

CHS bringing more students into honors courses  
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The number of students enrolled in honors courses at Charlottesville High School is up 21 percent this year.

CHS Principal Eric Irizarry attributed the increase to an expansion of “honors-option” courses, which let students study subjects at differing levels of rigor within the same classroom. Students can start the year at the honors level and decide midyear whether to continue or switch to a standard grade-level course of study.

“We are hoping that this differentiation of instruction opens the door for more students to take honors classes,” Irizarry said.

Course enrollment data shared with the Charlottesville School Board this week showed that 789 CHS students were taking honors courses in November, up from 650 in 2016.

Duplicated enrollment in honors courses— which counts the total number of course sign-ups by all students— is up nearly 55 percent from last year.

CHS began piloting honors-option, or “unleveled,” English classes in 2011. This year, all ninth- and

10th-grade English classes are honors-option, along with world language, economics and personal finance courses.

"In these classes, students who aren't at the honors level interact with those who are. And they often realize that they can do honors-level work, too" Irizarry said.

Irizarry said completing an honors course makes it more likely for a student to take more honors, Advanced Placement and dual enrollment courses in the future. He said honors-option courses could help address a longstanding racial disparity in AP course enrollment at CHS.

"This is an issue we don't take lightly," Irizarry said.

Fifty-two African-American students are taking AP courses at CHS this year. While 30 percent of CHS students are black, they make up just 11.4 percent of students enrolled in an AP course.

According to a student achievement report presented to the School Board on Oct. 5, African-American students achieved passing scores on 22 AP exams in 2016-2017, while white students achieved 606 passing scores.

CHS is adding a dual enrollment Piedmont Virginia Community College course on college success skills next year, which Irizarry said could help disadvantaged students and minorities perform better in college-level courses.

"It's one thing to enroll; we want our students to be successful in these courses," Irizarry said.

Meanwhile, members of the School Board and the CHS community have also voiced concerns about students taking excessive numbers of AP courses.

At the School Board's Oct. 5 meeting, Superintendent Rosa Atkins said that some CHS students were feeling pressure "to meet some imaginary goal for AP testing, in order to compete with peers."

"Parents of students in ninth- and 10th-grade — who are already in the 'pipeline' — have told me that their children are expressing a lot of stresses," School Board member Lisa Larson-Torres said on Thursday.

Irizarry said CHS would consider making changes to its AP program after new mandates from the Virginia Department of Education's "Profile of a Virginia Graduate" and the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) are finalized.

"For now, we are targeting students' stress levels," Irizarry said. "We are making sure they have access to organizations and strategies that can help them manage stress."