

A rich high school goes its own way

Scarsdale dropped AP courses in favor of its own, but still restricts some students

BY JAY MATHEWS

Scarsdale is the third-richest community (average household income: \$388,000) and the richest school district in America. Scarsdale High is also the only public school in the country that has dropped the popular Advanced Placement program in favor of its own homegrown college-level courses.

I think those facts are related to each other, but that does not mean the Advanced Topics courses at Scarsdale are elitist scams. After a decade of operation, they seem excellent in nearly every way, particularly those AT courses that have replaced their final exams with long research papers.

Advanced Topics courses in that Westchester County village are important because the courses they replaced are important. AP and its smaller counterpart, the International Baccalaureate, are the most successful antidotes ever to America's high school curricular blahs. AP has grown to reach a

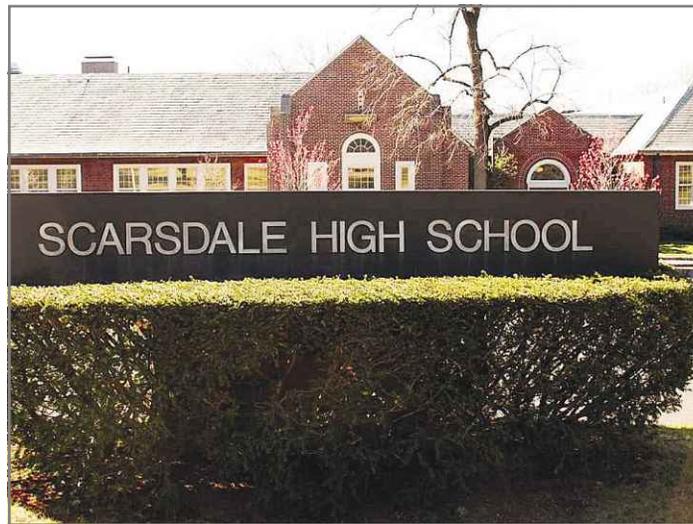
majority of U.S. schools with no loss of rigor and a significant increase in the percentage of low-income students participating. Any attempt to improve on it deserves a close look.

I have questions. Many AP critics anticipated that other public schools would follow Scarsdale's example and drop AP in favor of their own courses. Why hasn't that happened?

Scarsdale students say that excellent teachers have been a key to the success of AT. Talia Schulhof, a rising senior, said her AT statistics teacher "was great. She taught several sections other than my own, and I could tell she had a passion for the material."

A recent Scarsdale graduate said he took AT courses in Spanish language, Spanish literature, macroeconomics, English literature and poetry, calculus, physics, computer science, and U.S. history. The quality of teaching in all but one of them "was exceptional," he said.

Kelli Rainer, also a rising senior, said she loved her AT U.S. history course. "My teacher



ANGELA GAUL

Scarsdale, the nation's first high school to drop AP courses.

was really open to hearing what we, the students, wanted to learn about, and he actually implemented those ideas in the curriculum," she said.

I applaud those AT teachers who assign a major research paper rather than a final exam. Sadly, the vast majority of U.S. high schools require no such assignment. Rainer wrote a 15-page paper about journalism's impact on Watergate and the Vietnam War. Another rising senior, Talia Potters, said

she wrote hers on the Zodiac Killer and his relationship with the media.

I have just one complaint. Given the quality of AT courses, why does Scarsdale bar some eager students from taking them? In many subjects, students have to earn top grades, get a teacher's recommendation or pass an entrance exam to get into an AT course. AP at Scarsdale High had the same barriers when my son Peter was a student there in the 1990s.

When AT was launched a decade ago, the superintendent told me it would be able to waive such barriers for motivated students, but that appears not to have happened. About 30 percent of Scarsdale students were kept out of AP. The district does not have that figure for AT, but the school has always said that AT is selective, and I think it is likely that many students are left out.

Scarsdale High administrators say only students ready for AT courses should take them. As many teachers have explained to me, teenagers can mature rapidly and are often ready to respond to good teaching.

AT works for Scarsdale because the school's wealth and influence can get students into selective colleges no matter what courses it uses. Other schools lack that clout and prefer to keep AP or IB. But that doesn't mean Scarsdale has to be so restrictive. Why tell a student who wants to work hard not to bother?



Jay Mathews is an education columnist for The Washington Post.



RAYCHEL BRIGHTMAN

Ralph and Danielle Cittadino with their dog, Max. Danielle thought she was making payments on Max, but she was, in fact, leasing him.

passed by both houses of the State Legislature to ban the leasing of pets in New York. I hope fellow concerned citizens will write to Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo

to urge him to sign the bill.

I also encourage fellow Newsday readers to consider pet adoption instead of buying from a pet store. Thousands of animals in

shelters across the state are looking for a forever home and for people to love them.

Leslie Granger,
Wantagh

Editor's note: The writer is president and chief executive of Bideawee, a no-kill animal rescue organization.

Check moral compass on way to greatness

Greatness is an ideal to aspire to ["America's quest for greatness," Editorial, Aug. 17]. It is something we strive for, aim toward. It is a goal, a journey. It is not a location or ultimate destination.

From time to time, we must look back on where we started to see where we are heading, to check whether we are on course. Are we progressing toward this ideal of American greatness or going backward?

To progress to greatness, we must face facts truthfully. Now is the time to check our in-

tegrity and moral compass, because the path we choose will affect our pursuit to greatness.

Holly Gordon,
Bay Shore

The problem with free college tuition

Opinion page writer Isobel van Hagen bemoans the "punishment" of the crippling student loan debt facing many American college graduates ["The comic extremes of student debt," Aug. 19]. This alleged punishment is self-imposed by the folks who took tens of thousands and sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars in loans and promised to pay them back.

Many students used the money to attend pricey schools, while many of their peers went to less expensive universities or community colleges, worked while attending college, sometimes delayed college to earn money, joined the military to

gain access to educational benefits and worked hard to earn scholarships. These students employed the good old-fashioned American values of hard work, delayed gratification, frugality and determination. Sadly, this is undesirable for some, and they praise the message of "free education" from the likes of U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders and congressional Democratic candidate Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Van Hagen refers to this Democratic socialist promise as a better solution.

Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is credited with a quote that appropriately addresses this issue: "The problem with socialism is that you eventually run out of other people's money."

Michael Cisek,
East Islip

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