



Serving Special Populations: Accelerated Learning Opportunities

INFORMATION SHEET

This information sheet explores Title IV, Part A programming and how special populations of students may be impacted. Specifically, the information sheet examines accelerated learning opportunities by highlighting challenges and sharing considerations and best practices for State Coordinators interested in supporting special populations of students and their families.

Introduction

Students from historically underserved backgrounds or communities tend to be underrepresented in courses or learning opportunities that can be beneficial for later learning or career pathways, and these disparities in opportunity can be observed across schools and within schools. Disparities are also observed for students with disabilities whose disability status — rather than knowledge or achievement — may determine course trajectories. It is critical that all students have equitable access to educational opportunities that challenge them to reach their full academic potential.

Title IV, Part A (Title IV-A) is designed to increase the capacity of State education agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) to support all students in equitably accessing high-quality learning experiences, a requirement for SEAs and LEAs that receive Federal dollars. Section 4104(b)(A) of the statute addresses the underrepresentation and limited access of “female students, minority students, English learners, children with disabilities, and low-income students” regarding educational opportunities. For the purposes of this information sheet, these subgroups are referred to as *special populations*.

Definitions of Key Terms

Accelerated Learning Opportunities:

Postsecondary-level courses accepted for credit at institutions of higher education, including dual or concurrent enrollment programs, early college high schools, or AP and International Baccalaureate programs (Section 4104(b)(3)(A)(i)(IV)).

Advanced Learning Opportunities:

Accelerated learning opportunities as defined above, as well as other enriching subjects addressed in the statute as areas where increased access and representation are needed, such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) subjects. This also includes opportunities that expose students to high-quality content that can facilitate access to accelerated learning opportunities, such as gifted and talented, enrichment, or mentorship (note that these terms are not defined by statute).

Parent: A legal guardian or other person standing in loco parentis (such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the child lives, or a person who is legally responsible for the child’s welfare; Section 8101(38)).

Special Populations: Subgroups of students and families who are underrepresented in or who may have limited access to enriching educational experiences (note that these terms are not defined by statute).

These special populations have limited access to accelerated learning opportunities, such as Advanced Placement (AP) or dual enrollment courses that enable the acquisition of credit toward a postsecondary degree.¹ They also have limited representation in advanced courses related to fields like STEM.² Actively breaking down barriers within education systems and helping students access advanced coursework have the potential to support equitable outcomes for these special populations. Title IV-A allows SEAs and LEAs to use funds to support a well-rounded education, including access to enriching and accelerated learning opportunities (Section 4107).

SEAs and LEAs may need support ensuring systems increase all students' access to accelerated learning opportunities. To aid State coordinators (SCs) in supporting education agencies, this information sheet highlights challenges and shares considerations and best practices. The role of the SC in supporting LEA efforts is also discussed, along with related resources.

	Starts	Ends
Homeroom	7:45	8:10
Advanced Placement Statistics	8:13	8:58
Western Civilizations	9:01	9:46
Foreign Language: Mandarin	9:49	
Physics	10:37	
Advanced Placement Literature	11:25	
Lunch	12:13	
Physical Education	1:01	
Concert Band	1:49	

Barriers to Accelerated Learning Opportunities

Advanced learning opportunities, such as AP courses, can provide students with the knowledge and skills that enable them to successfully complete college coursework. Access to more challenging learning opportunities has implications not only for students' overall educational attainment but also longer-term and broader outcomes such as income.³ However, strategic efforts are necessary to ensure increased, equitable representation and success in such courses. Discussed next are four broad categories of barriers or challenges that special populations of students and families may face in accessing advanced learning opportunities. It is important to acknowledge that this list is not comprehensive and that individuals have unique needs and face a wide array of challenges. SEAs and LEAs should make every effort to increase their understanding of the communities they serve to identify and address barriers unique to their local contexts.

