Advanced Academics and Talent Development Advisory Committee Recommendations
January 28, 2026

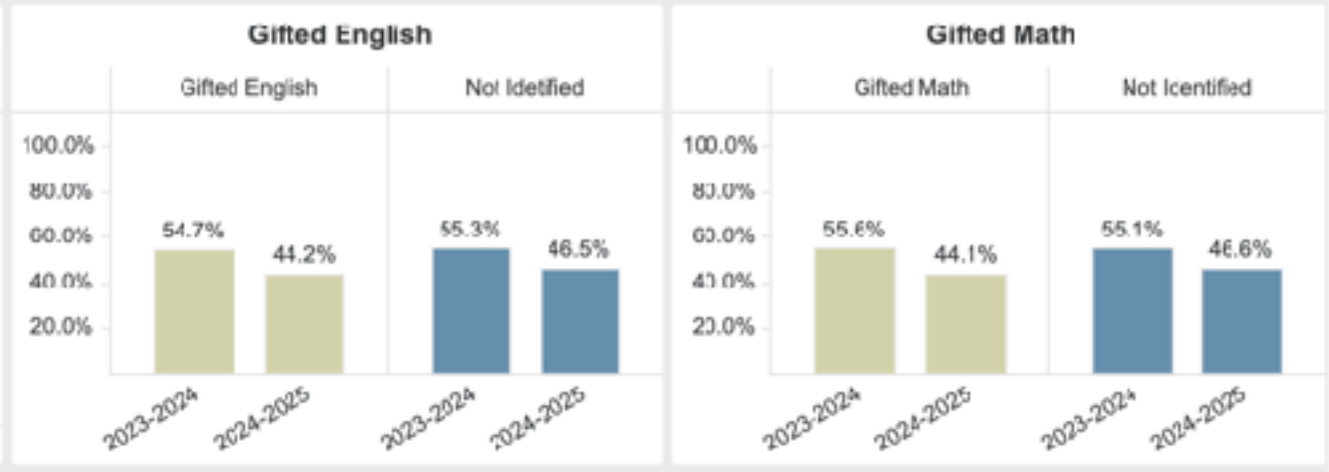
Continuation and follow-up from previous years' recommendations:

- Ensure that the central office and school board hold principals accountable for implementing APS policies, in particular implementation of student clustering (See APS Policy I-8.1) and enabling one year of growth for each student each year in each core subject.
- Ensure APS (or principals) are responsible for identifying School Action Plan goals for students at all achievement levels, including advanced academics students. Importantly, ensure accountability for delivering end-of-year outcomes based on their respective School Action Plans from the beginning of the year.
- AATDAC notes that the 2026-2027 Program of Studies includes 6th grade intensified English and intensified 8th grade world geography for all APS schools. We look forward to students at all APS middle schools having the opportunity to partake in those courses in the coming academic year.

AATDAC 2025-2026 Recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1. <u>We recommend that APS consistently pre-test before all academic units and implement differentiation from the start of each unit.</u>**
    - Giving pre-tests before each academic unit in all school levels provides educators with timely, actionable insight into students' prior knowledge, skills, and misconceptions before instruction begins. Rather than assuming a uniform starting point, pre-assessments allow teachers to identify students who have already mastered key concepts, those who are approaching readiness, and those who need targeted foundational support. This information enables instruction to be intentionally planned from day one, reducing unnecessary repetition for advanced learners while ensuring that students who need support receive early intervention. Research consistently shows that instruction aligned to students' actual readiness levels increases engagement, accelerates learning for all, and prevents gaps from widening over the course of a unit.
    - Using pre-test data to implement differentiation at the outset of each unit also promotes equity and efficient use of instructional time. When differentiation is proactive rather than reactive, all students are challenged appropriately and provided meaningful access to content at their level, regardless of background or prior opportunity. Early differentiation supports flexible grouping, targeted scaffolds, and extension opportunities that can be adjusted as learning progresses, fostering a growth-oriented classroom culture. At a system level, this approach strengthens instructional coherence, supports data-informed decision-making, and aligns with best practices in formative assessment, ultimately improving student outcomes while honoring the diverse learning needs present in every APS classroom.
    - The APS dashboard on MAP Growth shows that a smaller percentage of elementary students identified as gifted achieve their projected growth than non-

identified students, indicating that APS is not fully meeting the needs of this student population.



