



# A Pre-AP Professional Learning Success Story

## Introduction

This success story is about Bradley-Bourbonnais Community High School (BBCHS) and its involvement with the College Board Pre-AP® Program. The program asks teachers to make two professional learning commitments: (1) participate in foundational professional learning, in the form of Online Foundational Modules (OFMs) or a Pre-AP Summer Institute (Pre-APSI), and (2) complete at least one online performance task scoring module. With experiences from their Pre-AP foundational professional learning, BBCHS's teachers created courses and classrooms in which students participated earnestly, engaged with rigorous, grade-level material, and owned their own learning. As one teacher reflected, Pre-AP is “what we should be doing as educators.”

Teacher feedback from 2018–2022 shows high teacher satisfaction following the completion of Pre-AP professional learning. Beyond that initial satisfaction, this success story illustrates the longer-term impact of that learning by offering insights into the thinking and practices of BBCHS teachers who successfully fulfilled their professional learning commitments. These insights should be useful to new and prospective Pre-AP schools and districts when examining the ways professional learning can help to build and sustain a dedicated Pre-AP community over time.

## The Pre-AP Approach to Adult Learning

The Pre-AP Program's design and delivery of professional learning utilizes the body of research on adult learning theory (Carnegie: Short & Hirsh 2020; Learning Forward 2017, 2022), synthesized here into four tenets: (1) Teachers know why they are learning. They are given relevant and contextualized objectives that are easily transferable into classroom practices. (2) Teachers have opportunities to solve problems and confront challenges. Their specific tasks function to increase equity and access for all students. (3) Teachers are given space to plan and apply strategies to their own classrooms and circumstances. Their expertise is respected and expanded. (4) Teachers are engaged, active participants. Learning approaches prioritize collaboration with diverse colleagues and promote sharing, application, and reflection.

## BBCHS Background and Selection

**Setting.** BBCHS is an ethnically and socio-economically diverse Title I and II district, serving nearly 1900 students approximately one hour south of Chicago. According to the Illinois State Board of Education, 34% of the school's students are classified as low-income. The student population in 2021-22 was 68% White; 10% Black; 15% Hispanic; 1.7% Asian; 5% two or more races.

**Selection.** For the subject of this success story, the Pre-AP Professional Learning (PL) team searched for a public, community school with diverse demographics that used Pre-AP for two or more years. The team used a list of schools/districts with 10 or more teachers in at least three courses in 2022-23. This list was cross-referenced with a list of the top 30 schools/districts that completed Part 1 of foundational professional learning (OFM or Pre-APSI) in 2021-22.

The team refined its selection to top Pre-AP schools/districts that had completed professional learning above the overall average percentile (63%) and had more than 70% of teachers complete Part 1 of their professional learning commitment in 2021-22. The Pre-AP Implementation team was invited to comment on the remaining districts. Following their feedback, the PL team removed districts that reportedly had integrated questionable gatekeeping practices or were noncommunicative.

Of the top three schools/districts identified, the PL team selected BBCHS because it had two advantages; it was a partner school (early adopters and advisors of the program), and it employed two Pre-AP National Faculty members (professional learning facilitators), one from the humanities and one from STEM. The BBCHS team offered to solicit Pre-AP teacher volunteers willing to meet virtually for a 30-minute interview. The PL team met with one administrator and seven Pre-AP teachers (Algebra 1 and 2, Biology, Chemistry, English 1 and 2, and Geometry with Statistics).

## Teacher Interviews

**Interviews.** The teachers participated in virtual interviews during their scheduled planning time of a school day. The purpose of these interviews was to gather lasting impressions of their professional learning experience one to four years later, listen to successful and unsuccessful strategies in their classrooms, and determine the extent to which they thought professional learning should be an integral part of the Pre-AP Program.

**Analysis.** Analyses of each interview as well as the collection of interviews were conducted to identify themes and trends for the success study. Our initial interpretations of these themes and trends were singled out as areas for analysis. The analyses ultimately pointed to five areas, reported below as findings, in which Pre-AP professional learning made the most impact for the educators at BBCHS.

## Findings

**Equity, access, and Pre-AP for All.** Pre-AP professional learning prioritizes the Equity and Access Policy. Teachers consider the challenges that the policy addresses directly or indirectly. Coupled with the keystone findings of The New Teacher Project report, The Opportunity Myth (2019), which argues that gaps in students' school experience and outcomes are not inevitable, participants address access barriers using Pre-AP resources. Lesson planning sessions during professional learning highlight

support features in teacher resources and translate the idea of increased equity and access into practice by modeling differentiation strategies that meet the needs of all learners. Teachers revisit their initial reactions to the policy and point to changes in their thinking about their own roles in inviting all students to learn and grow intellectually.