- Biased Expectations.** Implicit or explicit biases staff may hold about students' values, interests, knowledge, and capabilities can influence whether educators recommend students for advanced learning opportunities or share information with students and families about available opportunities. Such biases around race/ethnicity, income, and ability status are common.⁴ For example, misconceptions can lead staff to believe that disabilities hinder both learning and the ability to demonstrate learning, while in reality there is a range of types of disabilities.⁵ Biased expectations can have lasting impacts.
- Limited Accessibility.** Limited access to advanced courses may be due to a variety of factors such as fewer course offerings or available seats within schools in lower-resourced communities. This is often the case in schools serving high percentages of

Black and Hispanic students.⁶ Even in schools with ample availability of such courses, inequities in student enrollment persist.⁷ Other factors that limit access include the cost of special exams required at the conclusion of accelerated learning courses or fewer qualified educators—particularly in rural areas where there is a smaller supply of potential teachers and higher percentages of families and students experiencing poverty.⁸ For students with disabilities, restrictive educational placements can limit access to rigorous content. For example, 13 percent of students with disabilities spend less than 40 percent of the school day in general education classroom.⁹



- **Inflexible Policies and Practices.** Policies and practices may impose explicit or de facto curricular tracking that funnels students through either occupational or academic tracks with limited mobility to move between tracks.¹⁰ Such limited mobility can place students on a trajectory that precludes access to necessary prerequisites for advanced courses, thereby fostering inequitable representation. Additionally, potential biases in teacher or counselor recommendations for advanced courses can contribute to inequities.¹¹ In the absence of support for students to close knowledge

and preparedness gaps, policies and practices often remain inflexible and may restrict student access to advanced learning opportunities over time.

- **Inadequate Outreach.** Standard outreach about available advanced learning opportunities may be less effective for special populations and could be a result of inequitable parent and family engagement practices. These students' parents and caregivers may have experienced limited access to educational opportunities during their own schooling. Subsequently, they may have limited experience with how to navigate access to such opportunities for themselves or their children. Variations in the amount, method, and frequency of information sharing about these opportunities may be necessary.

Considerations and Best Practices

Expanding access to accelerated learning opportunities in K-12 schools is not only important for equitable access but also builds the foundation for equitable representation in higher education and the workforce. Strategies to increase representation and expand access to accelerated learning opportunities can be summarized in four ways. Schools and districts can (1) use data to inform decision-making, (2) train educators to address barriers, (3) improve academic program planning, and (4) prioritize family outreach. These strategies are explained in more detail below.

Strategy 1: Use Data to Inform Decision-Making. Data can help initially identify disparities and then continuously gauge the extent to which access may have changed. Educators can use data to help understand which students are enrolled in different types of courses and can identify differences by subgroups.¹² They can also examine the data to help identify root causes of disparities. To get at root cause, educators can use data

to identify which students have access to advanced learning opportunities and then engage in thoughtful discussions about why such disparities exist.¹³

Strategy 2: Train Educators to Address Barriers to Participation. School and district leaders can organize training for educators to help address barriers to participation.

Topics covered as part of educator training can address issues such as bias awareness, effective communication and outreach, and requirements around supports for students with disabilities.¹⁴ Title IV-A can support compliance with *Individuals with Disabilities Act* (IDEA) mandates by providing funds to increase access to enriching and accelerated learning opportunities (Section 4104(b)(3)(A)(i)(IV)).

Strategy 3: Improve Academic Program Planning. School and district leaders can improve academic program planning by increasing the number of course offerings and available seats within courses, increasing the number of trained teachers and racially or ethnically diverse teachers, and revising methods for determining eligibility.¹⁵ For example, school and district leaders may consider offering a universal assessment for gifted and talented programs. They can also provide supports for inclusive and challenging education for students with disabilities by offering both special education and related services (e.g., instruction, personnel, equipment) as well as access to advanced learning opportunities as appropriate. Educators can also expand access by removing financial barriers such as costs associated with materials and exams. This activity is specifically supported for students from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds under Title IV-A (Section 4104(b)(3)(A)(ii) and Section 4107(a)(3)(D)(i)).

Sometimes it is necessary to find more creative solutions. Schools and districts can utilize innovative or alternative approaches

when there are limited numbers of course offerings or qualified personnel, such as access to off-site or remote learning opportunities or partnerships with local colleges and universities.¹⁶ The Title IV-A statute supports partnerships with institutions of higher education to implement programming and activities (Section 4107(a)(2)).

