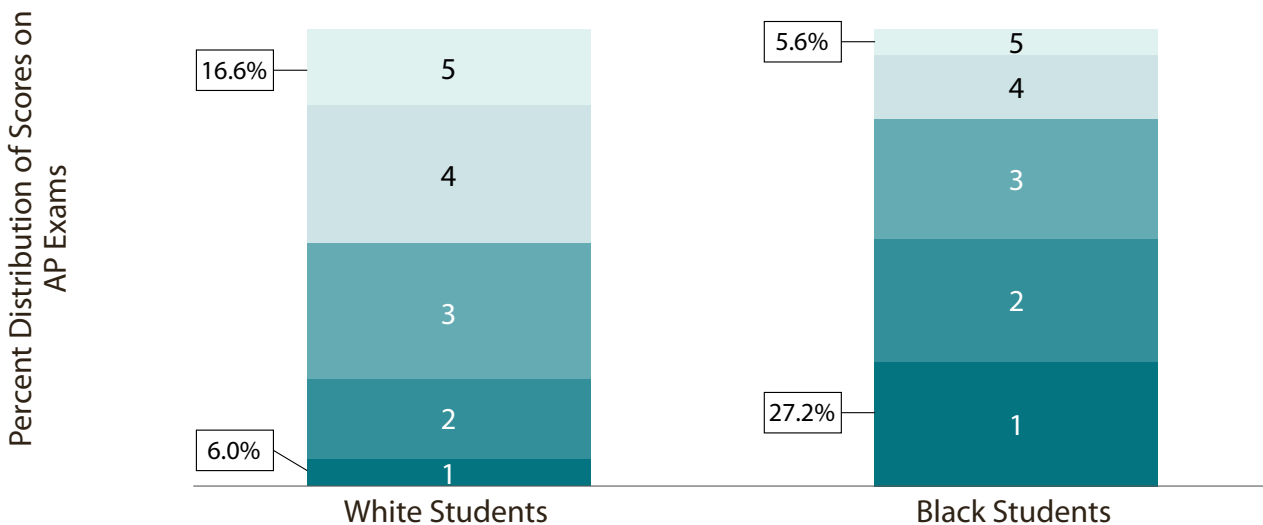
As EdTrust-Midwest calls for equity in access and enrollment in advanced courses, it is critical to ensure that every student is supported and successful in their coursework. In the case of AP, which culminates in a test to become eligible for college credit, students should have the resources needed to earn a high score on the test and increase their credit-earning potential. Research shows that earning college credit from a single AP exam increases the likelihood of graduating college within four years.<sup>43</sup>

An EdTrust-Midwest analysis found that 16.6% of AP exams taken by white students earned a 5, but only 5.6% of AP exams taken by Black students earned a 5. The distribution of low scores looks dramatically different: only 6% of AP tests taken by white students received a 1, while 27.2% of AP exams taken by Black students received a 1.

The disparity in scores exacerbates opportunity gaps. Consider that most states require all their public higher education institutions to accept a 3 or higher for some form of college credit.<sup>44</sup> In Michigan, while 77% of AP exams taken by white students received marks of 3 or higher, only 46% of AP tests taken by Black students received a 3 or higher. These achievement gaps are not an indicator of student intelligence or capacity to achieve. Rather, they are an indicator that students of color are not receiving the support needed to be successful in these courses and exams.

### AP Score Distribution for Michigan Students

2024-2025



Source: College Board, AP Performance Report, 2024-2025



## **Leading State Examples: Automatic Enrollment To Increase Underrepresented Student Enrollment**

Evidence from early adopters of automatic enrollment policies show great strides in expanding access to rigorous coursework, particularly among students of color. Washington state adopted a statewide automatic enrollment policy following early signs of success in their pilot program.<sup>45</sup> Following the statewide policy, Tacoma Public Schools doubled enrollment in advanced coursework overall and tripled enrollment among Black and Latino advanced coursework enrollment.<sup>46</sup> Students are also succeeding in coursework, with a 92% pass rate, and every racial cohort having a pass rate of at least 87%.<sup>47</sup> North Carolina's automatic enrollment policy, focused on math acceleration, resulted in dramatic increases in overall enrollment the year following policy implementation: the state's education agency reported that as many as 10,000 students were given access to advanced math courses they otherwise would not have been identified for.<sup>48</sup>

## **Students from Low-Income Backgrounds Would Benefit from Consistent Reimbursements for AP and IB**

The state of Michigan has taken promising steps to alleviate the cost burden of AP exams, but more systemic funding support would further reduce cost barriers. In the Fiscal Year 2026 budget, lawmakers allocated \$2.6 million to reimburse AP, IB, and CLEP exam fees, prioritizing students from low-income backgrounds.<sup>49</sup> This funding, however, is not guaranteed year-over-year, and could be reduced or eliminated in each budget cycle. Additionally, while the policy subsidizes qualifying students' exams to \$5 per exam, a 2021 study found the subsidy did not account for all exam costs.<sup>50</sup> Research on Michigan's subsidy program revealed that uncertainty about how much funding the legislature would approve led to school staffs' confusion and, in some cases, a greater cost to low-income students than lawmakers intended.<sup>51</sup> A clearer, more stable subsidy policy where schools can count on year-over-year financial support would further encourage students from low-income backgrounds to pursue AP coursework without concerns of test fees.