- **Background:** These two position papers from National Association for Gifted provide relevant background for this recommendation and our support of continued focus on implementing APS policies for advanced academics.
  - Challenging Gifted and Advanced Learners Through Differentiated Curriculum and Instructional Strategies
  - Universal Educator Preparation in Gifted Education
- **Budgetary implications:** Minimal. This recommendation relies on strategy, implementation guidance, and monitoring; teachers can leverage existing curriculum resources that often include suggested assessments.

- **Recommendation 2. <u>We recommend that APS increase co-teaching of advanced (including AP and IB) courses to students with disabilities and English learner students--both the number of courses offered as co-taught and specific implementation of co-taught courses</u>**
  - Students with disabilities and English learners who demonstrate interest and readiness for intensified, Advanced Placement (AP), and International Baccalaureate (IB) coursework at times face structural barriers to participation, despite division commitments to both inclusive practices and expanded access to rigorous academic opportunities. While middle school intensified, AP, and IB programs are designed to reflect high academic standards, some special education and English learner students are excluded not because of a lack of ability, but because the instructional supports and accommodations required for success are not consistently available in those settings. For students with disabilities, accommodations and supports agreed upon in IEPs and 504 plans need to be available also in intensified, AP and IB classes to ensure access and equity. A key element in ensuring support for English learners and SWDs is a co-taught model—pairing a content-area teacher with a special education or English learner teacher. It allows students to engage in advanced curricula

while receiving specialized instructional strategies, accommodations, and skill development aligned with their learning needs. This recommendation applies to both middle school and high school intensified, AP, and IB courses.

- APS has made progress on offering co-taught courses, now offering them at all middle and high schools, and should continue to improve co-taught offerings and implementation. Providing academic resources to support co-taught middle school intensified, AP, and IB courses is important because it aligns educational rigor with equity and postsecondary readiness. Access to advanced coursework has been shown to improve college enrollment, persistence, and career outcomes, including for students with disabilities and English learners. Investing in co-teaching structures, planning time, and appropriate instructional materials, creates pathways for students to meet high expectations without lowering academic standards. This approach supports inclusive education principles, strengthens instructional quality, and ensures that student interest and potential —rather than disability or English learner status—determine access to advanced academic opportunities.
- **Budgetary implications:** Incremental cost to schedule co-teachers.
- **Related recommendations:** English Learners Advisory Committee recommendation on improvements to co-teaching. We have shared the recommendation with the English Learners Advisory Committee Chair.
- **Appendix:** Information from SEPTA review of APS enrollment data and SEPTA survey results

- **Recommendation 3. We recommend that APS align IB programming in elementary and middle school with the high school IB program; APS should examine expanding the IB program to an additional high school.**

  - APS currently identifies approximately 2,086 8th grade students as gifted. It also provides IB certificate programming at Washington-Liberty High School. Students who are not in the W-L neighborhood zone can enter a lottery to join the IB program at W-L.
  - APS delivers pre-IB programming at Randolph elementary (Primary Years Programme, PYP) and Thomas Jefferson middle schools. Jefferson students' neighborhood high school is predominantly Wakefield, with some aligned to W-L, meaning most students who receive pre-IB curriculum in middle school must succeed in the lottery in order to continue the IB curriculum in high school.
  - This means that Randolph students in the PYP are likely to attend W-L high school, but many other students at Thomas Jefferson who participate in the Middle Years' Programme will only be eligible to attend if they are successful lottering into W-L.

- Given the arbitrary nature of a lottery, we recommend that APS allow students who participate in pre-IB programming in middle school be allowed to enroll in W-L without having to enter the lottery.
- As a step toward a longer-term solution, we also recommend that APS examine the demand for IB courses throughout the division and assess whether the IB certificate program should be expanded to at least one additional high school to meet demand.
- For example, for school year 2024-25, there were 150 applicants for the 80 lottery seats available in 9th grade in the Washington-Liberty IB program. https://www.apsva.us/school-transfer-data/
- APS data suggests an unmet student interest in AP and IB, or similarly challenging course work, particularly as students transition from middle to high school. Meeting that demand will enhance APS's ability to enable students to achieve their potential.
- **Budgetary implications:** Longer-term costs, APS should consider and budget for meeting student demand for advanced high school courses including expanding access to programs like the IB program