Strategy 4: Prioritize Family Outreach. It is important to share information with parents and families about the availability of learning, enrichment, and advanced course opportunities and the required processes and prerequisites to access those courses.¹⁷ Outreach to inform parents and families about available opportunities can include targeted efforts to reach marginalized students and their families. Helping families support their child as they navigate access, such as connecting them with guidance counselors or parent and family advocates, can be a great way to start. Additionally, school and district personnel can educate families of students with disabilities about their rights under IDEA, as well as develop systems and supports ensuring the development of strong, least restrictive Individualized Education Programs that allow their children to reach their full academic potential.¹⁸

Practical Applications for SCs

SCs play an important role in helping LEAs address disparities in access to advanced learning content for students from underrepresented populations. SCs have the benefit of being exposed to a range of LEA needs, challenges, plans, and proposed strategies (as articulated in LEAs' Title IV-A applications) and can leverage this exposure to support efforts to enroll a greater number of students from traditionally underrepresented groups in challenging academic courses across their states.

Training & Technical Assistance (T/TA) or Professional Development (PD)

In addition to the specific strategies mentioned in earlier sections, SCs have the opportunity to support LEAs by providing T/TA, PD, and related resources (e.g., publications, toolkits, etc.) in the following broad areas and subtopics:

Staff Competencies

- Culturally responsive approaches
- Trauma-informed approaches
- Implicit and explicit bias
- Strengths-based approaches
- Supporting students with disabilities (e.g., IDEA, Endrew v. Douglas ruling)

Partnering With Families

- Two-way sharing of meaningful data or information and resources
- Raising parent and caregiver awareness about enrichment opportunities
- Being responsive to parents advocating for their children to have access to more challenging academic experiences

Planning Supports for Students and Families

- How to track and support access efforts
- Identifying stakeholders within the school or broader community to serve as cultural liaisons or role models
- Developing community partnerships to identify applied learning opportunities

Funding Coordination

- Leveraging various funding mechanisms, such as braided or blended funding; sources might include:
 - Title II funds (which can be used to expand access to effective educators and provide PD)
 - IDEA funds (which can be used to improve family engagement around planning a child's academic program)

- 21st Century Community Learning Centers (which can provide academic enrichment opportunities and support afterschool activities)
- Collaborating with state education officials or other Title program coordinators

Application Reviews

In addition to T/TA and PD, SCs can offer feedback on LEA applications and schoolwide plans. Feedback can focus on the extent to which LEAs address the following key indicators of effective pathways to equitable academic access:

- Overall and targeted strategies for academic program planning and implementation and evaluating success of efforts (Section 4106(e)(1)(E))
- Distribution of funds to schools with the greatest need (Section (4016)(e)(2)(A)(i))
- Provisions to expand access to advanced and accelerated courses (Section 4107(a)(3)(D)), as well as ongoing supports for student learning and achievement
- Consultation with parents, families, and other stakeholders in planning uses of funds (Section 1114(b)(2), Section 4106(c)(1))

Conclusion

Ensuring that all students have access to high-quality learning experiences requires attention to issues of inequity. This information sheet highlights challenges, considerations, and best practices for SCs working to help LEAs increase student access to advanced, equitable learning opportunities. Intentional and targeted efforts on the part of SEAs and LEAs can better support special populations of students as they contend with barriers within the education system. These barriers currently prevent students from accessing educational opportunities that can shape future learning and achievement.

Accelerated Learning Opportunities Resources

The following table includes relevant guidance, resources, or tools related to advanced learning opportunities.

