



Extended Learning at Saturday Study Sessions: Students and teachers in Jefferson Parish commit to learning

By Charis Anderson and Anu Pattabiraman

Five days of school a week is enough for most teenagers, but no one told that to the more than 100 Jefferson Parish high school students who started streaming into the district's central office building at 8 a.m. on a recent Saturday.

The students were there to participate in a full day of instruction for their Advanced Placement English courses. The event, known as a Saturday Study Session, is part of a program implemented by the Jefferson Parish Public School System (JPPSS) with support from Mass Insight Education to expand the AP programs at Grace King High School and Fisher Middle-High School.

The Saturday sessions are just one component of the program, which also includes extensive training for teachers and support for college counseling and guidance functions at participating schools.

At the Saturday sessions, students attend a series of workshops that are taught by expert instructors selected by Mass Insight and that explore in further depth challenging topics and questions the students are covering in their AP courses. Over the course of the school year, three Saturday sessions will be held in each AP subject offered through the program. (The program covers math and science AP courses in addition to the English classes.) Student who attend all

three sessions in a given subject area receive the equivalent of about 15 additional hours of direct instruction in their AP courses.

And it's not just the students that benefit: their AP teachers experience the sessions as professional development opportunities during which they can strengthen their knowledge and skill in their subjects by observing the experienced MIE instructors at work.

At the most recent Saturday session on March 15, students in AP English Language & Composition took workshops on argument, rhetorical analysis, and synthesis while students in AP English Literature & Composition participated in classes on prose analysis, open response, and poetry. All students in attendance received instruction on multiple choice strategies.

"They definitely are preparing me," said Yolanda Bueso, a sophomore at Grace King High School, of the Saturday Study Sessions. Yolanda is taking AP English Language. "People are always like, '[AP courses are] so hard', but this, they're actually getting into detail and

You're getting a taste of what's to come – the work, what teachers expect of you, and the amount of dedication and study you have to put into your work,"

Yolanda Bueso
Sophomore
AP Student

making you feel more confident and more comfortable with the material.”

At the March study session, Sally Guadagno, director of English services for Mass Insight Education, kicked off a workshop on argument by having students write an essay about the meaning of ownership. One student, inspired by Sartre’s viewpoint, made the case that ownership could include intangibles, like skill or success, which launched a class discussion on the different things – education, a boyfriend, WiFi – that could be owned and whether they are tangible or intangible.

Meanwhile, Mary Lou Bednarski, an MIE instructor, was telling the students in her classroom that poetry analysis should focus on the text itself and that arguments need to be supported

by evidence. Analyzing a poem is like baking in reverse, she told the students: “Imagine that you have a cake in front of you, and now you’re going to extract every single ingredient.”

Having a mix of instructors is one of the benefits of the Saturday Study Sessions, both for students and for their regular teachers. Students have an opportunity to learn from someone with a different style and approach while their teachers can pick up tips and techniques from the experienced instructors.

“I know that after the very first one, several students told me that it helped a lot for them to get a different perspective,” said Lara Arceneaux, an AP English Language teacher at Fisher Middle-High School. “Sometimes it just

Sally Guadagno, Mass Insight Education’s director of English services, provided instruction on higher-level expository writing



helps some little concepts I've been trying to get across, it just helps it click. It helped them kind of pull the pieces together."

Katrina Torrado, an AP English Language teacher at Grace King High School, echoed Arceneaux's sentiments about the benefits for her students – and added that seeing the master instructors at work helped her as well.

"As a teacher, it was just interesting to get someone else's perspective," she said. "This year, I was the only AP Language teacher in my school. It was nice to see a more experienced educator facilitate the process and see what techniques and strategies they used. Sometimes it was really affirming to know that I was on the right track."

Other times, Torrado continued, it was helpful to see a different way of putting things.

