Supporting Online AP Learners

An Implementation Study of Tennessee's AP Access for All Program

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Introduction

Participating in Advanced Placement (AP) courses and performing well on AP coursework increases college readiness, persistence, and long-term financial success.[1] High school students take AP courses taught by trained teachers and, if they pass an exam at the end of the course, they can receive college credit.

In recent years, Tennessee has made substantial investments in providing more students across the state with access to early post-secondary opportunities (EPSOs), including increasing funding for dual enrollment programs and innovative high school models, and expanding student access to AP courses through the AP Access for All program (APAA). APAA launched in 2021 through a partnership between TDOE and the Niswonger Foundation to provide online AP courses for students who may not have access to them in their schools.[2] The program provides professional support for participating APAA teachers, school liaisons, classroom AP teachers, and high school counselors and administrators statewide. By providing virtual access to AP courses, APAA strives to eliminate student financial barriers and support student enrollment in AP coursework not currently available at their local high school.

The Niswonger Foundation oversees the recruitment of teachers for APAA courses, delivers professional development and training to APAA liaisons, and provides platforms and resources for APAA students. Each school participating in the APAA program has one dedicated liaison who is responsible for recruiting students for APAA courses, monitoring students' progress in their APAA courses, and ordering and administering AP exams for APAA students.[3] APAA liaisons are typically existing staff members at the school who hold other roles in addition to their APAA duties. Each APAA course is asynchronous, taught by College Board-certified teachers across the state, with no more than 20 students in each course. In its inaugural year (2021-22), the program saw participation from nearly 90% of school systems in Tennessee, offering 15 AP courses and enrolling around 1,800 students in APAA courses.[4] As of fall 2023, APAA course offerings cover 21 AP courses, and 98% of school districts in Tennessee participate in the program.[5]

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1. *Klepfer, K., & Hull, J. (2012). High school rigor and good advice: Setting up students to succeed. Alexandria, VA: The Center for Public Education; Rose, H., & Betts, J. R. (2004). The effect of high school courses on earnings. Review of Economics and Statistics, 86(2), 497-513.; Smith, J., Hurwitz, M., & Avery, C. (2017). Giving College Credit Where It Is Due: Advanced Placement Exam Scores and College Outcomes. Journal of Labor Economics, 35(1), 67–147. https://doi.org/10.1086/687568*

2. *https://tnapaccessforall.org/about/*

3. *See https://tnapaccessforall.org/liaisons/ for more information on APAA liaisons.*

4. *AP Access for ALL Impact Report: Spring 2022. https://tnapaccessforall.org/ap-access-for-all-releases-spring-2022-impact-report/*

5. *AP Access for ALL Impact Report: Fall 2023. https://tnapaccessforall.org/apaa-fall-impact-report-2023/*

To inform how the state can continue to implement and scale the program, the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) conducted a mixed-methods study of the implementation of APAA. Specifically, TERA researchers explored two main research questions: 1) What practices are APAA liaisons using to recruit, enroll and support students in APAA classes? 2) What school-level factors are predictive of APAA enrollment and success?

This brief focuses on findings from the first research question.

Key Findings:

1 *Most APAA liaisons reported that they use multiple methods to recruit students for APAA courses, but less than half reported intentional efforts to recruit students from underrepresented groups.*

2 *Liaisons reported using various APAA eligibility requirements and relying on informal assessments to gauge students' fit for the program, such as one-on-one conversations with students prior to enrollment.*

3 *Liaisons indicated that student interest in dual enrollment is a barrier to recruiting students for APAA.*

4 *Across schools, liaisons reported that APAA students struggle with time management, the academic rigor of the courses, and learning asynchronously.*

5 *Many liaisons reported having a dedicated time and space for their APAA students to work on their courses, but they reported varying levels of supervision and study environment quality across schools.*

6 *Liaisons generally reported that they feel supported by their administrators. However, they cited that it is difficult to manage the large workload of supporting students across different courses and, especially as a first-year liaison, the additional tasks specific to APAA.*