All educators at BBCHS recognized the importance of equity and access, and the commitment to all students. The curriculum director, Tiffany Kohl, talked about BBCHS's efforts to dismantle gatekeeping practices and remediate inadequate representation of historically underrepresented students in AP® courses. A partnership with Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS) afforded BBCHS a closer look into lingering student reports about an overall lack of preparation for the rigor of or the sense of belonging in AP classrooms. For her, Pre-AP provided an attainable solution: "All kids can rise to that challenge, I really do believe they can do that."

BBCHS teachers did more than recognize that Pre-AP for all is a sound idea. They acknowledged the extensive implications that planning, curricular decisions, assessment, and pedagogical and relational shifts have in the mission of supporting every student. Collectively, they employed a broad range of strategies modeled during professional learning, including mindful pacing, small group work, station teaching, student choice, and graphic organizers. To meet the evolving needs of their learners, they added co-teaching to their repertoire of strategies. The co-taught courses, led by both content and special education teachers, all of whom had completed Pre-AP foundational professional learning, used multitiered systems of support for students who needed targeted interventions. While they found classrooms full of students at varying levels of readiness challenging, the English 2 teacher, Hannah Karkos, reflected, "The students' success has really been our biggest success."

All teachers expressed genuine care for their students. The Biology and Chemistry first-year teacher, Drew Atkinson, who completed his student teaching at BBCHS in the spring of 2022, credited his colleagues with shaping his thinking around equity, or as he put it, "giving every student a chance to succeed." For him, his role as a Pre-AP teacher made him a more vocal proponent for students at all levels inside of school and for the mission of Pre-AP for all outside of school.

**Connections to higher-level courses, including AP.** Pre-AP professional learning models the Pre-AP shared principles, a set of research-supported instructional approaches that extend students' content knowledge while strengthening their critical thinking skills. These skills, a bridge to success in higher-level courses, invite conversations about AP. Professional learning makes explicit connections between Pre-AP and AP by illustrating how Pre-AP courses are back mapped from AP. During professional learning, teachers study former AP Exams and identify the skills and knowledge students need to be successful in them. Using their findings, teachers draw connections to Pre-AP course frameworks and disciplinary areas of focus. With these connections in mind, they design classroom activities that adhere to the shorter-term key concepts, learning objectives, and essential knowledge in Pre-AP, and prepare for the longer-term knowledge and skill development for AP.

With over 85% of their students consistently reporting that they want to go to college, BBCHS administrators set a goal to have all students take at least one AP course before graduating. To meet that goal, they increased their AP course offerings from 8 in 2012 to 19 in 2023. With this growth came an increase in historically underrepresented students enrolled in AP courses; from 10% in 2016 to 43% in 2023 (grades 11 and 12). The attrition rate for AP courses was 14% in 2021-22 and down to 5% in 2022-23. The district also made the investment to pay for all students to take AP Exams. Tiffany Kohl

credited Pre-AP with moving those numbers in favorable directions and added the caveat that the school is still on the threshold of seeing the impact of Pre-AP for all. The class of 2025, the school's current sophomores, will be the first to put readiness for and success in AP on full display.

All teachers mentioned that they are getting accolades from colleagues who teach students after their first Pre-AP courses. They also remarked that there were particularly smooth transitions for students between Pre-AP courses (e.g., English 1 to English 2, Biology to Chemistry). These transitions, eased by more collaborative planning, especially around the Pre-AP shared principles, were powerful modes of validation for teachers who had grown accustomed to planning independently or in disciplinary silos. The Chemistry teacher, Stephanie Walker, reflected on the skills gained in Pre-AP and transferred to AP:

“ The kids are used to having conversations and working in groups and asking questions. So, they are more willing to take those risks and share what they're thinking whether right or wrong; that's a huge success. And then I do have a privilege, I teach AP Chemistry, so I can see that [success] even further—this is my first year when all of my kids took Pre-AP, so granted they are Advanced Placement students, but those skills are there, and I see them.

BBCHS teachers reported that learning about the connections among Pre-AP courses as well as the connections between Pre-AP and AP courses increased their buy-in to the program and inspired more collaboration around vertical alignment over time. A few teachers noted the confidence their students exhibited when they made connections to their work in other Pre-AP disciplines. Other teachers shared that the most gratifying experience was teaching Pre-AP “having a foot in both worlds.” Knowing what skills and knowledge students would need to be successful in AP courses helped them to capitalize on what would translate into readiness for AP and other higher-level courses.

**Modeling student-centered practice.** Pre-AP professional learning is rooted in active experiences, meant to prompt teachers to place their students at the center of their educational practice. These experiences often ask teachers to participate in lessons as students. Modeling lessons this way, using the same instructional resources students will use, builds empathy for the student-learner and brings to life experiences the Pre-AP Program wants teachers to design.

