

Texas Advanced Placement Project

By Bill Hobby

Highly educated engineers and scientists can work just about wherever they want. So how to get them to work in a rural area just South of Dallas--even if the project is as important as the Superconducting Supercollider?

One way is to make sure there are good schools for their children to attend.

With that in mind, let me draw your attention to the Texas Advanced Placement Project, financed by the O'Donnell Foundation of Dallas. This project improves education in nine school districts near the Supercollider, which is near Waxahachie in Ellis County.

Advanced Placement is a program designed by The College Board to enable students to complete college-level studies in high school. Assuming they score well on the uniform examination at the end of an AP course, they may place out of the corresponding college course.

The Advanced Placement examination was the target for the barrio students in the movie "Stand and Deliver," a true story about the superb California teacher Jaime Escalante.

Advanced Placement is on the verge of going statewide in Texas. While the O'Donnell project was underway, the Senate Education Committee was studying an Advanced Placement initiative for Texas.

Senator Carl Parker, chair of the Senate Economic Development Committee, Rep. Libby Linebarger, chair of the House Public Education Committee, and Comptroller John Sharp have announced a statewide initiative to give all students the opportunity to take these challenging courses.

College students who have taken Advanced Placement courses in high school make better grades than non-AP students. The AP students are more likely to attend college and do better when they get there.

The O'Donnell Foundation finances Advanced Placement courses in nine school districts near the SSC site: Duncanville, DeSoto, Cedar Hill, Red Oak, Midlothian, Lancaster, Ferris, Ellis and Waxahachie.

All of those schools offer advanced courses in calculus, biology, chemistry, physics and English.

The program relies on incentives for teachers and for students. Teachers get a \$100 stipend and expenses paid to a two-day AP training conference and a \$250 stipend and expenses paid to a summer institute. When they teach their first course they receive a \$1000 bonus from the foundation.

During the two school years the program has been in effect, teachers have earned \$35,000 in bonuses. Their training cost \$20,000.

Students get their exam fees paid and a \$100 mini-scholarship if they pass the test by earning a grade 3 out of a possible 5. Schools get a \$3,500 equipment grant and a \$100

bonus for each passing student. Students have earned \$24,000 in scholarships, and schools got the same amount in bonuses.

Last year 269 AP exams were taken by 208 students in those districts, and a grade of 3 or better was earned on 188 of these exams. The Texas students did slightly better than the national average with 70 percent passing compared to 66 percent nationwide.

Obviously, only a small number of students take the courses--208 of 5,010 students in the SSC schools last year, but the number is steadily growing. Only 40 students took AP exams in 1982. And, at a time when Texas SAT scores trail the national average, the SSC students are bucking the trend. Over the past three years, the average SAT score in Texas increased from 874 - 876, and the average SAT score of the SSC schools increased from 876 - 911. While the average score in Texas is still below the national average of 899, the score of SSC schools is 12 points higher.

And the cost of this SSC initiative was small--\$118,000 over two years.

The Parker-Linebarger bill will provide incentives for teachers and schools offering AP classes. Teachers will receive \$250 for teaching a course the first time. Schools will receive \$100 for each student who successfully completes an exam.

That may improve the Texas track record. When compared to the 10 largest states, Texas students took the fewest number of AP exams per 1000 11th and 12th grade students, and Texas has the lowest percent of schools offering AP's.

In 1992, 32% of Texas schools offered AP exams (the national average is 46%) and only 6% of 11th and 12th grade students took AP's (compared to the national average of 10%).

The SSC project has demonstrated that ordinary students in ordinary high schools can achieve excellence, given a special challenge and a small incentive. The result is good for the students, who will perform better in college and presumably in life.

It is good for the teachers who grow professionally, and it's good for a state like Texas that spent \$125 million this biennium financing remedial education at the college level.

Comptroller John Sharp estimates that more than one-third of students entering Texas colleges and universities each year cannot read, write or compute at post-secondary school standards. (So what are they doing in college anyway?) Sharp proposes charging the cost of the remedial education they require back to the schools from which they graduated.

I agree. I proposed the same idea in 1986 and was called a racist for making such a wrongheaded suggestion. It's more in fashion now since the community college system has begun offering "guarantees" with its graduates in technical fields.

The Comptroller estimates that the Advanced Placement initiative will save taxpayers \$13 million by 1998 by reducing the number of credit hours and the amount of remedial education now necessary in colleges and university. It's important that this legislation pass.

If the schools in your city do not offer Advanced Placement tests, you may want to ask why. Aren't your children as important as those whose parents are building the Supercollider?

Originally published Mar. 11, 1993, in the Austin American-Statesman.