DATA

The data included in this analysis are drawn from 29 AP liaisons who participated in one of five focus groups and survey responses from 161 liaisons. Survey respondents represented 90% of focus group participants and 69% of all APAA liaisons statewide. Participating liaisons represent schools of similar sizes and serve similar populations of students to schools whose liaisons did not participate in our focus groups or survey. However, the set of all 231 schools currently participating in APAA tends to serve significantly larger student populations that are less economically disadvantaged and less racially diverse than the 268 other high schools in Tennessee that are not currently participating in APAA. The APAA schools were also more likely to already offer AP classes prior to the start of the APAA program than non-APAA schools.
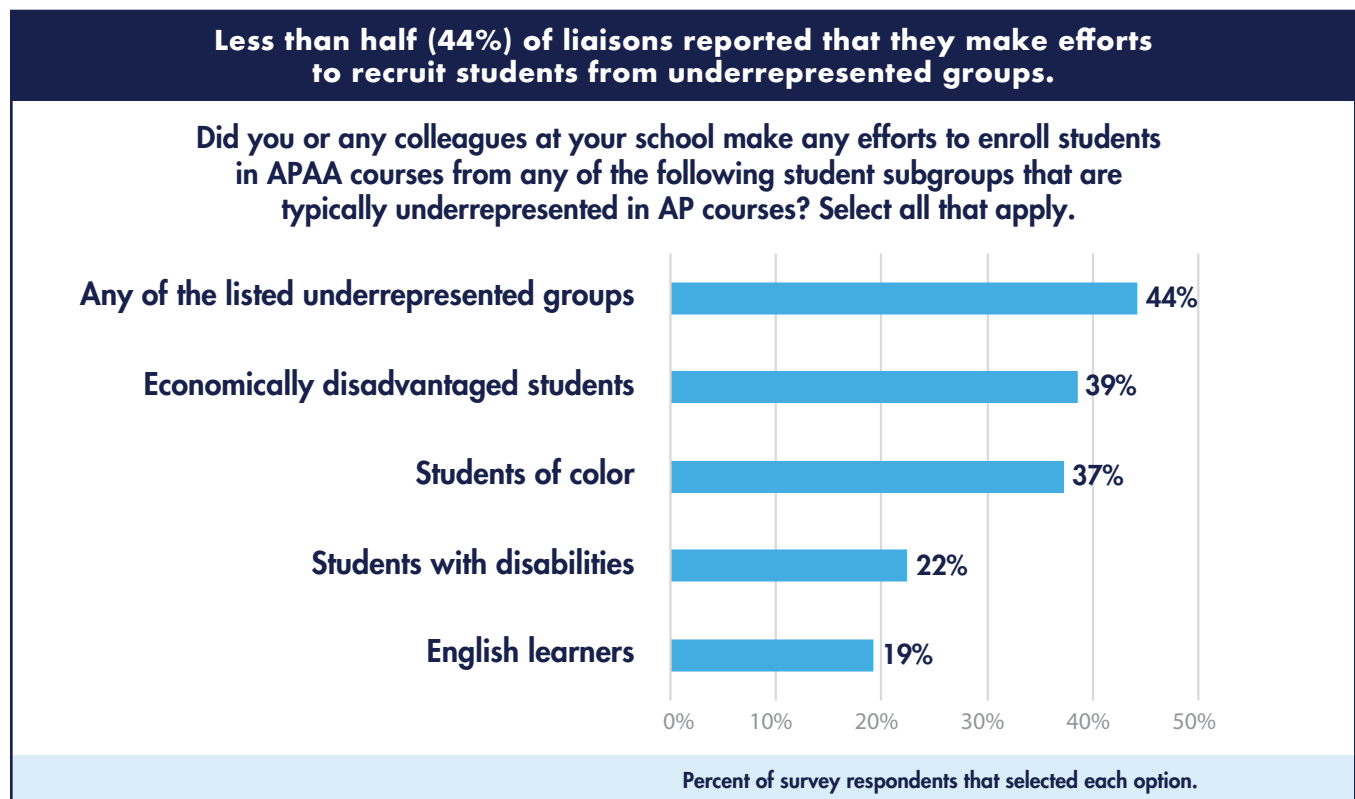
1 Most APAA liaisons reported that they use multiple methods to recruit students for APAA courses, but less than half reported intentional efforts to recruit students from underrepresented groups.

Responses from the survey and the focus groups indicated that most liaisons make efforts to recruit students to participate in APAA and they use a variety of recruitment tactics. Specifically, 78% of survey respondents reported using multiple methods to recruit students for APAA courses, including asking teachers or counselors to suggest students (55%), distributing handouts or posters (52%), holding meetings for parents/ students (52%), emailing information to students (47%), and posting on school websites or social media pages (39%). In focus groups, liaisons discussed taking both broad and targeted approaches to recruitment. For example, liaisons would use students' test scores, grades, teacher recommendations, and prior course enrollments to identify those who might be interested in APAA courses and capable of handling the workload. Liaisons also used wide-reaching methods to advertise APAA to all students, such as presenting at parent meetings, posting flyers in the school building, and sending school-wide emails about APAA opportunities.

Despite these varied tactics, liaisons reported that they generally do not target their recruitment efforts towards specific student groups who are historically underrepresented in AP courses. In fact, as shown in Figure 1, less than half (44%) of survey respondents reported making specific efforts to recruit students from any listed underrepresented group and under 40% reported that they specifically target students of color or economically disadvantaged students.

FIGURE 1

Less than half (44%) of liaisons reported that they make efforts to recruit students from underrepresented groups.

Did you or any colleagues at your school make any efforts to enroll students in APAA courses from any of the following student subgroups that are typically underrepresented in AP courses? Select all that apply.

Group	Percent
Any of the listed underrepresented groups	44%
Economically disadvantaged students	39%
Students of color	37%
Students with disabilities	22%
English learners	19%

Percent of survey respondents that selected each option.

When asked to describe strategies used to recruit students from these groups, survey responses revealed that the efforts were generally targeted to all students. For example, in an open-ended survey question that asked liaisons to describe efforts made to enroll students from underrepresented groups, none of the responses described methods for identifying or targeting specific students to enroll. Instead, liaisons made remarks such as, "all students are given the same opportunity" and "we invited everyone that was interested."

In focus groups, liaisons either expressed uncertainty about whether their school reached underrepresented students, or they reported that APAA participants naturally reflected the overall diversity of their school. For instance, one focus group participant explained that "I, as the AP Coordinator, am not privy to a list of [APAA student] names that would be the low socioeconomic group. And as for ethnicity, that would be a guess, you know." Another liaison said that they "feel like the enrollment in online APAA classes mirrors general enrollment" at their school. However, they went on to clarify that "there's not a lot of diversity" in either the school overall or among the school's APAA students.

Focus group participants also spoke about how APAA expands AP course options at schools that already offer AP courses in-person, as opposed to describing how APAA expands AP course access to underrepresented students. Several liaisons reported that APAA primarily served as an option for resolving scheduling conflicts for high-achieving students or for providing students with an opportunity to take "niche" AP courses that their school was unable to staff.