Tiffany Kohl mentioned the broad pedagogical shifts she observed at BBCHS, from classes rooted in teacher action—heavy in presentation and light in skill building—to classes rooted in learner action. The Biology teacher, Paige Derbas, said that she always wanted a student-centered classroom, but it was the professional learning and the model lessons that pushed her to “take that leap.” She recognized that the biggest challenge was shifting her mindset to focus “more on how the students are learning and the student ownership of that learning.” The Algebra 1 teacher, Adina Johnston, talked happily about her “loud math classroom” where students sit together in groups and enjoy a more meaningful role as problem solvers. She shared that she always valued a collaborative classroom, but there was a learning curve for Algebra 1 because she herself had to “learn what collaborative really meant in a freshman classroom with Pre-AP.”

The Algebra and Geometry with Statistics teacher, Tim Smith, credited his professional learning experience with a shift in his own practice from the self-evident “I do, we do, you do” to asking himself, “How do I get students to arrive at conclusions without me telling them what to do?” For him, facilitators modeling lessons opened his eyes to a new way of teaching—a palpable shift in his philosophy and practice.

Teachers reported that student comments at BBCHS suggest improved learning in Pre-AP courses themselves and better preparation for enrollment in AP courses. Some students pointed to their new sense of agency in Pre-AP classrooms, where teachers’ expectations placed them at the center of their own learning, i.e., asking questions, solving problems, analyzing texts and evidence, participating in discussions, and writing sound arguments. Other students reported that their transitions to AP from disciplines in which they did not have a Pre-AP course were much more challenging.

**Using formative assessments for learning.** Many people associate the College Board with summative, high-stakes assessments. However, Pre-AP professional learning underscores the formative nature of Pre-AP assessments and the part they play in the teaching and learning cycle. As a result, teachers turn the traditional use of assessments as strict measures of achievement to tools of course preparation, prompts for collegial discourse, and sources for student feedback. In foundational professional learning, teachers use performance tasks at the start of their unit, planning to see what knowledge and skills their students will need to apply by the unit’s end. Additionally, they practice analyzing learning checkpoint data reports that provide insights into students’ skill development and inform their next instructional steps.

Online scoring modules, part two of the Pre-AP professional learning commitment, feature a Pre-AP National Faculty professional learning community (PLC), modeling a collaborative scoring protocol. The PLC analyzes a Pre-AP performance task and scoring guidelines, uses evidence from student work to justify their scores, and resolves any discrepancies. Most importantly, the PLC generates actionable feedback, which points to what each student does well and identifies areas in which the student can take manageable steps to improve. Teachers also identify their next instructional steps, which serve as the means to help students achieve their improved ends.

Most BBCHS teachers internalized the formative nature of Pre-AP assessments. Some talked about learning to “think backwards” and use a performance task to plan for a unit, others mentioned adding more formative checks for understanding to their courses, and still others mentioned the broader change from administering static exams to offering assessments for learning. This was an important change for BBCHS, which uses a standards-based grading system where a small number of summative assessments makes up a student’s grade. A few students reflected on the new opportunities their teachers had given them to retake or revise their performance tasks. According to the teachers, some students lamented their new inclination toward procrastination, knowing they would have another chance at an assessment, while others appreciated the additional opportunity to understand the material.

Several teachers mentioned the value of the Pre-AP scoring modules and the PLC’s discussion around student samples, which helped them interpret the scoring guidelines and align their expectations for student work. In departments with heavy teacher turnaround, this was a helpful learning tool that teachers could revisit periodically. The emphasis on collaboration and formative assessment in the modules, carried into the teachers’ curricular decision making. An analysis of English 2 performance

tasks yielded a new instructional focal point in the unit, determining a theme in a text, which was consistently challenging for students. Ultimately, this analysis contributed to the case for more time during school hours devoted to collaboration around student work, energizing teachers who want to reflect on their practice and who enjoy designing new approaches to help their students achieve better results.

**Building educator communities.** Professional learning provides teachers the time to discuss how Pre-AP will work in their school communities, using a more constructive rather than hierarchical approach to implementation. Teachers grapple with the challenges of both individual and schoolwide change with the support of Pre-AP National Faculty, a representative community of facilitators with a demonstrated history of dedication to increasing equity and access.

Most BBCHS teachers attended the Pre-APSI (formerly Course Teacher Institute) at Ball State University. Several talked about their appreciation of the National Faculty, who were also classroom teachers with experience teaching the courses. A clear source of pride was that 12 of the 15 original teachers who attended that event are still teaching at BBCHS. Those original teachers, touted as champions of the work, serve as leaders and mentors for new teachers, which is no small task, as Pre-AP teachers now make up 40% of the school's staff.

