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ADVANCED PLACEMENT COURSES: ENRICHMENT FOR YOUR HIGH SCHOOL CHILD

As parents of bright and gifted children, we constantly evaluate the academic needs of our children as they move up through school. Parents are the best advocates for their children and they can lobby for increased educational choices for them. Here, ABC reports on Advanced Placement (AP) courses as an example of high school enrichment in Canada today.

What is the AP program?

The Advanced Placement program allows high school students to take university-level courses and show that they have mastered the material by taking AP examinations. About 65 Ontario high schools have AP programs, with a further 260 across Canada, and many more in the United States and overseas. The Ontario program is growing at over 20% a year.

Each school teaches a variety of AP courses and administers the annual exams. Students can receive credit, advanced placement, or both from Canadian and US colleges and universities that participate in the AP program. AP courses may exempt students from introductory university courses and allow them to move into second year core courses, or take extra minor subject classes.

There are more than 25 AP subjects in the arts, languages, science, history and math (see box below). These can be integrated with the present Ontario OAC or grade 12 curriculum as credit courses, or taught as after school academic programs, as the curriculum closely matches that in Ontario where teachers already understand the academic needs of the students. Some subjects reach above and beyond the Ontario curriculum and are correspondingly demanding, so that study time and commitment increase by as much as 50% per course. Calculus and physics are examples of these, though they are certainly within the capacity of successful gifted students who already succeed in those subjects.

AP subjects include

Art, studio art, art history and music
Calculus, statistics
Computer science
Economics
Environmental science
English, French, German, Spanish and Latin
Government & politics
History: American, European and World
Human geography
Psychology
Sciences: biology, chemistry, physics

How to get details on AP's

- * AP Canada: <http://ap.ca>
George Ewonus is Director, and he is at 212-1755 Springfield Road, Kelowna, BC V1Y 5V5.
tel: (800) 667-4548, fax: (250) 764-9073
e-mail: gewonus@ap.ca
- * AP subjects:
www.collegeboard.org/ap/subjects.html
- * College Board organisation:
www.collegeboard.org/ap/
- * the AP schools in Canada and Ontario:
www.ap.ca/general/schools.htm
www.ap.ca/cgi-bin/schools.cgi/state=ON
- * AP's at Ontario Universities (list being revised):
www.ap.ca/general/policy.htm
- * There are regular workshops and conferences across Canada for parents, teachers and educators to explain the AP process. Check the AP Canada website www.ap.ca/general/conferences.htm

What does it take of the student?

The main criteria for doing an AP course is that students have the desire, motivation and ability in the chosen subject areas: being an honour roll student is not enough by itself. While we know that many bright and gifted children have the ability, the motivation may be lacking in some, particularly in gifted underachievers. So it is important for students to know their own capabilities.

AP courses are a major commitment on the part of the student, who should limit part time work and will be required to put in extra reading time which would extend into summer vacations. The cost to the student is a CDN \$100 fee for each exam plus the cost of materials and books. Some schools provide financial assistance for families in need and AP will reduce the exam fee upon application.

What does your child get out of it?

Students who have studied in AP programs report that they enjoy the challenge of the program, school staff find that AP courses greatly enhance students' confidence and academic interest, and universities report that these students are better prepared for serious academic work.

Students learn a subject in depth, develop analytical reasoning skills, and form disciplined study habits that can contribute to success at the university level. The experience of working in small, after school study groups can offer a unique opportunity to test students' understanding of intellectually challenging materials. Students also add to their academic profile as they apply for scholarships or placement at university.

At the end of the course, which takes place in May, students sit a two or three hour exam. Most exams include a free-response

section (either essay or problem solving) and a series of multiple-choice questions. Exam results are released in July, and are graded on a five-point scale, with 5 being the highest. A grade 3 or higher is accepted by many universities as equivalent to a credit for a first year course, though exact credit details should be checked, as there are wide variations within faculties and between universities. McGill and Simon Fraser Universities will accept four grade 3 credits as equivalent to a full first year exemption, saving one year of university. Many U.S. universities have the same policy, including Ivy League universities.

Students are also eligible to earn prestigious AP Scholar Awards that recognise those who demonstrate high achievement in a defined number of AP exams.

What is the process?

In order to excel, students need strong teachers who are willing and able to deliver challenging course material. Many secondary school teachers are prepared to go to AP summer school or other graduate courses at universities across Canada and USA. AP has excellent teaching materials and its programs will provide teachers the opportunity to expand on their area of interest, and give meaningful support in teaching AP courses. An innovative principal and resourceful department and guidance heads are also very important factors in implementing the AP option in your high school.

The College Board provides considerable support for anyone interested in implementing an AP program at a secondary school. Apart from the extensive website information, hard copy publications explaining the AP course content, teaching methodologies and administrative process are readily available through the College Board.

If you are interested in finding out more about Advanced Placement courses for your child, there may be a high school in your area offering AP courses which you can investigate (students can study independently and sit exams at a local school centre) or alternatively, you may wish to approach the principal of your child's

Interested? What to do next?

- * Look up AP on the World Wide Web at www.collegeboard.org/ap. Search for schools in your area that have AP programs.
- * Talk to your child on his/her areas of interest in AP subjects; think ahead a year or two.
- * Talk to AP Canada and teachers and others who have introduced APs in their school – the guidance counsellor is often the contact for AP programs, though there may be an AP co-ordinator.
- * Talk to students who have taken APs. What did they get out of it? How did they handle it? Was it worth the time and effort?
- * Approach your secondary school principal, guidance staff, department heads and School Councils on introducing AP courses.
- * Plan ahead.

Thanks to

George Ewonus, Director, AP Canada, for permission to quote AP literature.

David Croome, ABC Peel Chapter, for additional information on implementing AP programs.

secondary school about AP options. The AP team recommends that anyone interested in introducing AP courses into their school should start off small, say with one or two courses, and then build on that for future years. Often, the impetus for offering an AP program starts with the parental request. You are your child's strongest advocate.