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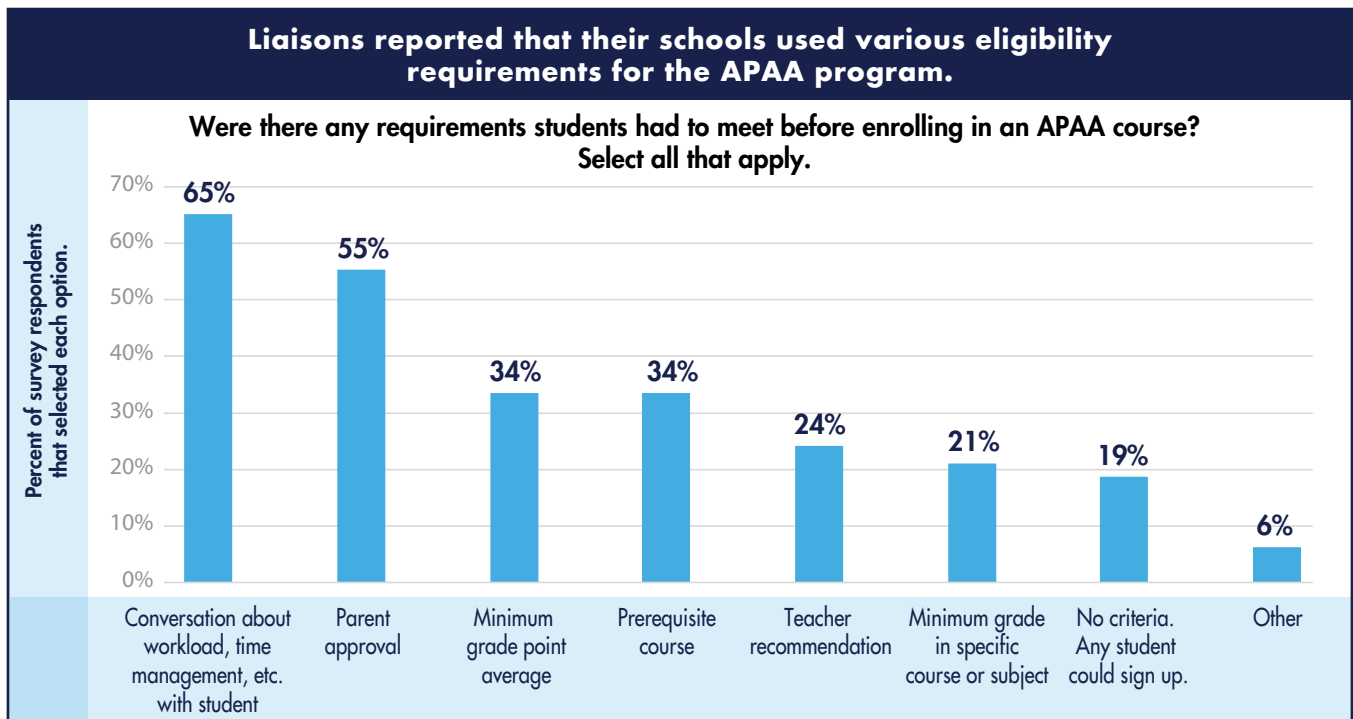
– APAA Liaison

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Liaisons reported using various APAA eligibility requirements and relying on informal assessments to gauge students' fit for the program, such as one-on-one conversations with students prior to enrollment.

About three quarters (73%) of survey respondents reported using multiple criteria to determine student eligibility for APAA and about one-fifth (19%) reported having no criteria. Eligibility criteria are intended not only to ensure that students are prepared for the academic rigor of the courses, but also to gauge whether students can manage their time and be self-sufficient. One liaison explained in the focus group that they try "to make sure that the students who sign up are capable. We make sure they at least have a 3.0 GPA as we do for honors courses. We do not want to set students up for failure. I've had several in the past that have struggled with the responsibility of the course load."

As shown in Figure 2, while students' prior test scores and grades provided some information about whether they were prepared for the course material, liaisons relied heavily on conversations with students, teachers, and counselors to assess students' soft skills. In fact, only 34% of survey respondents reported that students were required to have certain prerequisite courses or a minimum GPA prior to enrollment, while 65% said that they required a conversation with the student about workload and time management.

FIGURE 2

Liaisons reported that their schools used various eligibility requirements for the APAA program.

Were there any requirements students had to meet before enrolling in an APAA course? Select all that apply.

Percent of survey respondents that selected each option.

- Conversation about workload, time management, etc. with student: 65%
- Parent approval: 55%
- Minimum grade point average: 34%
- Prerequisite course: 34%
- Teacher recommendation: 24%
- Minimum grade in specific course or subject: 21%
- No criteria. Any student could sign up.: 19%
- Other: 6%

> "We make sure they at least have a 3.0 GPA as we do for honors courses. We do not want to set students up for failure. I've had several in the past that have struggled with the responsibility of the course load." – APAA Liaison

One liaison reported having "a lot of conversations" with students to ensure that enrolling in an APAA course is the "appropriate decision for the student" as opposed to relying on other eligibility criteria. When explaining the school's reasoning for this approach, they said, "I don't want to set them up for failure, but I also don't want to make it sound like that conversation is discouraging them from making the attempt." Some liaisons felt that these conversations were even more informative about a student's ability to handle an APAA course than other pieces of information like student grades or test scores. Liaisons spoke extensively about how students faced time management issues, which hindered their success in APAA courses. The asynchronous nature of APAA courses required students to exercise greater independence and motivation than what was typically required in their in-person classes. Having conversations with students and using information provided through teacher recommendations were an opportunity for liaisons to learn more about a student's time management skills.