Through its work with EOS, BBCHS dedicated itself to building a community that cultivates a sense of belonging, especially among students who are new to AP classrooms. English 2 teacher, Kalin Kintzel, offered additional support when a rising senior expressed doubt about taking the AP Language and Composition course. Sensitive to those who may not have seen themselves as AP students, she took him aside and shared her faith in his academic abilities, ultimately swaying him to register. He was clearly moved by her gesture, and happy that he took the course. Another great stride in this regard was the increased presence of special education teachers in Pre-AP classrooms. Bringing their expertise to the forefront to support all students was a bridge building experience that the school community found rewarding. Additionally, most teachers acknowledged the ongoing support they now receive from administrators, who provide ample time for planning, find productive ways to hold teachers accountable for student success, foster piloted approaches to classroom challenges, and hold forums for interdisciplinary professional discourse.

BBCHS teachers who participated in New or Experienced Teacher Cohorts, a voluntary and synchronous online Pre-AP professional learning opportunity designed to support teachers taking the OFMs or building expertise, found greater context and meaning in their work among colleagues around the country. For some, the discussions led to a deeper understanding of the course framework and teacher resources. For others, learning how teachers in other states adjusted the model lessons, built new lessons aligned to the course framework, and met the needs of their students was inspiring and, in some cases, offered a renewed sense of purpose. For four BBCHS teachers, this sense of purpose translated into a shift from valuing equity to advocating for it. Kalin Kintzel (English 2) and Tim Smith (Algebra and Geometry with Statistics) joined the Pre-AP National Faculty in 2021 and Paige Derbas (Biology) and Stephanie Walker (Chemistry) joined in 2023. After expanding their expertise over several years, these teachers sought to share pivotal professional learning experiences with other teachers across the country and joined in our commitment to offer equitable learning opportunities to all students.

## Conclusion

BBCHS was drawn to the Pre-AP Program for its central premise that every student deserves classroom opportunities to learn, grow, and succeed. Specific comments from BBCHS teachers suggest that their school was rethinking the ways it delivered education, and that it found considerable intellectual resources and meaningful support in what Pre-AP professional learning has to offer, i.e., achieving higher levels of equity and access, connecting Pre-AP and AP Programs, modeling student-centered instruction, using assessments as tools for learning, and building educator communities. In fact, in their first two years in the Pre-AP Program, the BBCHS teachers participated in all of the available Pre-AP professional learning services for new and experienced teachers.

Pre-AP professional learning designs experiences for the benefit of adult learners. These experiences activate teachers by pairing the teachers' expertise with Pre-AP resources, in effect, fostering their ownership of and investment in the courses they build for their students. To that end, Pre-AP professional learning engages participants as both students and teachers on the rationale that modeling and designing lessons is superior to describing or prescribing them. All teachers mentioned that professional learning was an integral part of their introduction to the Pre-AP Program and a source of ongoing energy and inspiration. As its biggest supporters attested, professional learning imbued the spirit of the program, galvanized a team of extraordinary teachers, and earned a place in BBCHS's success story.

## Pre-AP Professional Learning at BBCHS At a Glance

	<b>Equity, access, and Pre-AP® for all</b>	<b>Connections to higher-level courses, including AP®</b>	<b>Modeling student-centered practice</b>	<b>Using formative assessments for learning</b>	<b>Building educator communities</b>
<b>Problems BBCHS sought to solve</b>	Lack of preparation for rigorous, high-level courses, especially among historically underrepresented students.	Individual or siloed planning within and among disciplines.  Little knowledge of AP in other courses.	Teacher-centered lessons and planning.  Little emphasis on skills.	Few formative checks to monitor student learning.  Rare reflection about student work.	Students and teachers new to AP culture felt no sense of belonging.
<b>Pre-AP Professional Learning</b>	Highlights equity and access.  Translates equity and access into practice using Pre-AP® teacher resources and differentiation strategies.	Analyzes AP Exams for skills and knowledge.  Highlights Pre-AP shared principles.	Models student-centered lessons.  Encourages planning and refining student-centered lessons.	Uses scoring modules that model collaborative scoring and reflecting on student work.  Emphasizes formative nature of assessments.	Facilitated by Pre-AP National Faculty members.  Teachers work together as a cohort.
<b>Current State at BBCHS</b>	Large repertoire of differentiation strategies including new co-teaching model.	Collaborative planning.  Vertical alignment within disciplines.	Student-centered classrooms with more agency.  Students are more prepared for AP.  Less attrition in AP courses.	Opportunities for students to revise and improve their assessments.  Teachers analyze student work collaboratively.  More support for new teachers.	More resources for professional mentorship.  More inclusive of Special Education teachers.
<b>Educational Impact</b>	Pre-AP for all by 2025.  Teachers join Pre-AP National Faculty as advocates of equity.	Teachers capitalize on moments for long-term skill building and readiness.  Increased student confidence.	Growth in their AP program.  More students taking AP, especially historically underrepresented students.	Aligned expectations for student work.  More formative assessment and feedback opportunities for students.	More teacher satisfaction and retention.