## **Michigan Dual Enrollment Participation Lags National Rate**

Dual enrollment with local community colleges and four-year universities is another promising pathway to increase access to rigorous coursework, but Michigan participation is significantly lower than the national rate. Research consistently highlights the multitude of benefits that dual enrollment offers students. These include stronger high school grades and completion, higher rates of college enrollment, increased college credit accumulation, and greater likelihood of degree completion.<sup>52</sup> Dual enrollment can also reduce the time it takes to earn a degree and lower overall college costs, directly addressing key concerns such as affordability. Students who took dual enrollment courses in high school demonstrated higher persistence rates from the first to second year in college.<sup>53</sup>

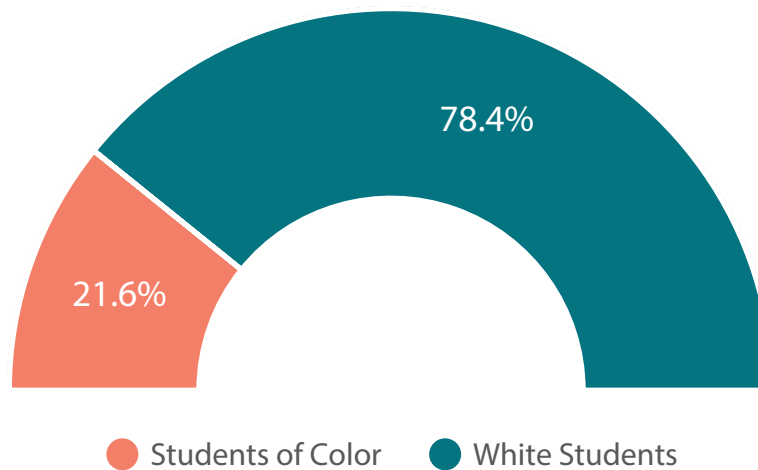
Too few Michigan students experience the benefits of dual enrollment: in the 2021-22 school year nearly 5% of Michigan students participated in dual enrollment, compared to 10% of students nationally.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, Michigan's dual enrollment does not reflect the diversity of the student body. Students of color made up 22% of dual enrolled students, but 34% of high school enrollment in the 2021-22 school year.<sup>55</sup> The reasons behind

Michigan students' lack of participation, particularly among students of color, are due to multiple factors, including funding barriers, lack of incentive or encouragement by school staff, and lack of awareness of the benefits of dual enrollment to students.<sup>56</sup>

Michigan vs. National Dual Enrollment Rates, 2021-2022		
	National	Michigan
All Students	10.3%	4.5%
White Students	13.1%	5.3%
Latino Students	7.7%	2.8%
Black Students	6.6%	2.5%
English Learners	4.7%	1.8%
Students with Disabilities	3.6%	0.8%

Source: Civil Rights Data Collection, Dual Enrollment, 2021-2022

### Student Diversity in Dual Enrollment in Michigan 2021-2022



Source: Civil Rights Data Collection, Dual Enrollment, 2021-2022

### Lack of comprehensive dual enrollment funding system leaves behind students from low-income backgrounds

Michigan's current dual enrollment funding model is further driving disparities in access by putting the cost burden on districts and students and disincentivizing program participation. Since dual enrollment courses are not part of the traditional high school course offerings, dual enrollment tuition comes at an additional cost. Michigan currently operates under a split cost model between the state and the student, in which local districts

must use part of their foundation allowance allotment to pay dual enrollment tuition costs, and students must cover transportation and parking costs.<sup>57</sup> This funding model, which pulls needed dollars out of K-12 buildings, may disincentivize school and district leaders from promoting dual enrollment, at the expense of rigorous coursework opportunities. State leaders are currently discussing ways to reform dual enrollment funding models, and these discussions should include ways to increase participation while taking the cost burden off students and districts.

### **A Promising College Pathway: Early Middle College Programs**

Michigan's Early Middle College (EMC) program offers an accelerated pathway to post-secondary education, offering greater access to advanced coursework for the students that EMCs are encouraged to serve, including those who are underserved, underrepresented, and at-risk eligible.<sup>58</sup> Students take 5 years to earn both a high school diploma and complete either 60 college credits, an associate's degree, a professional or technical certificate, or a registered apprenticeship.<sup>59</sup> Each Early Middle College varies in its post-secondary offerings, with some only offering one post-secondary credential option and others offering multiple. Additionally, EMCs offer a low-cost option for college tuition, which is generally paid for by the local school district.<sup>60</sup> Future publications will explore Michigan's Early Middle College programs more deeply.