3 Liaisons indicated that student interest in dual enrollment is a barrier to recruiting students for APAA.

AP is just one type of early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs) offered by Tennessee high schools. Almost all survey respondents (95%) said that their school offered dual enrollment or dual credit courses. Around three quarters (78%) offered industry certifications, 65% offered in-person AP courses, and 12% offered other EPSOs like International Baccalaureate (IB) or Cambridge International.

In both the focus groups and survey responses, liaisons frequently noted that students considering enrolling in APAA often decide to enroll in dual enrollment instead, and that this competition with dual enrollment presented a significant barrier to successfully recruiting students for APAA. Dual enrollment courses are college-level courses offered by a college or university and taught by credentialed, postsecondary faculty.[6] Students can take these courses at a college campus, their local high school, or online. As reflected in both survey results and focus group discussions, liaisons believed the main reason students are drawn to dual enrollment over APAA is that students view dual enrollment courses as a more straightforward process for earning college credit. Ninety percent of liaisons at schools that offered dual enrollment said that students are more motivated to take dual enrollment over APAA because dual enrollment courses are considered an easier path to receiving college credit (see Figure 3). As one focus group participant explained, their school has "a lot of dual enrollment students, and [these students] are finding that they take the [dual enrollment] course, they pass the course, they get [college] credit for it. With AP, if they don't pass the AP test at the end of the year, they don't get any [college] credit for that course."

Another main reason liaisons believed that students choose other EPSOs like dual enrollment over APAA is that students prefer to take classes that meet in-person rather than online. While not all dual enrollment courses are offered in-person, those that are were perhaps preferred over online courses like APAA for some students. Liaisons cited proximity to their local college as another driver of dual enrollment participation over APAA because it provides students with an opportunity to participate on the college campus with in-person instructors. As one liaison put it, "dual enrollment is preferred due to the college being 5 minutes away and being able to meet with the professors in-person."

6. https://www.tn.gov/education/students/early-postsecondary/dual-enrollment.html

FIGURE 3

Liaisons reported that students choose other EPSOs like dual enrollment over APAA because it is an "easier" option and that students want to meet in person instead of online.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the other EPSOs offered at your school and their impact on your APAA program?

Statement	Percent
Students are more motivated to take dual enrollment/credit courses because it's an easier way to earn college credit.	90%
Students prefer EPSOs that meet in-person to learning online.	76%
Students have heard that APAA classes are harder than dual enrollment/credit classes.	73%
Students prefer dual enrollment/credit if they are planning to go to a community college, not a four-year university.	60%
Students prefer APAA because they face financial barriers with other EPSOs (e.g., cost of textbooks, exams).	52%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Percent of survey respondents that agree/strongly agree with each statement.