RESOURCE	DESCRIPTION
Advanced Coursework in Your State Data Tool	<p>This tool allows states to examine the extent to which Black and Hispanic students are represented in advanced courses, including enrollment in elementary school gifted and talented programs, middle school algebra, and high school AP courses.</p>
Five Things to Advance Equity in, Access to, and Success in Advanced Coursework	<p>This resource offers five key recommendations to promote equity in access to and success in advanced coursework.</p>
Integrating Classrooms and Reducing Academic Tracking	<p>This report highlights less desirable outcomes associated with academic tracking and offers guidance for integrating classrooms so that all students have access to challenging coursework.</p>
Differing Abilities in STEM	<p>This U.S. Department of Education hosted webinar focused on inclusive STEM environments where students of all abilities can thrive.</p>
Questions and Answers on U.S. Supreme Court Case Decision <i>Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District Re-1</i>	<p>This Q&A document answers common questions about the <i>Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District</i> Supreme Court case, which determined that all children “should have the chance to meet challenging objectives.”</p>
Significant Disproportionality (Equity in IDEA)	<p>This Q&A document answers key questions about understanding, determining, and addressing disproportionality in the identification of children with disabilities based on race and ethnicity.</p>
Unlocking Federal and State Program Funds to Support Student Success	<p>This resource details how funds from various Federal and state programs might be braided or blended to support various initiatives, such as advanced learning opportunities.</p>

Endnotes

- ¹ Civil Rights Data Collection. (2018). *2015-2016 Civil rights data collection: Data highlights on STEM*. <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/resources/datareports>
- ² Civil Rights Data Collection, *2015-2016 Civil rights data collection: Data highlights on STEM*. Patrick, K., Rose Socol, A., & Morgan, I. (2020). Inequities in advanced coursework. <https://edtrust.org/resource/inequities-in-advanced-coursework/>
- ³ Chatterji, R., Campbell, N., & Quirk, A. (2021). *Closing advanced coursework equity gaps for all students*. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2021/06/30/500759/closing-advanced-coursework-equity-gaps-students/>
- ⁴ Gershenson, S., Holt, S.B., & Papageorge, N.W. (2016). Who believes in me? The effect of student-teacher demographic match on teacher expectations. *Economics of Education Review*, 52. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775715300959>; Staats, C. et al. (2017). *State of the science: Implicit bias review*. https://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/2017-implicit-bias-review_O.pdf.
- ⁵ National Center for Learning Disabilities. (2020). *Significant disproportionality in special education: Current trends and actions for impact*. <https://nclid.org/sigdispro/>
- ⁶ The Education Trust. (2020). *Black and Latino students shut out of advanced coursework opportunities*. <https://edtrust.org/press-release/black-and-latino-students-shut-out-of-advanced-coursework-opportunities/>
- ⁷ Civil Rights Data Collection, *2015-2016 Civil rights data collection: Data highlights on STEM*.
- ⁸ Croft, M., & Moore, R. (2019). *Rural students: Technology, coursework, and extracurricular activities*. <https://www.act.org/content/act/en/research/reports/act-publications/rural-students-technology-coursework-extracurriculars.html>
- ⁹ Mooney, T. (2018). *Why we say “opportunity gap” instead of “achievement gap”*. <https://www.teachforamerica.org/one-day/top-issues/why-we-say-opportunity-gap-instead-of-achievement-gap>
- ¹⁰ Lucas, S.R., & Berends, M. (2002). Sociodemographic diversity, correlated achievement, and de facto tracking. *Sociology of Education*, 75, 328-348, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3090282>
- ¹¹ Civil Rights Data Collection, *2015-2016 Civil rights data collection: Data highlights on STEM*.
- ¹² The Education Trust. (2019). *5 things to advance equity in access to and success in advanced coursework*. <https://edtrust.org/resource/5-things-to-advance-equity-in-access-to-and-success-in-advanced-coursework/>
- ¹³ Staats, C. et al., *State of the science: Implicit bias review*.
- ¹⁴ Staats, C. et al., *State of the science: Implicit bias review*; U.S. Department of Education. (2017). *Department issues Q&A on free appropriate public education following Supreme Court decision*. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/endrew-qa>
- ¹⁵ Staats, C. et al., *State of the science: Implicit bias review*.
- ¹⁶ Staats, C. et al., *State of the science: Implicit bias review*.
- ¹⁷ REL Mid-Atlantic. (2021). *Fact sheet: Expanding Access to Advanced Placement Courses*. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midatlantic/app/Docs/Infographics/RELMA_AP_offerings_Factsheet_508.pdf
- ¹⁸ U.S. Department of Education, *Department issues Q&A on free appropriate public education following Supreme Court decision*.



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