### **Students with the Greatest Needs Lack CTE Access, Limiting Career-Connected Learning Opportunities**

Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs are another option for students to expand upon traditional high school courses, serving as a vital link between high school and post-secondary education and employment while providing benefits for students with the greatest needs. CTE teachers are noted to play a critical role in career advising, leveraging their industry experience and connections to provide practical guidance to students.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, research shows that CTE has positive effects on high school graduation, and these findings are often more pronounced for students from low-income backgrounds, highlighting CTE's potential to address opportunity gaps and provide effective pathways for a wide range of students.<sup>62</sup>

While career-connected learning is important to ensure that students are ready for their post-secondary education, Michigan students do not have equitable access to these opportunities. For instance, students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and students in urban and rural communities often face additional barriers to these opportunities due to lack of CTE programming and participation. Research on Michigan's CTE landscape reveals that students from low-income

### **Investing in CTE Deserts**

Recent state investments in Michigan's CTE availability across different geographic regions is a promising recognition from lawmakers on the importance of CTE access. In a scan of Michigan's CTE availability, 41% of districts qualified as 'CTE deserts,' or areas where data show that CTE participation is lower than expected.<sup>63</sup> In the Fiscal Year 2026 budget, lawmakers allocated \$70 million to support CTE programming in CTE deserts.<sup>64</sup> This funding can help address access issues in deserts such as limited seats in popular programs and transportation to program sites.<sup>65</sup>

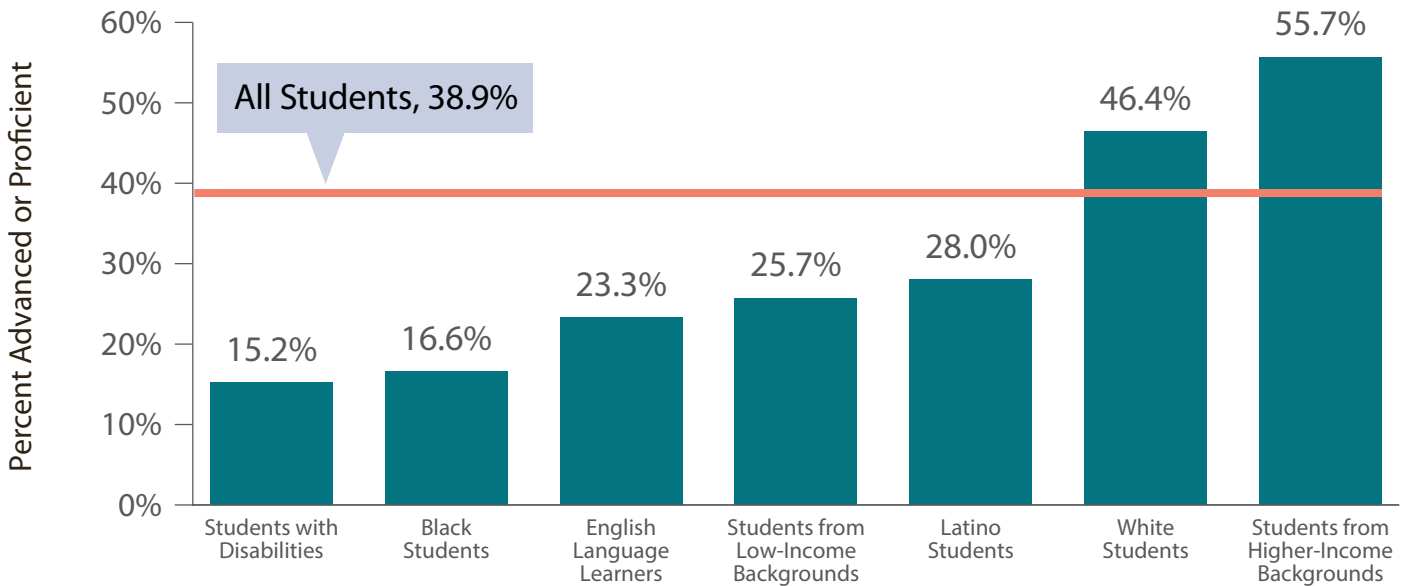
backgrounds, Black, and Latino students have less overall access to CTE and are less likely to attend schools with at least one CTE program.<sup>66</sup> Black students are three times as likely as white students, and about twice as likely as Latino students, to have access to no CTE programs at all.<sup>67</sup> Further, students from low-income backgrounds are more than twice as likely as their higher-income peers to have access to only a few CTE programs – three or fewer.<sup>68</sup>

Research shows that sustained engagement in CTE is associated with positive outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly those with learning disabilities.<sup>69</sup> However, students with disabilities are less likely to complete CTE programs compared to students without disabilities even though they participate in CTE at the same rate as other students.<sup>70</sup> Given that completing a CTE program is associated with academic benefits like higher attendance and graduation rates, it is imperative that students with disabilities are supported to complete their CTE programs and graduate college- and career-ready.<sup>71</sup> This may include greater collaboration between CTE and special education teachers to ensure students with disabilities are receiving needed supports.

### Early Literacy and Math Scores Paint a Troubling Picture for Future College and Career Readiness

Success in high school, and the opportunity for more students to pursue advanced coursework, depends on a strong early learning foundation for Michigan students. In fact, early reading is considered one of the most impactful factors in high school graduation rates, setting the stage for student success in post-secondary and beyond. Research shows that students who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely than proficient readers to not graduate high school.<sup>72</sup> Unfortunately, performance on the 2025 M-STEP shows troubling disparities. Students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English Learners, and students with disabilities are falling behind their peers in early reading.

**3rd Grade M-STEP Reading Proficiency Rates by Subgroup**  
2024-2025

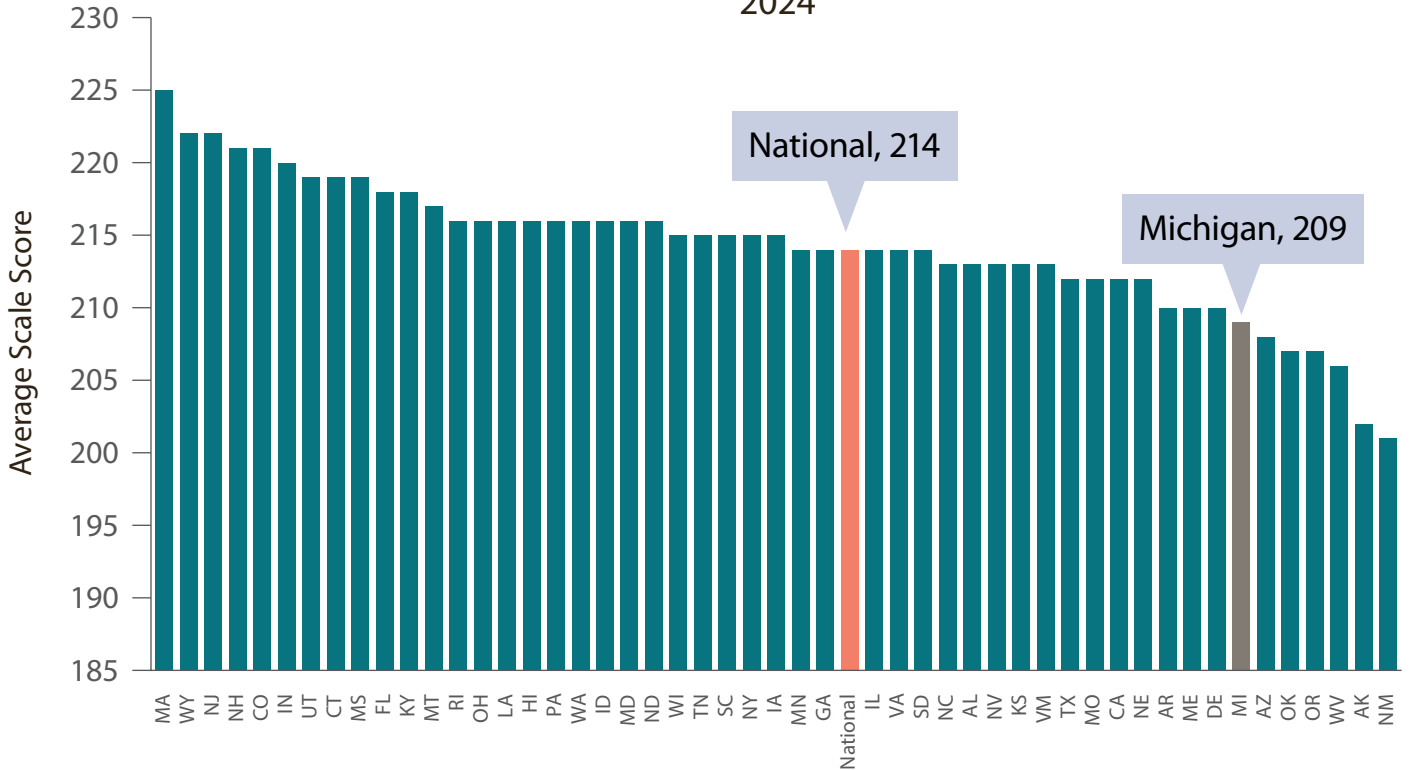


**Source:** Center for Educational Performance Information (CEPI), MI School Data, M-STEP Scores, 2024-2025

Michigan’s lackluster performance in early reading is particularly evident when measured up to other states. While 2024 NAEP scores signal a national reading crisis with low performance across the country, Michigan falls far behind the national average. Michigan’s troubling performance warns of challenges ahead for struggling readers as they need additional support to graduate high school and pursue post-secondary pathways.

To bridge the gap in access to rigorous coursework for students with the greatest needs, school districts must invest deeply and intentionally in early literacy efforts to lay a foundation of strong readers.