"A lot of dual enrollment students are finding that when they take and pass a dual enrollment course, they get college credit for it. With AP, if they don't pass the AP test at the end of the year, they don't get any college credit for that course."
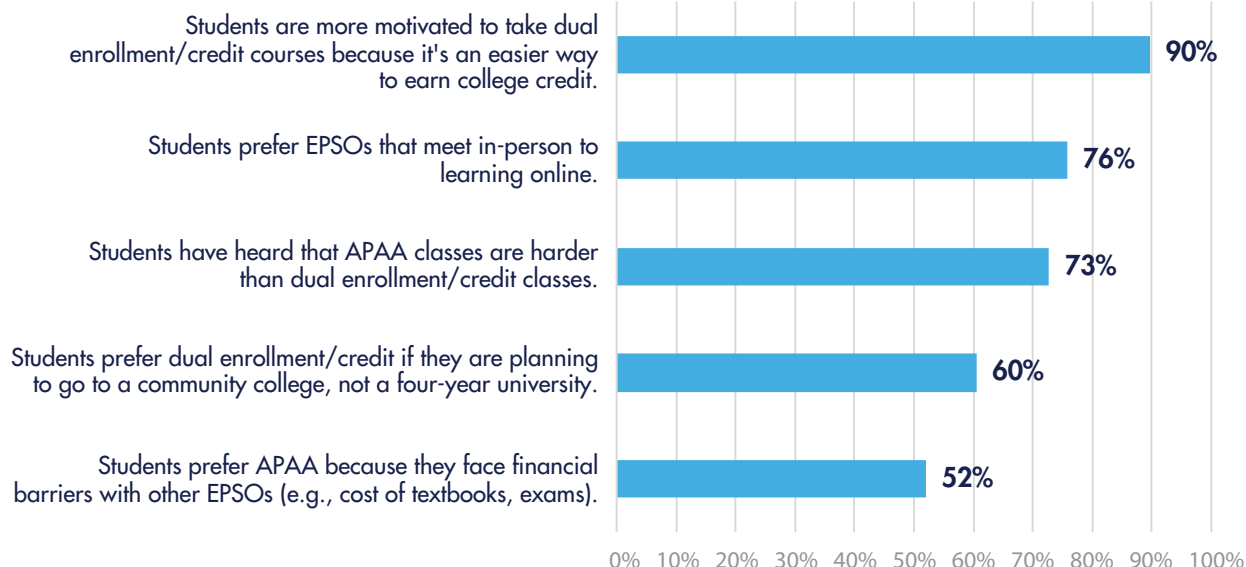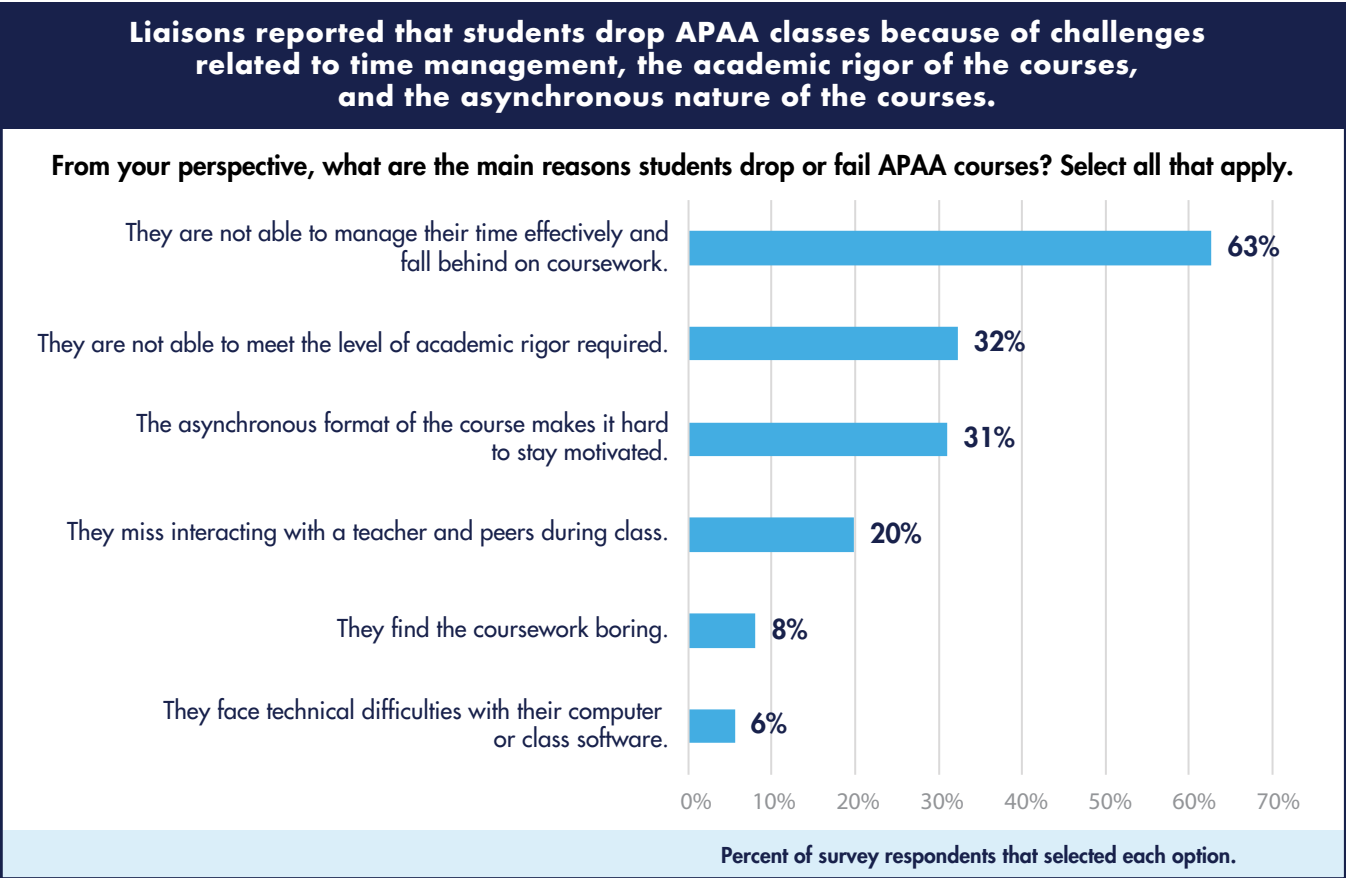
– APAA Liaison

Across schools, liaisons reported that APAA students struggle with time management, the academic rigor of the courses, and learning asynchronously.

Time management is a key struggle for students, according to the liaisons. As shown in Figure 4, more than half (63%) of survey respondents who had at least one student drop or fail an APAA course in the previous year listed time management as a primary reason. Additionally, focus group participants repeatedly explained that time management, course rigor, and staying engaged in the online format were major hurdles for students.

FIGURE 4

Liaisons reported that students drop APAA classes because of challenges related to time management, the academic rigor of the courses, and the asynchronous nature of the courses.

From your perspective, what are the main reasons students drop or fail APAA courses? Select all that apply.

They are not able to manage their time effectively and fall behind on coursework.	63%
They are not able to meet the level of academic rigor required.	32%
The asynchronous format of the course makes it hard to stay motivated.	31%
They miss interacting with a teacher and peers during class.	20%
They find the coursework boring.	8%
They face technical difficulties with their computer or class software.	6%

Percent of survey respondents that selected each option.

Note: Figure shows responses to survey question among respondents who reported that at least one student had dropped or failed an APAA course in the previous year.

Liaisons reported that students struggle with time management and motivation for various reasons. In some cases, liaisons found that otherwise high-achieving students take on more than they can handle and struggle to keep up with their extra work. As one focus group participant explained, "Our students who struggled last year were some of our top students, but they were having organization issues and they seemed to be procrastinators. They were all very bright and capable of the workload." Several of these students had enrolled in full course loads and had taken on an APAA course as an extra course to complete outside of regular school hours. When assignments came due, these students struggled to meet deadlines and complete their work on top of their other classwork.

