

School initiative's test-takers stand out; participants field nearly half of state's college-credit qualifiers

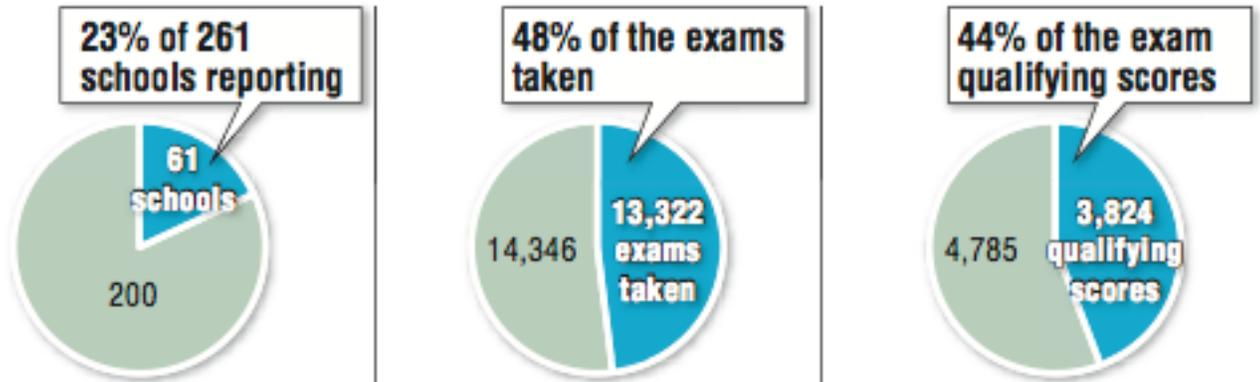
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Advanced Initiative for Math and Science: 2017 results

The 61 high schools participating in the Arkansas Advanced Initiative for Math and Science program produced a disproportionately higher percentage of students taking Advanced Placement exams in math, science and English in the 2016-17 school year than schools not in the program. The schools also generated a disproportionately greater percentage of students earning test scores that can qualify them for college credits or higher level college course placement.

Advanced Initiative for Math and Science schools are:



SOURCE: National Math and Science Initiative, The College Board

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

PHOTO BY ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE / SOURCE: NATIONAL MATH AND SCIENCE INITIATIVE, THE COLLEGE BOARD

The 61 high schools that participated in the Arkansas Advanced Initiative for Math and Science program last school year produced almost half of the state's Advanced Placement math, science and English test-takers and 44 percent of the scores that qualified students for college credit.

Students who earn college credit for their high school work can realize savings in college tuition costs or have the time to take more advanced-level college courses because they have completed introductory courses.

The initiative schools make up 23 percent of the state's 261 high schools in which students took Advanced Placement tests in math, science and English in 2016-17, Ken

James, president of the Arkansas initiative, said in releasing the organization's annual report.

The Arkansas initiative, a nonprofit corporation affiliated with the National Math and Science Initiative since 2008 and based at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, provides course content training to teachers of Advanced Placement and pre-Advanced Placement courses, James said.

It also provides tutoring for students in the participating schools in preparation for the year-end Advanced Placement exams that are made by the College Board, which is also the maker of the SAT college-entrance exam.

The high schools in the initiative are located throughout the state and vary in size. They include Booneville, El Dorado, Greene County Tech, Lake Hamilton, Greenbrier, and both Springdale high schools -- all of which have been participating since the initiative's first year in 2008-09. Some of the others are Benton, Russellville, Pea Ridge, Dumas, Crossett, Conway, Arkadelphia, Beebe, Star City and several schools in the Little Rock and Pulaski County Special districts. Jacksonville High School is one. The eSTEM and KIPP charter schools are also recipients of the course content training for teachers and the student tutoring provided by the initiative.

All 305 Arkansas public high schools by law must offer at least four Advanced Placement courses, but students aren't required to take the Advanced Placement exams, resulting in some schools not having math, science and English test results. Magnet Cove High School began participating in the initiative in the 2015-16 school year.

Jeff Eskola, principal of Magnet Cove High School, praised the initiative Monday, saying that it has given both teachers and students the confidence to take on the more challenging Advanced Placement courses, as evidenced by the increased student enrollment in the courses.

"Our numbers have gone way up but, with the numbers, our scores are going up, too," Eskola said. "It's not just the same two or three students getting scores of 3 or 4s. There are some students you hope and they pray they will score well, and they blow it to the roof."

School districts -- particularly those that have joined the initiative in more recent years -- have to pay fees for the services provided by James and his staff of content experts. That can be \$15,000 to \$25,000 a year depending on the school size, James said.

"When you look at what you get out of it, it is worth every dime," Eskola said of the training and teaching strategies.

"They could double it and I would pay every dime," he said of the cost. "There is no way I would switch."

In the past and continuing in some high schools, there have been awards to both teachers and students for success on the Advanced Placement courses. In Magnet Cove, students who earn a 3 or better can expect a day off from school. Teachers, Eskola said, get "lots of pats on the back" for good scores. He also noted that the district has a growing enrollment and has provided pay increases to all staff members in recent years.

The 61 schools in the Advanced Initiative for Math and Science last school year comprised 13,322, or 48 percent, of the math, science and English exams taken in the state and 3,824, or 44 percent, of the scores of 3, 4 or 5 that made students eligible for college credit or accelerated college course placement, according to the recently released report.