The student participation and engagement on display at the most recent Saturday Study Session illustrated just how much JPPSS' AP program has changed over the last year. As of the 2011-12 school year, less than 10 percent of the district's high school students took even one AP course, and nearly two-thirds of those students who did take an AP course came from just two high schools.

About a year ago, the district's leadership committed to expanding its AP program both by increasing the number of courses offered and recruiting student participation from outside

the pool of "traditional" AP students. JPPSS was able to tap into Mass Insight Education's years of experience in implementing this AP program in Massachusetts high schools: over the past six years, MIE has more than doubled both the number of students participating in and earning qualifying scores on AP math, science and English courses at more than 60 partner high schools across Massachusetts.

English and increased the enrollment in their AP courses by 301 students.

In AP Physics alone, Grace King has 60 students enrolled. Fisher, which did not have an AP program until this year, has 65 students enrolled in AP English Language and AP English Literature and expects to add at least two AP math or science courses to its schedule next year.

The program does more than just boost enrollment, however. It is also

“This year, I was the only AP Language teacher in my school. It was nice to see a more experienced educator facilitate the process and see what techniques and strategies they used. Sometimes it was really affirming to know that I was on the right track.”

Katrina Torrado
AP English Language Teacher
Fisher Middle-High School

The district chose three high schools – Grace King, Fisher and West Jefferson – at which to pilot the program. West Jefferson spent this first year focusing on pre-AP teacher training in order to raise the level of instructional rigor across all grades with the anticipation of expanding AP course options next school year.

Grace King and Fisher, meanwhile, dove right in. Between the two schools, they added seven new AP courses in chemistry, statistics, calculus, physics and

focused on working with teachers and students to ensure that those students are successful in their AP courses.

Current and prospective AP teachers at all three schools participated in extensive trainings, both last summer and in October, in order to prepare for teaching AP courses, and so far this school year, three additional trainings have been held to help pre-AP teachers on how to approach topics in ways that will prepare students for success in AP courses.

by the NUMBERS

47	AP Enrollment 2013
348	AP Enrollment 2014
250%	Increase in # of AP Courses Offered
66	# of teachers receiving training or support
2,870	# of hours of additional Saturday instruction
60%	Saturday Study Session Attendance Goal
62%	Saturday Study Session Average Attendance



AP math, science, English at Grace King High School and Fisher Middle-High School

Saturday Study Sessions provide academic reinforcement for students while increased support for the college counseling and guidance functions at participating high schools enhances students' focus on and preparation for college.

There is strong support for the link between participation in Advanced Placement classes while still in high school and college success. Students who take AP exams in high school are more likely to graduate from college within four years, according to College Board research, and other studies have found that students who take advanced math and science courses in high school are more likely to enroll in and graduate from college.

Both students and teachers at Grace King and Fisher said their participation in the expanded AP program has helped change the conversation at

their schools by increasing the focus on a rigorous high school curriculum as a pathway to college enrollment – and ensuring that students will have the skills and knowledge to be successful once they're there.

"You're getting a taste of what's to come – the work, what teachers expect of you, and the amount of dedication and study you have to put into your work," said Yolanda. "It gives you also what people are expecting of you when you move on to graduating, working for a real job when you get out of college."

According to Torrado, students are starting to think about college earlier in their high school tenure – and to appreciate how what they're doing in class connects to what skills they'll need for college success.

"I think it gets the conversation started earlier," she said. "In previous

years, maybe your top students would be considering college, but the others wouldn't consider it until their senior year."

In an email, Sharon Thomas, assistant principal at Grace King, wrote that the Saturday sessions are one of the most important and beneficial parts of the AP program.

"I feel that the Saturday Sessions give our students a tremendous advantage in preparing for the AP exams," she wrote. "The presenters at the Saturday Sessions have all been very knowledgeable and experienced AP teachers who are helping our students to see the common mistakes that students often make on these tests and also pointing out ways our students can increase their scores ... I believe these sessions have also been very beneficial for our teachers, as they become better AP teachers."