Liaisons also observed that some students are not prepared for the rigor that the AP courses demand, particularly in schools that did not offer AP courses prior to APAA. About half (53%) of survey respondents said that their school has a strong "AP culture," however among those whose schools did not offer AP courses prior to APAA, 87% of respondents said many students don't understand how rigorous AP courses might be before they enroll. One focus group participant recounted her attempt to prepare a student who was unfamiliar with AP for the difficulty of APAA courses by saying, "I did tell her and her dad that these [APAA] courses are gonna be very rigorous. …'cause they were kind of thinking it was more like an honors class, but it's a little bit more rigorous than the honors class. So, I was trying to tell them that, and they were just like, you know, 'We got it. I think she's gonna do fine,' and she's actually failing it right now." Although liaisons made efforts to prepare students for APAA coursework, as this liaison found, it was challenging to convey the difficulty of APAA in comparison to other courses students may have taken.

Other students struggle with the self-paced nature of the asynchronous course. Liaisons believed that these students have difficulty staying "on-task" during their dedicated APAA time period or are otherwise unable to keep up with their work. Among survey respondents who had at least one student drop or fail an APAA course in the previous year, 31% said that students dropped or failed because the asynchronous format of the course make it hard to stay motivated and 6% said that students face technical difficulties with computer equipment or the course software. In focus groups, liaisons mentioned that students find the APAA courses unengaging and face challenges with accessing real-time support from teachers while working on the course material. Students who attend hybrid or virtual schools may be more prepared for the format. One liaison at a hybrid school felt that the virtual structure of their school mirrored the format of the APAA classes, which contributed to the high level of success seen among their APAA students.

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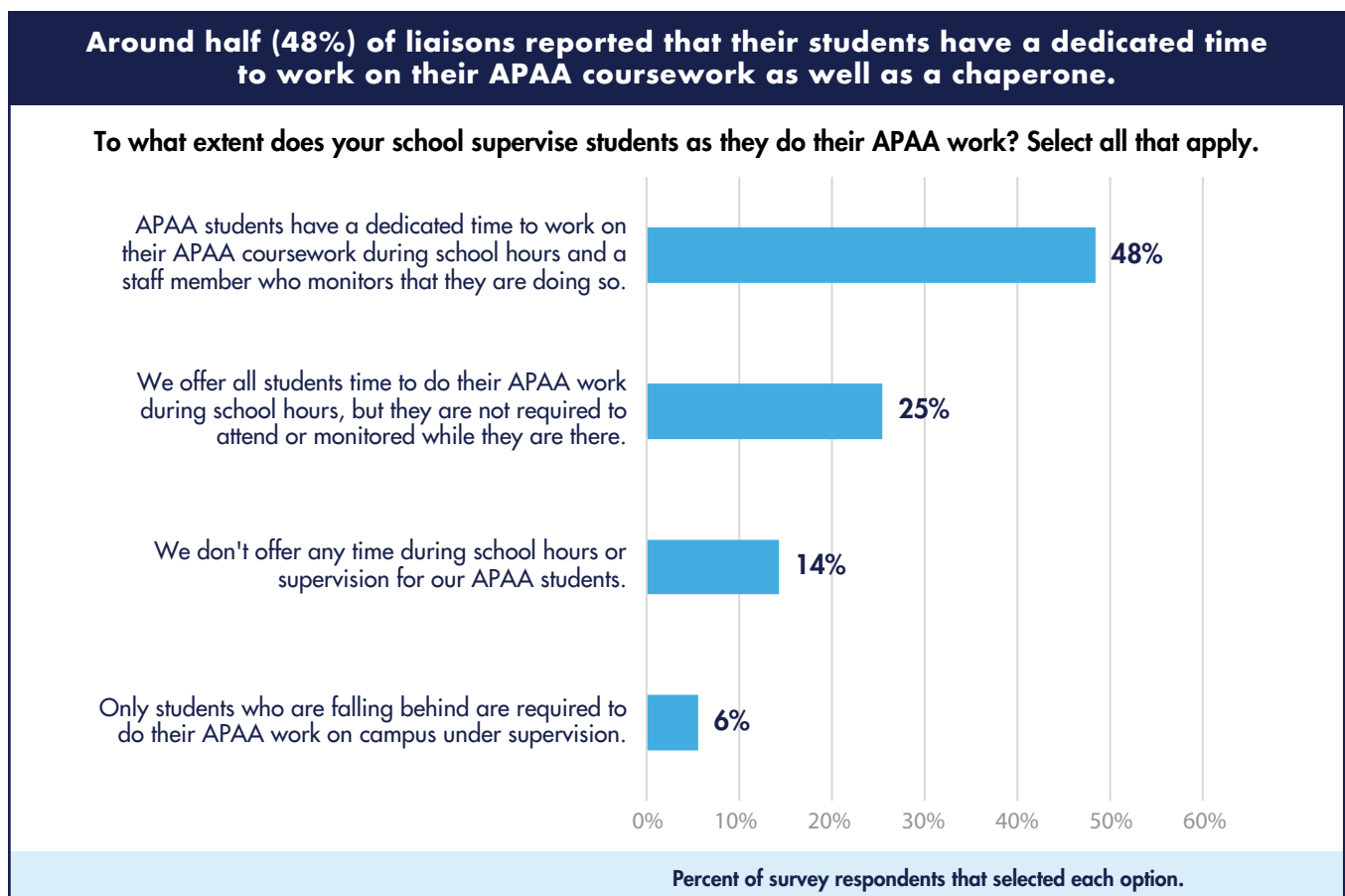
– APAA Liaison

Many liaisons reported having a dedicated time and space for their APAA students to work on their courses, but they reported varying levels of supervision and study environment quality across schools.

