



When challenged, students rise to the occasion

Nora Tsoutsis helps her AP students build a school culture of excellence

Among other things, Mass Insight Education seeks to use Advanced Placement as a lever to transform school culture. Boston's John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science in Boston was among the first group of schools to become part of the AP/STEM program in 2008, and AP English teacher Nora Tsoutsis has seen that transformation take hold.

“I do think that every student is **capable** of **succeeding** in the AP class.”

Nora Tsoutsis
AP English Teacher
Boston Public Schools

“Students like to be challenged,” Tsoutsis says. In fact, she finds that students who struggle when they first take an AP course are the program's biggest boosters. “They work harder and see themselves getting better. When it clicks, it's a great feeling.”

Thanks to Tsoutsis and other dedicated teachers, Mass Insight has helped the O'Bryant make significant gains in AP enrollment and performance. Since joining the program, AP enrollment at the school has nearly doubled, to over 400. Plus the number of qualifying exam scores has increased by over five dozen, far outpacing state and national gains.

Tsoutsis is an outstanding teacher. She was chosen as Partner in Excellence Award winner as well as English teacher of the year for Massachusetts by the National Math and Science Initiative. Part of what Tsoutsis likes best about what she calls “the AP culture” is the way students apply the skills they learn in her class to make them better in other courses. Those same skills will ultimately make them more successful in college and as adults.

Mass Insight also engages students in Saturday AP study sessions three times a year, many of them on college campuses. The sessions provide an opportunity for students to get extra help, meet peers

from other schools and benefit from having different teachers present and review challenging material. Students report that the extra learning time has helped improve their exam scores. And the results speak for themselves.

At the O'Bryant, each AP teacher holds an after-school session to recruit students for his or her class. This, too, has helped the AP culture take hold. In 2009-10, the O'Bryant, an exam school, offered two sections of AP English. This year, the school has five increasing enrollment in AP English classes by nearly 120% since the program began.

Tsoutsis has taught AP English for several years, but she believes the AP/STEM program has made her a better teacher. “Mass Insight provides rich professional development,” she says. “An important part of that is putting me in touch with other teachers, not just for one day, but several times a year.”

Tsoutsis says content directors that the program supplies in math, science and English, together with the teachers, make up a network to exchange ideas and share best practices. Those practices help make her a better teacher and prepare her students to get a jump on, and succeed in, college.

Nora Tsoutsis's AP English class get published through an 826 Boston grant

Demonstrating the power of academic rigor, Boston students find success through the guidance of their AP teacher

For many high school students, having a piece of writing published in the school newspaper or literary magazine would be the height of success. But a group of Advanced Placement English students from the John D. O'Bryant decided to shoot a little higher. Earlier this month, the students, 11th graders taking an AP English Literature class taught by Nora Tsoutsis, released a book titled "It's Not the Stone that Brings You Strength," a collection of short stories written by each student in the class. Tsoutsis is a lead teacher in Mass Insight Education's AP College Success program.

The book was published with the support of 826 Boston, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting students ages 6-18 with their creative and expository writing skills, and to helping teachers inspire their students to write. 826 Boston is one of eight official chapters of a national organization co-founded by author Dave Eggers.

About 75 people gathered at Northeastern University earlier in June to celebrate the release of the book. The collection compiles stories focused on each student's challenging personal experience with a myth—hence the subtitle, "Myths Uncovered, Unraveled, and Retold". Throughout the event, the students shared their stories with the crowd.

"We each took a piece of ourselves and etched it onto the pages of this book," Emily Gay, a student "emcee" for the event, told the crowd, before introducing her fellow classmates who read their pieces aloud to the group.

AP student Jarlin Perez spoke of his enlightening experience at Harvard Summer School last year. A charismatic student, he was introduced by his peers as someone who is inspired by the human brain and plans to attend a four-year college, then go on to obtain a medical degree. Liraniz Colon spoke of the strength she derives from overcoming a disability. Liraniz wants to be a criminal lawyer, and hopes to attend both Boston University and Suffolk Law School. Elba Oliva spoke of her Guatemalan origins, and the struggle she's



Students from Tsoutsis's Advanced Placement English course at The John D. O'Bryant School for Math and Science in Boston read excerpts from *It's Not the Stone that Brings You Strength*.

faced in transitioning to a life in Boston and feeling as though she's left her culture behind.

"I will not live my life in a stream of regret... I will return to Guatemala," Elba promised.

According to 826 Boston's project coordinators from the O'Bryant, Christine Meade and Erin O'Brien, part of the program involves setting up a permanent "writing room" in the school, where teachers can take their classes, or where students can go on their own to get help with writing. By partnering with Northeastern, 826 Boston was able to provide tutors in the writing center throughout the year from the university. Chris Gallagher, Northeastern University's writing program director, expressed his appreciation for the partnership with 826 Boston, and his admiration for the students.

"Please keep writing. We need to hear your voices," Gallagher told the students.

Meanwhile, the students and 826 Boston all voiced appreciation for the outstanding work of Tsoutsis, who was also recognized for her outstanding accomplishments at this year's Partners in Excellence Teacher Awards Celebration in April. Tsoutsis has been teaching AP English Language for more than 10 years.

“Ms. Tsoutsis **pushed us to dig deeper into our lives, cultures, and stories.**”

Fawzy Salama, Class of 2015

"Ms. Tsoutsis pushed us to dig deeper into our lives, cultures, and stories," student "emcee" Fawzy Salama said when introducing his AP teacher.

Tsoutsis said of her students, "They have found their voice... and they are ready for their next adventure – senior year, and college."

Finally, she thanked her students for their hard work on the stories and the book over the course of the school year: "You learn through your struggles and you appreciate the end result so much more because of your time and efforts."