### Average Scale Score NAEP Grade 4 - Reading - All Students 2024



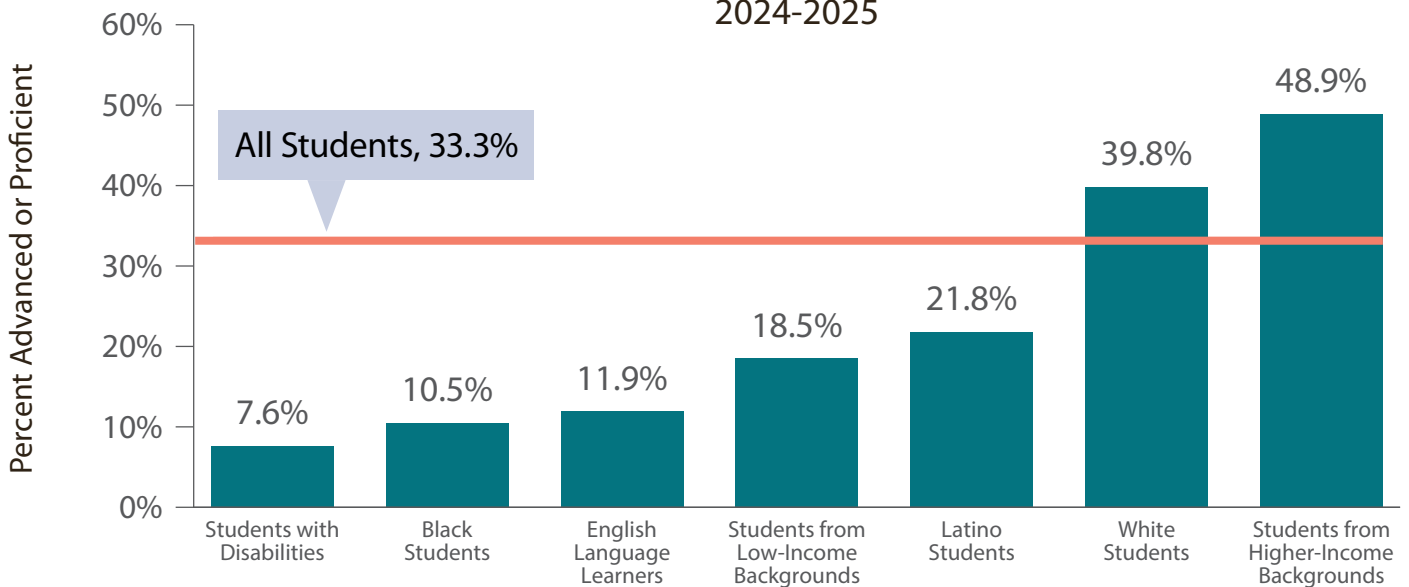
**Source:** NCES, NAEP Data

**Note:** Proficient Scale Score = 238; Basic Scale Score = 208



Additionally, strong math skills, particularly success in algebra, are a predictor of high school success, but Michigan students with the greatest needs lag behind their peers in both 7th grade math M-STEP proficiency and Algebra I pass rates. Students with disabilities, students of color, English Learners, and students from low-income backgrounds are performing at a math proficiency rate at least 10 percentage points below the state average and substantially lag behind their white and higher-income peers. These M-STEP proficiency rates are a glimpse into how students lack a solid foundation to be prepared for high school math.

**7th Grade M-STEP Math Scores by Subgroup**  
2024-2025

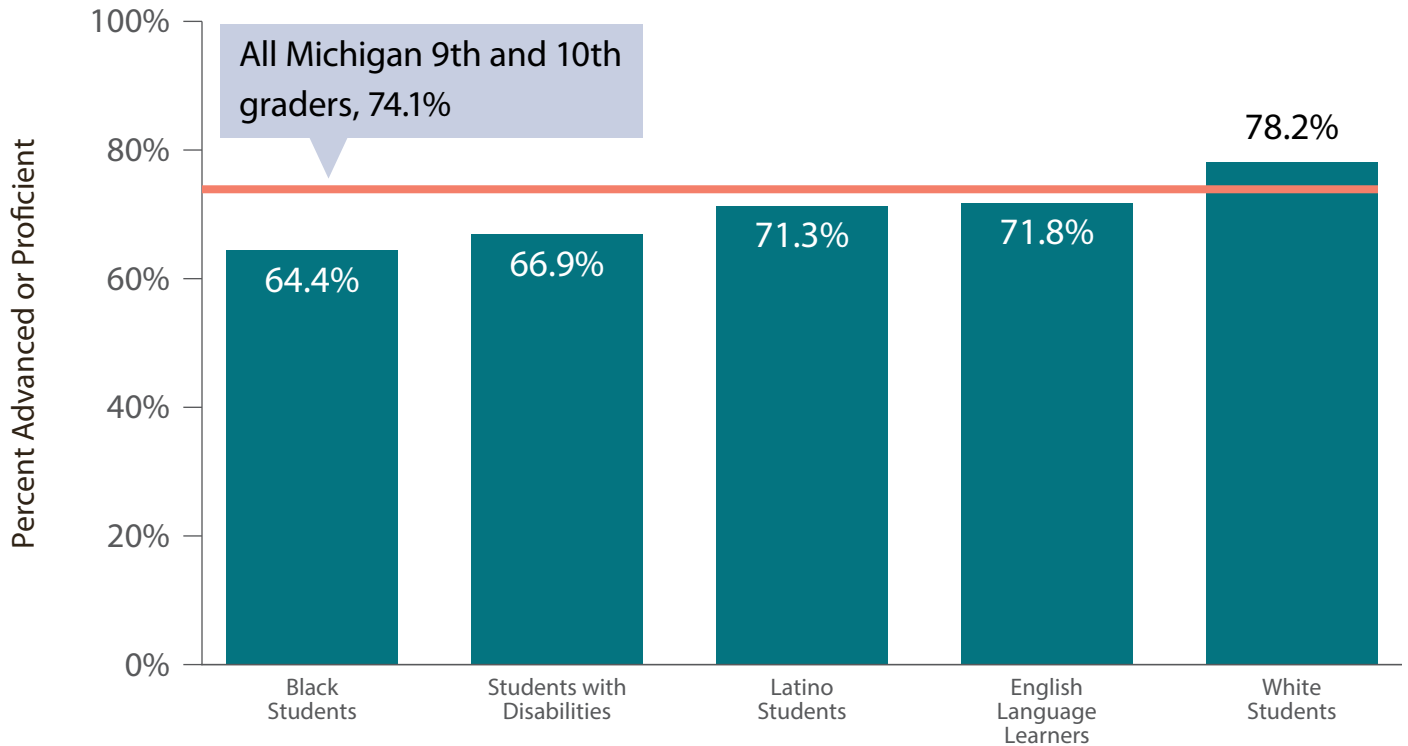


**Source:** Center for Educational Performance Information (CEPI), M-STEP Scores, 2024-2025

In addition to opportunities for advanced coursework, success in foundational high school courses is essential for college and career readiness. Algebra I, the math course typically taken in 9th grade, serves as a critical gateway to advanced mathematics and future opportunities. Success in Algebra I is directly linked to high achievement in advanced mathematics, higher graduation rates, and preparedness for post-secondary education.<sup>73</sup> This foundational course is so crucial that it is considered an equity and civil rights issue, opening doors to higher education, technical skills, and career pathways.<sup>74</sup> Students who don't achieve proficiency in Algebra I by the end of 9th grade face reduced chances of meeting college admissions criteria and on-time high school graduation: Algebra I failure rates exceed those of other 9th grade subjects, meaning it could be the make-or-break class of a student's high school career.<sup>75</sup>

Significant disparities in Algebra I access and pass rates continue to hinder Black students, Latino students, English Learners, and students with disabilities in Michigan. For instance, in the 2021-22 school year, only 64% of Black students passed Algebra I by 10th grade, the lowest rate among all reported groups and well below the statewide average pass rate of 74%.<sup>76</sup> In contrast, white students were the sole group to surpass the state average with a 78% pass rate, underscoring considerable opportunity gaps. Students with disabilities, English Learners, and Latino students also consistently achieve pass rates below the state average.

## Algebra I Pass Rates for Michigan 9th and 10th Graders 2021-2022



**Source:** Civil Rights Data Collection, Algebra I, 2021-2022

National data on access to early, advanced math pathways further illustrate these inequities. Research shows that even when students perform well in 5th grade math, they aren't equally given the chance to move ahead in accelerated math pathways.<sup>77</sup> Among students who scored at the top level, 42% of English Learners and 37% of students from low-income backgrounds were not placed in advanced math, compared to only 25% of students overall.<sup>78</sup>





## Leading State Example: Math Acceleration in Texas

To ensure that students succeed in algebra, districts and schools must identify and communicate opportunities for additional math support, as well as accelerated math pathways. Students who take Algebra I in middle school have more opportunities to take advanced math in high school, setting them up for greater postsecondary options and earnings.<sup>79</sup> However, Black and Latino students, as well as students from low-income backgrounds, are underrepresented in eighth grade Algebra I.<sup>80</sup> To address these disparities, Texas provides a promising practice for Michigan to consider. E3 Alliance, a data-driven education collaborative in Central Texas, found that Black and Latino students were underrepresented in advanced math, despite demonstrating readiness on the fifth grade test.<sup>81</sup> The collaborative worked with local school districts to implement automatic enrollment policies, which identify and place high-performing students in accelerated math courses.<sup>82</sup> E3 Alliance also helped districts increase communication about the benefits of advanced math and offer training for teachers.<sup>83</sup> These interventions lessened opportunity gaps: participation in eighth grade Algebra I for high-performing Latino students increased by 20 percentage points, and for high-performing Black students, participation increased by over 30 percentage points.<sup>84</sup> Following the success of these local policies, Texas lawmakers passed a statewide math automatic enrollment policy in 2023.<sup>85</sup> The law requires districts to automatically enroll sixth grade students who performed in the top 40% on their fifth grade end-of-year test in an advanced math course.<sup>86</sup> While parents can still opt their student out, this early identification and enrollment in accelerated math has demonstrated results in increasing eighth grade Algebra I enrollment among Black and Latino students.

The evidence is clear: Michigan students with the greatest needs lack the resources necessary to enroll and succeed in rigorous coursework opportunities. These barriers present themselves long before high school; they start with a weak early reading foundation and poor foundational math performance among students with the greatest needs. Challenges are felt most acutely in high school, as students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities face systemic barriers to meaningful coursework that unlocks college- and career-readiness opportunities. These gaps have long-term consequences for the economic prospects of young Michiganders, and it is on all of us – educators, advocates, and especially policymakers – to expand educational opportunity for every Michigan student.

## V. Counseling is Key; Capacity is Lacking

For Michigan to ensure its students are college- and career-ready, students need a strong and diverse educator workforce, as well as academic, social, and often financial support to succeed in their next steps after high school. That support should include access to school counselors, who are recognized as essential pillars in supporting students' academic, career, and social-emotional growth.<sup>87</sup> Their work holds significant potential to improve educational outcomes for all students, particularly those with the greatest needs who face complex decisions after high school.<sup>88</sup> They serve as a crucial source of vital information and resources that facilitate students' pathways to post-secondary education and careers, especially for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation college-going students.<sup>89</sup> Implementing structured and comprehensive school counseling programs is consistently linked to a range of positive student outcomes, including improved academic performance, higher attendance, and reduced disciplinary issues.<sup>90</sup>

While dedicated college and career counselors are crucial to supporting students through high school, Michigan schools are not immune to the national shortage of school counselors. That's concerning because research consistently demonstrates that lower student-to-counselor ratios are associated with improved attendance, discipline rates, and graduation rates.<sup>91</sup> While the recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250:1, Michigan schools had an average ratio of 565:1 in the 2024-25 school year, which has dire consequences for the amount of attention and resources each student receives.<sup>92</sup>

Research shows that simply increasing the overall number of full-time counselors in a school is linked to a higher number of college applications submitted by students, underscoring the importance of reduced caseloads to enhance students' college exploration.<sup>93</sup> Especially for first-generation college-going students, college and career counselors can be influential in helping students envision themselves as college-bound if they do not have exposure to adults with college degrees outside of school. Further, this support is critical as parents may lack the resources and information to navigate college prep materials if they did not attend college themselves.

School counselors can play an essential role in expanding access to rigorous coursework as they help students understand course offerings and how they relate to different career pathways and interests. Counselors have a keen understanding of their students, teachers, course material, and the broader school environment. Understanding each students' unique skills and needs, counselors can recommend the level of coursework that will best support and challenge the student. The disparities in access to these supportive adults exacerbates the opportunity gaps for students who are the most underserved. Counselors must be central in efforts to expand access to rigorous coursework as they are the stewards of student success.

College and career counseling is also beneficial in helping students navigate important post-secondary preparation tasks, including college and job applications and financial aid like the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and scholarships. Research shows that high school seniors in high-poverty districts are less likely to complete the FAFSA than students in wealthier districts, but benefits can be greater for students from low-income backgrounds.<sup>94</sup> Seniors who complete the FAFSA are 84% more likely to immediately enroll in postsecondary education.<sup>95</sup> For students from low-income backgrounds, they are more than twice as likely to immediately enroll in college compared to their peers who did not complete the FAFSA.<sup>96</sup> Financial aid support is critical in Michigan, where only 61 percent of students in the Class of 2025 completed the FAFSA.<sup>97</sup> Incomplete FAFSAs have serious financial consequences, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds, with

Michigan 2023 graduates leaving nearly \$100 million in Pell Grants unclaimed and not receiving financial aid they would otherwise be eligible for.<sup>98</sup>

Policymakers have created different financial incentives to encourage students to complete the FAFSA, recognizing that the form is the gateway to state and federal financial aid like the [Michigan Achievement Scholarship](#), the [Community College Guarantee](#), [Michigan Reconnect](#), and the Pell Grant.<sup>99</sup> In 2024, the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP) created the Universal FAFSA Challenge Grant, a \$10 million grant available to school districts that commit to incorporating FAFSA completion into their graduation requirements.<sup>100</sup> Governor Whitmer’s administration has also taken steps to incentivize individual students to complete the FAFSA through the \$1 million “Ticket to Tuition” FAFSA Sweepstakes. The initiative encourages Michigan’s first-time college enrollees, especially high school seniors, to complete the FAFSA and enter for a chance to win one of forty \$10,000 prizes or one of ten \$50,000 prizes.<sup>101</sup> These prizes will be awarded in Michigan Education Savings Program accounts, which can be used toward tuition and fees, living expenses, and other educational expenses.<sup>102</sup>



### **Supporting Undocumented and Mixed-Status Families with Post-Secondary Planning**

All students deserve equitable and appropriate resources and support. There are no laws barring students from college admission and enrollment based on immigration status, yet students from undocumented or mixed-status families may face additional barriers in accessing information and financial aid.<sup>103</sup> Undocumented students are not eligible for federal financial aid, and undocumented students living in Michigan are not eligible for state financial aid.<sup>104</sup> Private and institutional scholarships may provide financial support to undocumented students, and it is important that counselors serving immigrant populations are aware of and connected to these opportunities.<sup>105</sup> For mixed-status families in which one or both parents are undocumented, students may feel additional anxieties about completing applications that require sensitive information, particularly federal forms like the FAFSA.<sup>106</sup> Counselors should be equipped with the knowledge and resources to ensure that students from mixed-status families feel safe and comfortable completing government documents amid concerns about data privacy.<sup>107</sup>

*While the recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250:1, Michigan schools had an average ratio of 565:1 in the 2024-25 school year, which has dire consequences for the amount of attention and resources each student receives.*

## VI. Policy Recommendations

Students across Michigan face barriers in accessing and succeeding in rigorous coursework, spanning from early reading to AP and dual enrollment opportunities. These challenges are more pronounced for students with the greatest needs. However, these problems are not unsolvable. Lessons from other states and promising existing programs across the state provide a vision for strong, sustained investments in students with the greatest needs. These policy recommendations provide a roadmap to the work needed to ensure all Michigan students are ready for rigor.

- 1.** Districts should adopt an automatic enrollment policy to place qualifying students in advanced coursework.
  - a. To mitigate bias in enrollment policies, students with qualifying grades and/or test scores should be automatically enrolled in the advanced coursework offered in their school. Students would still be able to take the regular course if they so choose. Using an “opt-out” policy rather than “opt-in” process reduces the risk of gatekeeping practices that can inhibit qualified students from enrolling in courses they would succeed in.
  - b. The state should provide technical support through pilot program grant funding to support district shifts in enrollment policies and ensure that administrators, counselors, and teachers are equipped to properly identify and enroll students in the best course for them.
    - i. Pilot programming should also include extensive parent communications about the opt-in policy and easily accessible information for parents of opted-in students.
    - ii. Minnesota’s pilot program includes up to six districts who are tasked with creating their own automatic enrollment policy in applicable advanced coursework.<sup>108</sup> This model allows for district flexibility alongside state support to better understand best practices.
- 2.** The state should continue to consistently reimburse AP, IB, and CLEP testing fees for qualifying students and districts and streamline qualifications for high-poverty districts.
  - a. Districts and schools are currently encouraged to participate in the program, and processes for how students request reimbursement may vary from district to district.<sup>109</sup> To best serve students from low-income backgrounds, the state should automatically waive test fees for students in districts in Opportunity Index Bands 5 and 6, which are districts with the highest concentrations of poverty. This will reduce potential stigma and student burden that may serve as a barrier to testing.
  - b. Districts serving lower concentrations of student poverty should explore ways to leverage state funding and streamline test waiver processes for students from low-income backgrounds so that all qualifying students receive financial support.
- 3.** The state should commit dedicated resources to ensure dual enrollment access in high schools across the state, particularly in districts with high concentrations of student poverty.
  - a. Policymakers should establish a statewide funding mechanism for dual enrollment courses that eliminates the cost burden on the student. The Michigan Community College Association outlines the following options for a new funding formula that allows districts to retain their current foundation allowance funding:

- i. Creating a Designated Categorical Grant, meaning there is a designated funding stream in the budget for which dollars can only be used for dual enrollment purposes.
    - ii. Funding dual enrollment through the Post-secondary Scholarship Fund, which would allocate funding directly to institutions of higher education.<sup>110</sup>
  - b. The Michigan Department of Education should work with ISD and district leaders to strengthen community college partnerships so that every high school student has the opportunity to take a dual enrollment course either on-campus or online.
  - c. MDE should expand public availability of dual enrollment data and researchers should continue to expand dual enrollment research.
- 4.** The state should continue to invest in expanding high-quality career and technical education opportunities for all students, particularly students with disabilities and districts serving high concentrations of students from low-income backgrounds and students of color.
- a. Districts should create policies and processes that ensure collaboration between special education and CTE teachers. This could include CTE teacher participation in individualized education plan (IEP) meetings and additional training for CTE teachers to ensure they are prepared and equipped to teach students with disabilities.<sup>111</sup>
  - b. The state should continue to fund CTE deserts, and grants should continue to be prioritized for school districts in areas with opportunity gaps.<sup>112</sup>
- 5.** Policymakers should invest in the school counselor pipeline through increased funding for districts to hire counselors and career advising positions.
- a. Schools and districts, with the support of the state, should work to ensure a ratio of 1 counselor for every 250 students, as recommended by the American School Counselor Association.<sup>113</sup>
  - b. Lawmakers should follow the framework of teacher recruitment and retention efforts to incentivize school counselor education and working in high-poverty schools.<sup>114</sup>
- 6.** The state should implement FAFSA completion as a graduation requirement, with guardrails and supports in place to provide accurate, timely information and assistance to families.
- a. For Michigan's Class of 2023, nearly \$100 million in Pell Grants were left unclaimed due to students not completing the FAFSA and, therefore, not receiving financial aid they would otherwise be eligible for.<sup>115</sup>
  - b. Evidence from Louisiana, Illinois, Alabama, and Texas show that FAFSA graduation requirements have minimal negative impact on high school graduation rates.<sup>116</sup> Results show an increased FAFSA completion rate and, therefore, greater eligibility for federal and state financial aid programs.<sup>117</sup>
  - c. Counselors should be equipped with the resources to support undocumented and mixed-status families with financial aid opportunities in the absence of federal or state eligibility.
  - d. Students should be able to opt-out of completing the FAFSA with a parent or guardian signature and approval from a school counselor with no penalty toward their progress to graduation.

## VII. Conclusion

Every Michigan student should graduate high school ready for their post-secondary journey, whether that includes college, a skilled trade program, or the workforce. This work is not easy, but it is important. It will take coordinated efforts from policymakers, ISD, district, and school leaders, industry professionals, and community-led organizations to provide all students with the skills and resources needed for the modern workforce. In particular, dedicated resources, funding, and efforts will be needed to reduce existing opportunity gaps and barriers that prevent students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English Learners, and students with disabilities from accessing rigorous coursework that will set them up for future success. The recommendations in this report provide concrete steps to expand access to rigorous coursework and meaningful opportunities that will ensure every Michigan student is college- and career-ready.



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