While around half of liaisons (48%) said that their APAA students have a dedicated, supervised time to work on their APAA coursework during school hours, the format and quality seemed to vary substantially across schools. As shown in Figure 5, 25% of liaisons said that they offer all students time to do their APAA work during school hours, but students are not required to attend, and they are not monitored during that time. Another 6% said only students who are falling behind are required to do their APAA coursework on campus under supervision.

FIGURE 5

Around half (48%) of liaisons reported that their students have a dedicated time to work on their APAA coursework as well as a chaperone.

To what extent does your school supervise students as they do their APAA work? Select all that apply.

Response	Percent
APAA students have a dedicated time to work on their APAA coursework during school hours and a staff member who monitors that they are doing so.	48%
We offer all students time to do their APAA work during school hours, but they are not required to attend or monitored while they are there.	25%
We don't offer any time during school hours or supervision for our APAA students.	14%
Only students who are falling behind are required to do their APAA work on campus under supervision.	6%

Percent of survey respondents that selected each option.

Additionally, multiple focus group participants reported that even if a school provides a space for students to do their APAA work, the quality of the environment varies according to the school's available resources and staff. For example, some schools can provide a quiet space for all APAA students to work on their course at the same time while being supervised by a staff member who is knowledgeable about APAA. Other schools are only able to provide students with space in a louder environment (such as a cafeteria), or with no direct supervision by a staff member familiar with APAA. Liaisons who were not able to provide high levels of supervision expressed disappointment that they were not able to do so. One liaison said "I do ask [APAA students] to stay on campus and work in the media center. I wish that we had a dedicated person… That would be so nice to have that! But we do not have that option."

According to the liaisons, providing a dedicated time and space for working on APAA coursework gives students an opportunity to interact with each other, which focus group respondents said was helpful for students. For example, one focus group participant said, "we have arranged for students who are taking the same class to meet occasionally during lunch to collaborate. Our [APAA] Computer Science kids have really enjoyed this and have benefited from sharing struggles and successes." While not every liaison was able to monitor or check-in on students during their assigned APAA period, focus group respondents did occasionally observe APAA students helping each other out with both their course material and with navigating the online APAA platform. However, liaisons in schools with few APAA students discussed how students do not have many opportunities to receive support from their peers given that there might only be one student taking a specific AP course in the school.

> **"We have arranged for students who are taking the same class to meet occasionally during lunch to collaborate. Our [APAA] Computer Science kids have really enjoyed this and have benefited from sharing struggles and successes."**
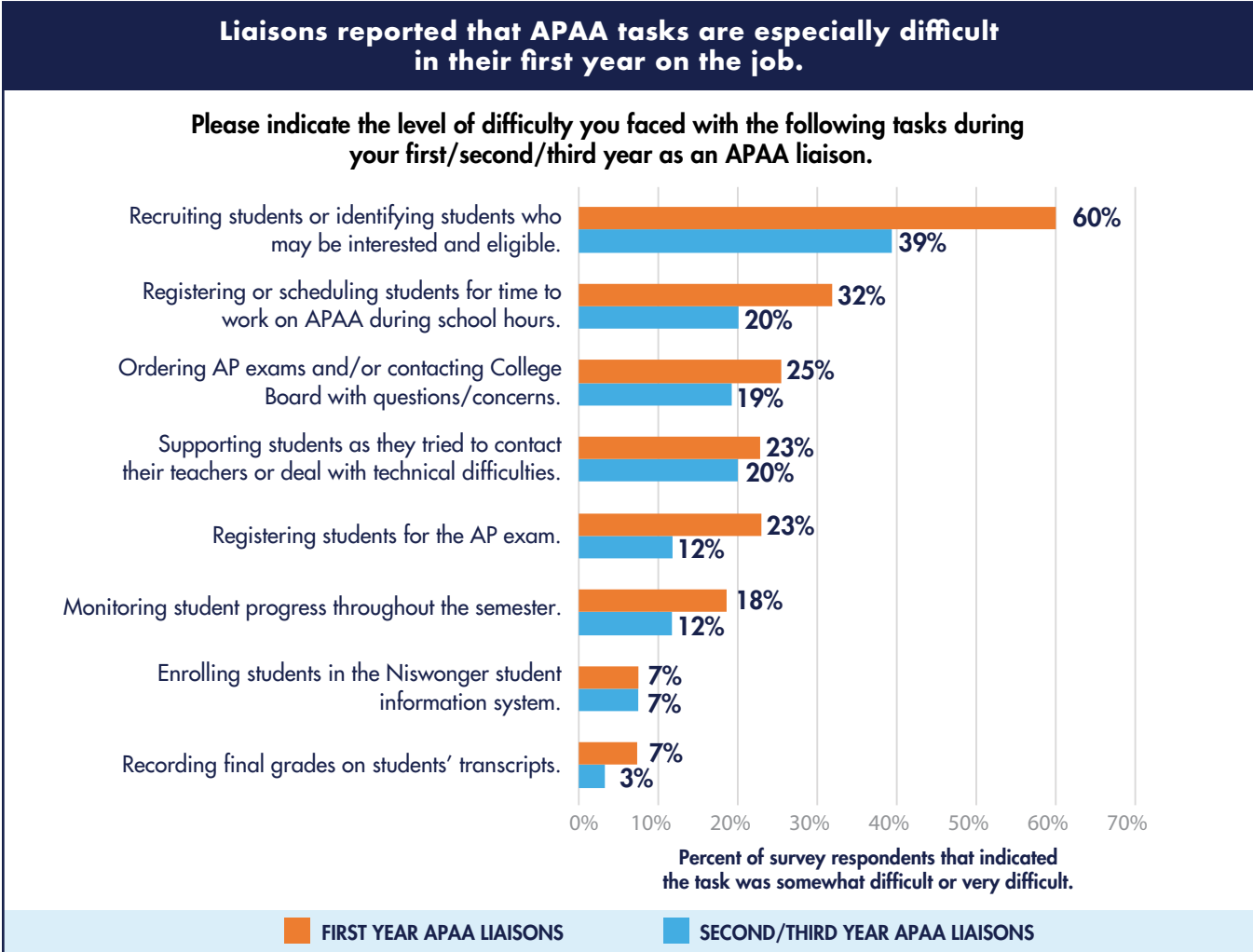>
> *– APAA Liaison*