- **Recommendation 4. <u>We recommend that APS ensure student apps are automatically adaptive to student comprehension level and allow for extension or acceleration with instruction where appropriate.</u>**
  - AATDAC recognizes that views on apps in classroom instruction vary within the APS community. APS is leveraging apps to supplement instruction, intervention, and/or for extension.
  - Leveraging the full capability of apps, to adapt to a student's educational level and with students' learning growth is essential to getting the most for APS students from the apps APS chooses to use.
  - To do so, it is essential that these platforms are implemented in ways that adapt to the wide range of student learning needs and levels of readiness. This includes through gating, targeted instruction, and advancement. Educational apps should provide a floor (minimum proficiency) but never a ceiling (maximum growth).
  - Students enter classrooms with varying academic backgrounds, learning profiles, and rates of progression. Static, one-size-fits-all applications often fail to meet those differences effectively. Without adaptive learning features—such as real-time adjustment of content difficulty, pacing, and instructional support—educational apps can unintentionally limit student growth, by overwhelming students who need scaffolding or by failing to challenge those who are ready for more advanced material. In practice, this most often appears in two ways:

(1) Artificial caps on progression in adaptive apps that prevent ready students from advancing, leading to boredom and disengagement (e.g., guidance to teachers that puts artificial caps on Lexia and IXL despite these apps providing adaptive learning features/ individualized pathways);

(2) The use of apps primarily as digital worksheets, which positions students as passive consumers rather than creative producers and critical thinkers.

- Additionally, APS should ensure that apps it adopts are inclusive and meet accessibility requirements for APS students with special needs, including students who have visual or hearing impairments (e.g., that apps are compatible with screen readers).
- Ensuring that app-based educational tools incorporate adaptive learning is important because it directly supports equity, instructional effectiveness, and responsible use of instructional time and resources. Adaptive platforms allow students to access content at their level while receiving individualized support, including accommodations for students with disabilities and targeted extension for high-performing students. For schools (and teachers), this results in more precise data on student progress, better alignment with personalized learning goals, and stronger academic outcomes overall. APS is investing—and will continue to invest—in apps and app systems to support educational outcomes.
- Finally, APS should ensure that teachers have sufficient training and access to supporting materials to ensure the apps generate benefits for themselves and their students without needing to put in a great deal of additional time. For example, IXL is aligned to NWEA MAP Growth scores and can generate personalized skill plans based on student RIT scores, allowing teachers to assign targeted practice that matches each student's level. To realize the full value of these investments, APS should ensure that teachers know the potential and are trained on implementation for apps to maximize student growth in ways that promote deep learning, creativity, and continuous academic growth.
- **Budgetary implications:** Minimal costs in teacher training/tech support and leveraging existing curriculum differentiation options.

Alignment to strategic plan (all 4 recommendations):

Priority: Student Academic Growth and Success

Committee Members Supporting these Recommendations:

Co-Chairs: John Schaus, Mary Wierzbicki

Secretary: Amanda Miesionczek

Committee members supporting recommendation:

Dr. Deanna Caputo

Elizabeth Corry

Greg Eastman

Dr. Natalie Goldring

Andrea Hansen-Phillips

Sheila Leonard

Carlisle Levine

Colleen Lunsford

Friederike Niepmann (SEPTA)

Brin Ochoa

APS Liaison: Cheryl McCullough, Director, Advanced Academics and Talent Developments

Appendix: Report on Access of Students with Disabilities (SWDs) to Advanced Academic Services in APS[1]

Analysis of APS Data on Participation and Performance of SWDs in AP/IB courses

Findings: Differences in academic performance between students with disabilities and those without are unlikely to explain the low participation rates of SWDs in AP and IB programs. There is evidence that SWDs face accessibility issues, being vastly underrepresented in those programs.

- SWDs are vastly underrepresented in IB and AP courses at all APS high schools. Representation is greatest at HB Woodlawn and lowest at Wakefield. (Table 1)
- If some disabilities affect school performance, we may expect a lower representation of SWDs in AP courses and IB programs. Only 13 percent of SWDs are identified as gifted while 36 percent of students without disabilities are identified as gifted in APS (based on all APS students). To which extent these differences in identification rates reflect differences in academic performance is an open question.
- To understand whether differences in academic performance can explain the low participation of SWDs in AP courses and the IB program, we calculate benchmark (or hypothetical) participation rates of SWDs in AP courses and the IB program:
    - We assume that gifted SWDs take AP courses or participate in IB programs to the same degree as gifted students without disabilities. This assumes that SWDs and students without disabilities are equally likely to be identified as gifted conditional on the same academic performance.
    - We assume that SWDs have a participation rate that is only 25 percent of that of students without disabilities. The 25 percent implicitly assumes that non-gifted SWDs show academic performance that makes them only ¼ as likely as non-gifted students without disabilities to participate in AP/IB courses, an assumption that can be modified. SOL pass rates of SWDs are around half those of students without disabilities. The share of SWDs achieving an advanced score in SOLs is only a quarter that of students without disabilities (6.1 percent versus 24.1 percent in 2024-2025). The 25 percent assumption therefore appears plausible.

[1] Prepared by Friederike Niepmann, SEPTA.

- Under these assumptions, we would expect the number of SWDs in AP courses to be higher by a factor of 1.4 to 3 at various high schools (**Table 2**). For example, while currently only 2.5 percent of students in AP classes at Wakefield are SWDs, under the above assumption, the number of students should be 3 times as high and would imply an SWD participation share of 7.3 percent.
- Assuming that only 10 percent of SWDs not identified as gifted participate in AP and IB courses because of lower academic performance would still not bring the benchmark participation rate down to the observed participation rate (except for HB Woodlawn) and would still imply 1.4-2 times higher participation at Wakefield, W&L, and Yorktown. In other words, lower academic performance alone is unlikely to explain the low participation of SWDs in AP courses and the IB program especially for high schools other than HB Woodlawn. Representation of SWDs is particularly low in the IB program, suggesting that accessibility for SWDs is very limited.
- Looking at performance of SWDs in AP and IB classes, there are some clear differences.
    - While SWDs take the AP/IB exams at the same rates and SWDs' performance in the IB exam is similar to students without disabilities, SWDs perform significantly worse in AP classes compared to non-SWDs across all schools. Discrepancies are especially large for AP classes at Washington-Liberty (**Table 3**).
    - It is unclear what explains the lower performance of SWDs in AP classes. It is most likely that SWDs face hurdles in accessing the content in AP classes and are not getting the required support to succeed in those classes, making them perform worse than their non-SWD peers in final exams. This explanation is supported by the survey responses discussed below. Alternatively, the lower performance in AP exams could suggest that SWDs are more generously admitted to AP classes (requiring lower academic performance, which then gets reflected in lower test scores), but this goes counter to the previous finding of very low participation rates, which are unlikely to be explained by differences in academic performance alone.

Table 1: Representation of SWDs in AP courses and the IB program, by school

		AP classes		IB program	
School	SWDs at school	SWDs in AP courses	SWDs taking AP exam	SWDs in IB program	SWDs taking IB exam
HB Woodlawn	19.0%	12.6%	12.4%		
Wakefield	16.4%	2.5%	2.6%		

Washington-Liberty	12.5%	4.0%	4.2%	1.5%	1.6%
Yorktown	15.4%	3.8%	4.0%		

Table 2: Benchmark participation rates of SWDs in AP and IB courses adjusting for lower academic performance of SWDs, by school

			AP classes		IB classes	
School	SWDs identified as gifted	Non-SWDs identified as gifted	Factor by which benchmark participation is higher	Counterfactual share of SWDs in AP classes	Factor by which benchmark participation is higher	Counterfactual share of SWDs in AP classes
HB	33.1%	65.5%	**1.36**	16.4%		
Wake	10.7%	34.4%	**3.00**	7.3%		
W&L	16.1%	48.4%	**2.61**	9.8%	**6.25**	8.5%
York	18.5%	47.2%	**2.92**	10.4%		

Table 3: Comparing performance in AP exams for SWDs and others

	SWDs	Non SWDs	
School	Score 2 or less	Score 2 or less	Difference
HB	38.9%	22.9%	15.9%
Wakefield	27.7%	19.2%	8.5%
W&L	56.1%	26.9%	29.1%
Yorktown	36.7%	20.2%	16.5%

Results from SEPTA Survey

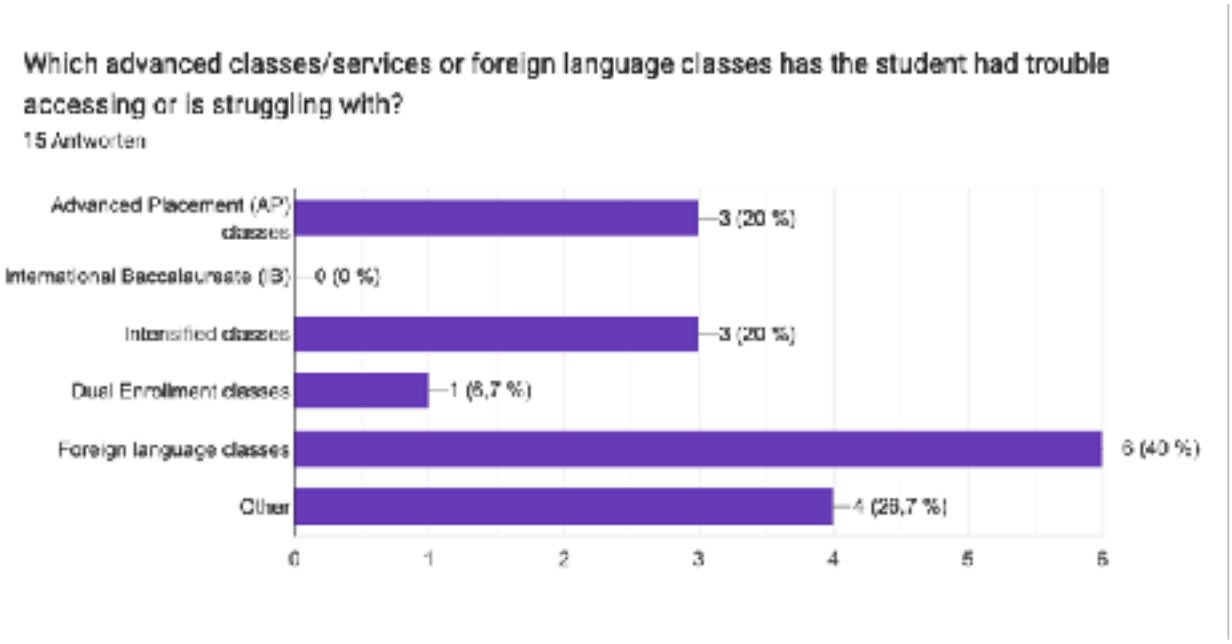
Findings: The most common problem that prevents SWDs from accessing advanced/ foreign language courses is that support and accommodations in IEPs/504 plans are not provided for these courses. Support is lacking especially for students struggling with executive functioning.

Overview of the survey

To understand the issues with access to advanced academic services in APS, SEPTA conducted a survey of its members. The survey ran from mid-November 2025 to mid-January 2026.

The survey solicited 18 responses. It covered students in a large range of schools and grades. Around 70 percent of responses covered students with IEPs, 17 percent had a 504 plan; the rest had none of the two. Around 90 percent of responses were related to students that participate in the general education classroom at least some of the time. 40 percent of the responses were about students identified as gifted. Around 80 percent of respondents reported having trouble accessing advanced academic services or foreign language classes, which were covered in the survey. 40 percent reported having trouble with accessing foreign language classes (**Figure 1**). The remaining respondents described access issues with AP, intensified, dual enrollment and other courses. No response covered access issues with IB classes.

Figure 1



Issues described by respondents

From the written responses to the survey, the most prominent issues are:

1. Lack of accommodations implementation in advanced/foreign language classes

- Teachers not following/understanding IEP or 504 plan accommodations
- Lack of clear written policies on supporting students with disabilities in advanced/language classes
- Case carriers incorrectly believing they only need to support core subjects (English, math, science, social studies); students pushed to drop classes rather than finding support solutions
- Accommodations that work in core classes (like Grammarly) not being allowed in AP/ foreign language classes, inaccessible course material.

2. Executive functioning support gaps

- Students struggle with organization, Canvas navigation, video uploads, and assignment tracking
- Little to no proactive support for executive functioning challenges
- Instructional Studies classes described as ineffective for addressing these issues

3. Lack of co-teaching in non-core subjects

- Foreign language classes typically not co-taught
- Too little additional instructional support in intensified and AP classes
- This includes ASL classes which attract dyslexic students

4. Extended time creating problems

- Students miss class while using extended time on assessments, fall behind on current material while making up previous work
- Creates perpetual cycle despite students knowing the material

5. Issues with gifted identification among SWDs

- Especially when child has executive functioning issues

Suggestions for improvements

- Making sure accommodations are met. Communication ahead of time which accommodations cannot be met if any.
- Write down explicitly in student support manual that accommodations have to be met also in advanced academics classes/foreign language classes.
- More support for SWDs through additional staff in class including in foreign language classes, co-taught ASL classes.

- Allow for fewer questions in the tests rather than only extra time. Allow SWDs to demonstrate mastery of material in more flexible ways.
- Communication ahead of the school year with teachers about SWDs' needs to succeed in class. In-person communication easier than having teacher just read IEP/504 plans.
- More teacher training on identifying gifted students among SWD population.

Appendix

Details on the calculation of benchmark participation rates

- Calculate the share of students in AP/IB courses among gifted and non-gifted by school.
- Apply the same AP/IB participation rates to gifted SWDs as to gifted students.
- Apply the participation rate multiplied by 0.25 to SWDs not identified as gifted.
- Add number of hypothetical gifted and non-gifted SWDs participating to get total SWDs participating.
- Compare to actual SWDs participating. Divide benchmark (hypothetical) number of participating SWDs by the actual number to obtain factor.
- Add additional SWDs participating to total number of participating students and calculate counterfactual share of SWDs in all participating students if benchmark was met.

Underlying data for school year 2024/2025

Appendix: SEPTA analysis of co-taught classes and SEPTA survey results

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- Under these assumptions, we would expect the number of SWDs in AP courses to be higher by a factor of 1.4 to 3 at various high schools (**Table 2**). For example, while currently only 2.5 percent of students in AP classes at Wakefield are SWDs, under the above assumption, the number of students should be 3 times as high and would imply an SWD participation share of 7.3 percent.
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    - It is unclear what explains the lower performance of SWDs in AP classes. It is most likely that SWDs face hurdles in accessing the content in AP classes and are not getting the required support to succeed in those classes, making them perform worse than their non-SWD peers in final exams. This explanation is supported by the survey responses discussed below. Alternatively, the lower performance in AP exams could suggest that SWDs are more generously admitted to AP classes (requiring lower academic performance, which then gets reflected in lower test scores), but this goes counter to the previous finding of very low participation rates, which are unlikely to be explained by differences in academic performance alone.

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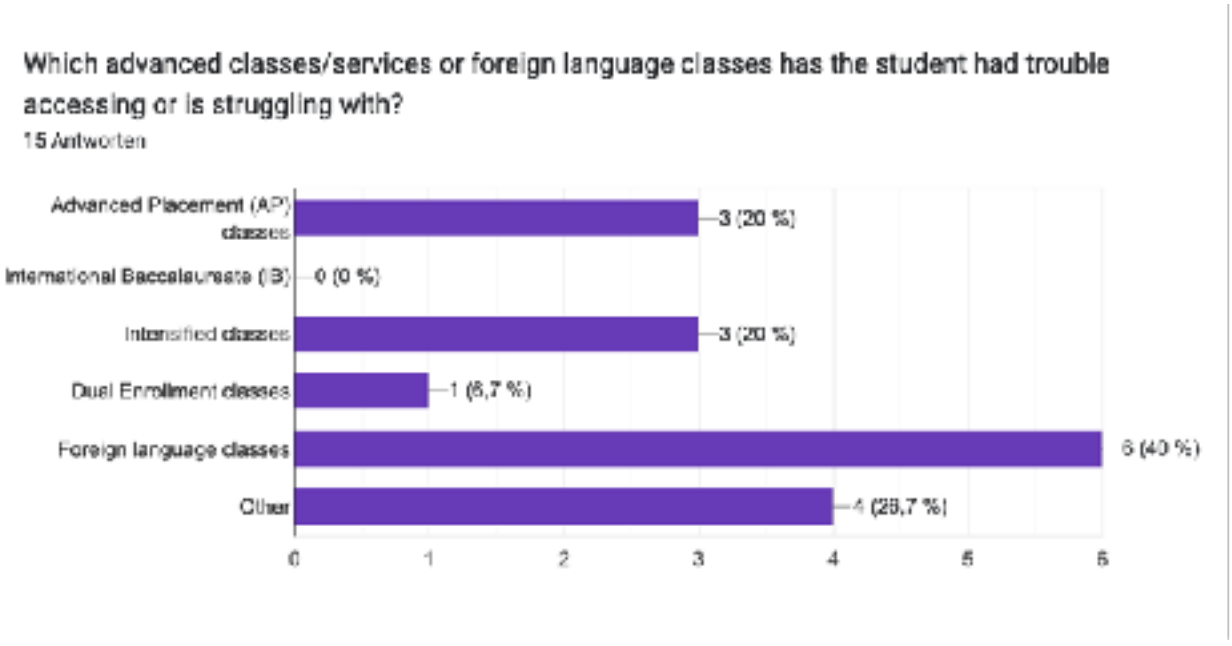

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