6 Liaisons generally reported that they feel supported by their administrators. However, they cited that it is difficult to manage the large workload of supporting students across different courses and, especially as a first-year liaison, the additional tasks specific to APAA.

Most liaisons in focus groups reported that they feel supported by their administrators, leaders, and faculty, and that the support empowers liaisons to solicit help from colleagues with various APAA tasks including student recruitment, scheduling logistics, and student monitoring.

However, APAA liaisons reported facing several barriers that limit their capacity to fully support their students. For example, almost all liaisons said that they serve in at least one other role at their school, and many reported serving in multiple roles. In addition to holding the APAA liaison role, more than half of survey respondents said they are also the AP Coordinator for their school (58%) and/or serve as a counselor (57%).

Further, some liaisons said that they struggle to manage APAA tasks, especially those who lack extensive experience with AP programs prior to starting the APAA liaison role and those in their first year as a liaison. However, as shown in Figure 6, liaisons reported that managing the APAA tasks is less burdensome as they enter their second year. For example, 60% of survey respondents who were in their first year as a liaison reported that they found it difficult to recruit or identify interested students compared to 39% in their second year. Similarly, 39% of first-year liaisons reported that it was difficult to schedule students for time to work on APAA during school hours compared to 20% of second-year liaisons.

FIGURE 6

Liaisons reported that APAA tasks are especially difficult in their first year on the job.

Please indicate the level of difficulty you faced with the following tasks during your first/second/third year as an APAA liaison.

Task	First Year	Second/Third Year
Recruiting students or identifying students who may be interested and eligible.	60%	39%
Registering or scheduling students for time to work on APAA during school hours.	32%	20%
Ordering AP exams and/or contacting College Board with questions/concerns.	25%	19%
Supporting students as they tried to contact their teachers or deal with technical difficulties.	23%	20%
Registering students for the AP exam.	23%	12%
Monitoring student progress throughout the semester.	18%	12%
Enrolling students in the Niswonger student information system.	7%	7%
Recording final grades on students' transcripts.	7%	3%

Percent of survey respondents that indicated the task was somewhat difficult or very difficult.

■ FIRST YEAR APAA LIAISONS ■ SECOND/THIRD YEAR APAA LIAISONS

Focus group discussions further revealed that liaisons who are familiar with AP courses via their other roles (e.g., AP coordinator, counselor, teacher) tend to have an easier time getting up to speed upon entering the APAA liaison role. These liaisons are more familiar with navigating the College Board system and are better prepared for tasks like registering and ordering AP exams for students.

Additionally, liaisons reported that large APAA workloads make it more difficult for them to support their students. Focus group participants explained that the size of their workload varies according to the number of students enrolled in APAA, the degree to which students struggle with their APAA courses, and the number of different AP courses their APAA students are taking. Some liaisons went so far as to say that the number of different APAA courses offered has a greater impact on their workload than the total number of APAA students. As one liaison explained, "if you only have AP Biology and AP Statistics, for example, having 20 kids is the same to me as having 2 kids [with] one in each course, 'cause you're gonna go through those same steps." Liaisons who struggled to manage the workload of supporting students across multiple APAA courses advised schools and other liaisons who were new to the APAA program to limit course offerings in the first year as they adjusted to the program.

"**If you only have AP Biology and AP Statistics, for example, having 20 kids is the same to me as having 2 kids [with] one in each course, 'cause you're gonna go through those same steps.**"

– APAA Liaison

Responses from the APAA liaison surveys and focus groups provide critical insights into the implementation of the APAA program. Liaisons receive extensive informational materials from the Niswonger Foundation to aid in program implementation, and they feel supported by administrators, leaders, and faculty - all of which help schools adopt and run the APAA program.

However, liaisons still face numerous challenges in both recruiting and fully supporting their students and these challenges vary substantially across the participating schools. Notably, schools with established "AP cultures" or hybrid learning models often report having an easier time successfully integrating APAA, while schools with more traditional learning models or that have not historically offered AP courses tend to report facing greater hurdles supporting students and providing the school infrastructure needed to fully support the program. This may include supplying adequate study spaces for students staffed with teachers who are familiar with APAA, providing liaisons with differing levels and types of support (especially if they are in their first year or have limited experience with counseling or AP coordination), and supporting students who are struggling with time management and the rigorous coursework.

While schools may face challenges in implementing the program, APAA remains an integral part of the state's strategy to provide more students with access to AP coursework. Notably, the APAA program is still in its infancy. As the program grows and schools and districts learn more about strategies for success, these challenges may become easier to address. Indeed, as liaisons in our study reported, coordinating the APAA program is less difficult as time passes. Accordingly, TERA's next analyses will explore what school factors most contribute to APAA enrollment and student success in the program.

TN EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE