



# Implementing Advanced Course Limits to Combat Student Stress

# District Leadership Forum

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# 1) Executive Summary

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## Key Observations

### **Profiled institutions implement two distinct models of advanced course limits.**

Though most profiled institutions developed policies to limit students' advanced-course loads, profiled institutions differ in the strength of their policies, summarized below.

- *Strict Limits:* These advanced course policies impose specific, per-year limits on the number of Advanced Placement (AP) and/or other advanced courses (e.g., dual enrollment courses) in which students may enroll. Students may only exceed these limits in rare instances, and profiled institutions aim to minimize these exceptions.
- *Recommended Limits:* These advanced course policies do not impose a strict limit on advanced course loads but rather recommend a maximum AP/advanced course load for students. Students who wish to exceed this maximum threshold must meet with counselors and/or administrators to discuss their reasoning.

### **Though profiled institutions have not yet collected relevant data, contacts at profiled institutions report anecdotally that strict AP course limits reduce student stress.**

Strict AP course limits should (if homework loads remain constant) increase the amount of time that high-achieving students can commit to healthy, stress-relieving tasks and coping mechanisms (e.g., sleep, exercise, time with friends and family). Contacts from Institution B note anecdotally that their strict AP course limit reduces student stress and highlight student workload reductions specifically. Though contacts at Institution A, Institution F, and Institution C anticipate that advanced course limits will lead to reduced workloads, decreased student stress, and an increased likelihood that students select courses based on interest, administrators have not yet measured the impact of limits on student stress or academic outcomes.

**Admissions officers suggest that administrators allow exceptions to strict advanced course limits only in rare, defined circumstances.** In previous EAB research on the impact of advanced course limits on college admissions, interviewed admissions officers specifically advise that institutions not provide exceptions to strict advanced course limits. If students consistently exceed the institution's limit, students who choose to follow institutional policy may experience a disadvantage in the admissions process—they could have elected to take on a more rigorous course load alongside their classmates. Administrators at Institution A plan to prohibit exceptions to their advanced course limit, and only one to two students exceed the limit each year at Institution C. At Institution B, administrators created an application process that students must complete to exceed the limit.

**Use campus climate surveys to assess AP course limit impact on student stress and track college admissions to ensure limits do not impact student postsecondary outcomes.** Administrators at Institution F rely on a customized school climate survey from Challenge Success to assess their institution's advanced course limit implementation. Administrators asked students to take the survey prior to implementation and plan to ask students to retake the survey at the end of tenth and twelfth grade to measure changes in student stress after limit implementation. At Institution B, Institution F, and Institution C, administrators also monitor indicators of college admissions performance to identify any impact of AP course limits. Contacts at Institution B and Institution C—two institutions that have assessed the impact of advanced course limits on college admissions—report that they have not seen any change in student acceptances since imposing strict limits.

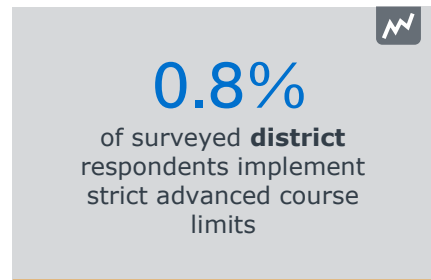
## 2) Motivations and Structure

### Motivations

#### Implement Advanced Course Limits to Combat School-Specific Academic Pressures

EAB researchers found that strict advanced course limits are not common in general but likely more common at individual high schools than as district-wide policy. An EAB survey of 130 districts across the United States uncovered only one district that currently operates a strict advanced course limit and another that plans to implement a strict limit (see **page 7**). Despite this finding, both the nonprofit Unlocking Time and the US News and World Report have explored the potential of advanced course limits to combat reduce student stress and improve student sleep.<sup>1</sup> Through online research, EAB researchers found multiple public and private high schools that operated strict advanced course limits.

EAB researchers also found that strict advanced course limits may be more common at schools with extensive advanced course offerings and a high-performing student body (e.g., urban “exam schools”, independent schools). This phenomenon is likely due to the higher academic pressure and the fact that more students intend to apply to highly competitive postsecondary institutions at these schools.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, schools with higher populations of historically underrepresented students and/or fewer resources may focus on increasing student access to advanced courses more generally. Institutional administrators should ensure that advanced course limits do not inadvertently restrict historically underrepresented students from accessing advanced coursework.



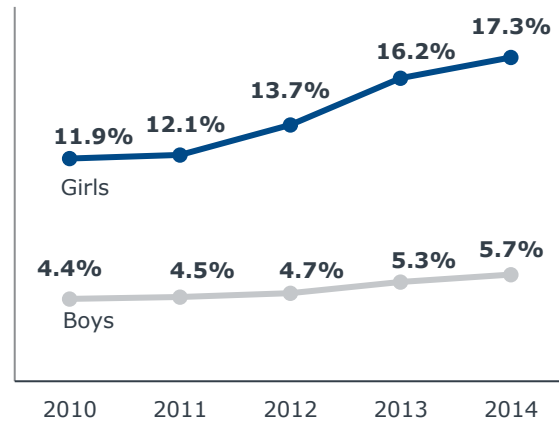
#### Profiled Institutions Implement Advanced Course Limits to Combat Increasing Student Stress

Contacts at most profiled institutions report that they implement or plan to implement advanced course limits to respond to student stress related to college admissions, parent pressure, and excessive workloads inside and outside of the classroom. At Institution C and Institution D, contacts also cite the desire to reduce severe stress-related consequences, including student hospitalization due to mental health disorders and student suicides at their institutions.

1) Jason Koebler, “Should High Schools Limit AP Course Enrollment,” *US News & World Report*, January 11, 2012. <https://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/high-school-notes/2012/01/11/should-high-schools-limit-ap-course-enrollment>; “Limit the Number of AP Courses Students Can Take,” Unlocking Time, accessed October 10, 2019. <https://unlockingtime.org/time-strategies-for-schools/limit-the-number-of-ap-classes-students-can-take>

2) Christopher James, “NYU Study Examines Top High School Students’ Stress and Coping Mechanisms,” *NYU*, August 11, 2015. <https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2015/august/nyu-study-examines-top-high-school-students-stress-and-coping-mechanisms.html>

## Past Year Major Depressive Episode\* Among Adolescents Aged 12-17 by Gender



41%

of 9-13-year old students report feeling **stressed** always or most of the time.

90%

of high school students report **getting good grades** is important, but only **six percent** say **they value learning**.

\*Characterized as suffering from a **depressed mood for two weeks or more**, and a **loss of interest or pleasure** in everyday activities, accompanied by other symptoms such as **feelings of emptiness**, hopelessness, anxiety, worthlessness.

Source: Adapted from Erin Rehel, Jeanine Navarette, and Amy Saul, "Tackling the Student Stress Dilemma," *EAB*, 2017, 9-13. <https://eab.com/research/district-leadership/study/tackling-the-student-stress-dilemma-3/>

“

Our institution operates bridge programs to support students hospitalized for mental health. Consistently, the highest number of students going into that program are our highly gifted academic students ... It's not the kid that ... doesn't come to school that's in the hospital—**it's my best students**.

Administrator at Profiled Institution

”

## Eliminate GPA Weights Alongside Advanced Course Limits to Encourage Students to Select Courses Aligned with Their Interests

At Institution A, Institution F, and Institution D, contacts report that students often eschew electives in favor of advanced courses because advanced courses improve student grade point average (GPA) relative to their classmates. For example, contacts at Institution F cite that AP human geography is one of the most popular elective courses at the institution, even over electives such as choir. Contacts cite this trend to assert that students choose to “collect” AP courses rather than explore their interests and passions.

### Influence of Weighted Grades



Contacts at Institution D report that after the institution implemented weighted grades, student interest in AP and honors courses increased dramatically. Concurrently, student interest in electives decreased.

Contacts at Institution A and Institution F note that advanced course limits prevent students from taking on as many AP courses as possible, which in turn encourages

them to take electives and career and technical education courses that may help them identify a career path. To further incentivize students to pursue courses that may help students discover personal interests, administrators at Institution A and Institution F plan to eliminate grade weights associated with advanced courses alongside their advanced course limit. Conversely, contacts from Institution D report that because their high schools continue to weight grades, their recommended AP course limit has had minimal impact on trends in student elective selection.

To support teachers in maintaining rigor in redesigned courses, administrators at Institution F hired external consultants with experience in course design.

### Some Schools Have Transitioned Curricula Away from AP Courses

At Institution F, administrators use the new advanced course limit to encourage teachers to redesign both AP and non-AP courses to provide in-depth knowledge aligned with school priorities rather than College Board standards. Many independent schools have recently moved away from AP courses, including **eight independent schools** in the Washington, D.C. area. Though public school districts are less likely to drop AP courses, **Scarsdale High School** in New York recently eliminated AP courses as well.

## Structure

### Profiled Institutions Implement Two Distinct Models of Advanced Course Limits

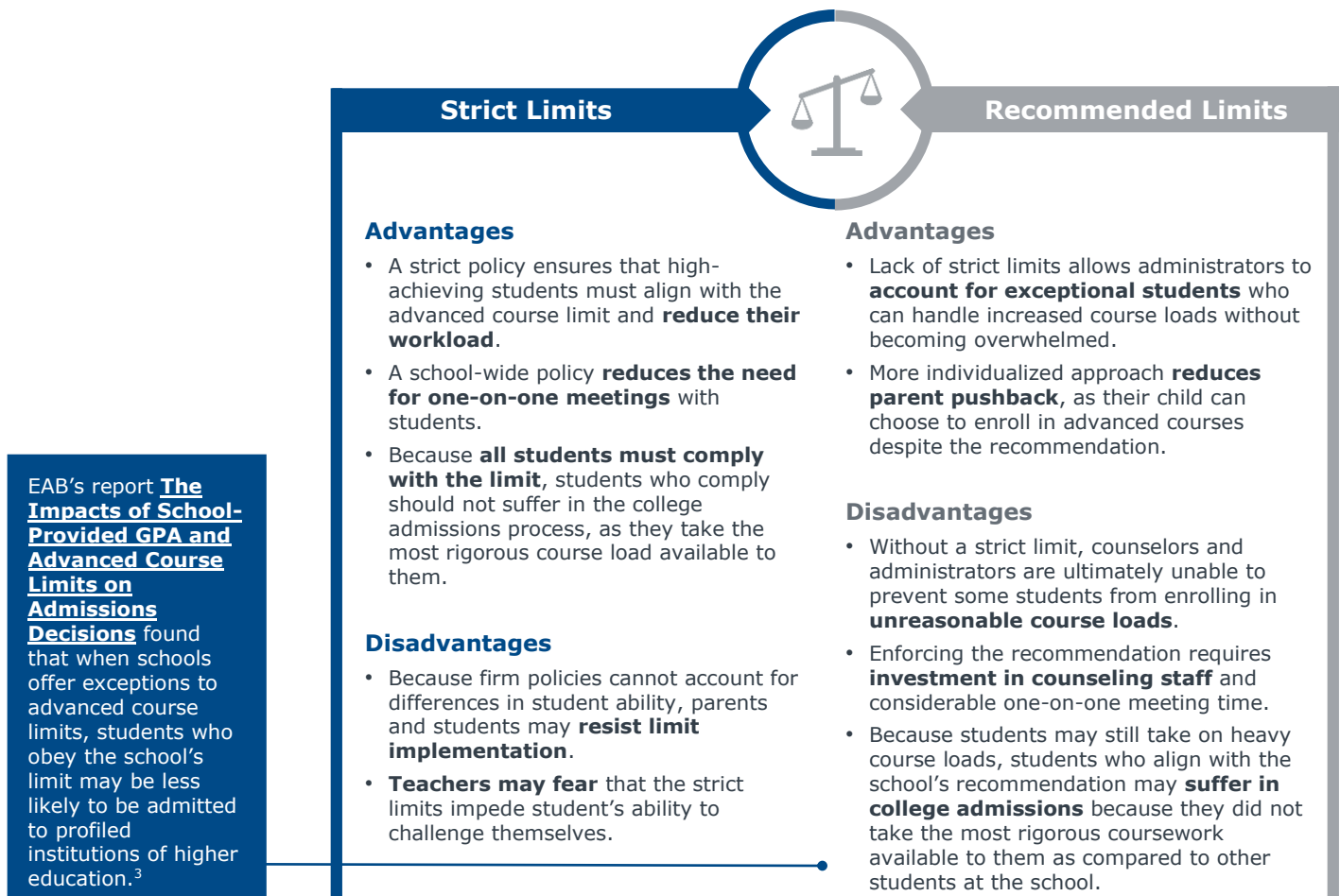
Though most profiled institutions developed policies to limit students' advanced-course loads, profiled institutions differ in the strength of their policies. Profiled institutions implement either *Strict Limits* or *Recommended Limits*\*.

- *Strict Limits*: These advanced course policies—implemented by Institution A, Institution C, Institution F, and Institution B\*\*—impose specific, per-year limits on the number of AP/advanced courses in which students may enroll. Students may only exceed these limits in rare instances, and profiled institutions aim to minimize those exceptions whenever possible.
- *Recommended Limits*: These advanced course policies—implemented by Institution D and Institution G—do not impose a strict limit on advanced course loads, but rather recommend a maximum course load for students. Students who wish to exceed this maximum threshold must meet with counselors and/or school administrators to discuss their reasoning. Administrators label limits as recommendations (i.e., “We recommend that students take no more than two AP courses per year”). Profiled institutions often rely heavily on counselor-student meetings to advise students to align with recommendations.

\* Though Institution E does not implement an advanced course limit, they do implement homework limits and other workload/stress management strategies.

\*\* Institution H previously implemented a strict limit but eliminated it because administrators felt it unfairly limited their best students. Contacts also report that students respond better to individualized counselor advice than to generalized limits.

## Advantages and Disadvantages of Advanced Course Limit Models



### If Using Recommended Limits, Pair with Targeted Strict Limits to Minimize Student Stress

Though administrators at Institution D generally only recommend a reduced course load, administrators do prohibit students from taking multiple AP science courses concurrently until they have satisfied all graduation requirements. Administrators also limit students to four college-level courses at external institutions (e.g., community colleges). Contacts report that these targeted limits decrease student workloads and stress.

## Design Graduated Strict Course Limits to Allow Students to Take on Additional Responsibility as They Gain Experience

All profiled institutions with strict advanced course limits implement graduated advanced course limits, in which the number of advanced courses students can take increases as they advance through high school. At these institutions, first-year

3) Luke Churchill, Matthew McCarthy, and Olivia Rios, "The Impacts of School-Provided GPA and Advanced Course Limits on Admissions Decisions," EAB, 2019, 16. <https://eab.com/research/district-leadership/resource/the-impacts-of-school-provided-gpa-and-advanced-course-limits-on-admissions-decisions/>



students cannot take any AP courses, and second year students can take one or two only. As students progress academically in their eleventh- and twelfth-grade year, they can take three to four advanced courses. These graduated course limits both require students to ease into strenuous course loads and allow upperclassmen to continue to challenge themselves with college-level course loads.

### Sample Graduated Advanced Course Limits at *Profiled Institutions*

For a full summary of advanced course limit policies at profiled institutions, see **Appendix A**.

Institution	AP Course Limit
<b>Institution A</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Administrators plan to limit students to no AP courses in ninth grade, one AP course in tenth grade, two AP courses in eleventh grade, and three AP courses in twelfth grade.</li> </ul>
<b>Institution B</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No AP courses in ninth grade, one AP course (only world history) in tenth grade, three AP courses in eleventh grade, and three AP courses in twelfth grade (four with application).</li> <li>Contacts note that 15 to 20 percent of the twelfth-grade class takes four AP courses each year.</li> </ul>
<b>Institution C</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No AP courses in ninth grade, one AP course (only European History) in tenth grade, three AP courses in eleventh grade, and three AP courses in twelfth grade.</li> </ul>
<b>Institution F</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No AP courses in ninth grade, two AP courses in tenth grade, three AP courses in eleventh grade, and four AP courses in twelfth grade.</li> </ul>

### Allow Exceptions to Strict Advanced Course Limits Only in Rare, Defined Circumstances

In EAB research on the impact of advanced course limits on college admissions, admissions officers at profiled postsecondary institutions specifically advise that institutions not provide exceptions to advanced course limits. If students consistently exceed the institution's limit, students who choose to follow institutional policy may experience a disadvantage in the admissions process—they are no longer taking the most rigorous course load available to them.<sup>4</sup> In alignment with this advice, administrators at Institution A plan to allow no exceptions to their advanced course limit.

At Institution F and Institution C, administrators very rarely allow exceptions to advanced course limits. Administrators at Institution F only allow students to exceed the limit if they have exhausted non-AP options in their core academic courses and areas of interest. For example, the only student who received an exception in the 2018-2019 school year (the first year of implementation) was a rising tenth-grade student who had already taken all available honors math, foreign language, and computer science courses. The institution strongly recommends that students take foreign language and math courses every year, so normally the student would have no choice but to take AP math and AP foreign language and drop AP computer science. In this case, however, administrators allowed the student to take three AP courses because the student wished to major in computer science. Administrators at Institution F predict that more

**1**  
out of 300 upper school students at Institution F exceeded the AP course limit in the 2018-2019 school year.

4) Luke Churchill, Matthew McCarthy, and Olivia Rios, "The Impacts of School-Provided GPA and Advanced Course Limits on Admissions Decisions," EAB, 2019. <https://eab.com/research/district-leadership/resource/the-impacts-of-school-provided-gpa-and-advanced-course-limits-on-admissions-decisions/>

students will seek exceptions in later grades (i.e., eleventh and twelfth grade) as they reach higher levels in multiple disciplines. Administrators plan to hold firm to their limits in upper grades despite the increased demand.

At Institution C, students can only earn exceptions if they provide documentation from their parents that explains why they should earn the exception. Counselors meet separately with the student and with the parents to ensure students are not seeking the exception due to parental pressure alone. Administrators and counseling staff strongly advise against allowing students and their parents to exceed the limit but allow students to move forward if the student and parents both agree that exceeding the limit is the correct decision. That said, contacts report that students rarely seek exceptions to the limit. Only one to two students apply for exceptions each year.

Administrators at Institution F and Institution C develop institution-specific Portrait of a Graduate initiatives to highlight qualities all students should possess by the time they graduate. Administrators emphasize student well-roundedness over academic achievement alone. At Institution C, the Portrait of a Graduate highlights multiple competencies, including “creativity” and “innovation and cross-cultural skill sets.”

### **Focus Culture on Social-Emotional Learning and Well-Roundedness to Minimize Exception Requests**

Contacts at Institution C cite their institution’s emphasis on social and emotional learning as the reason why so few students seek exceptions to the advanced course policy. At schools with academic cultures where students are more likely to overload on advanced courses, exceptions based on parental permission alone may lead to large numbers of students who exceed the policy.

Rather than rely on subjective measures such as parental permission, administrators at Institution B created a defined application process that students must complete if they wish to exceed the limit. Only twelfth-grade students may apply for exceptions, and they may only take one additional AP course. Thus, the exception policy still maintains a strict limit and aligns with admissions officer advice.

### **Application Criteria to Request Exceptions to the Advanced Course Limit at Institution B**



#### **GPA**

Though administrators do not define a specific threshold, students must have a high enough GPA to demonstrate consistent academic achievement.



#### **Course Change Requests**

If students have requested to move from an AP course to an honors course mid-year in the past, that indicates that those students were not as prepared as they thought for course rigor. Administrators may deny applications from students with past course changes.



#### **Rationale**

Students must provide a clear reason why they wish to take each of their requested AP courses. Courses should align with their interests and/or future career goals.



#### **Strategies to Destress**

Administrators ask students to report what healthy strategies they use to handle stress (e.g., exercise, tutoring). If students report healthy coping strategies, they can more likely handle heavy course loads.

## Pair Recommended Limits with Strategies to Help Students Select a Reasonable Course Load

If students at Institution D want to exceed the institution's recommendation of two AP courses per year, they must sign an AP course contract and complete a time management worksheet. The contract clearly states the institution's recommendation for an advanced course load, outlines the average time commitment associated with advanced courses, and asks the student to assert that they understand the commitment of enrolling in more than two advanced courses.<sup>5</sup>

See **Appendix B** for a sample time-management worksheet.

The time management worksheet asks students to identify exactly how much time each of their commitments consumes per week, including extra-curricular activities, homework, sleep, family time, and time to relax. Administrators pair the form with an appendix of associated questions for students to consider as they plan their academics, extracurricular activities, sleep, meals, and free time.

### Questions for Students to Consider as They Register for Courses at Institution D<sup>6</sup>



#### Academics

- Are you happy with your progress or do you feel you need to put more time into your work?
- How often do you find yourself procrastinating on assignments?
- Do you sometimes feel overwhelmed by the amount of work you have to do?



#### Extracurricular Activities

- Which of your extracurricular activities is most important to you?
- Which of your extracurricular activities could you pursue in other ways?
- Have your extracurricular commitments ever adversely affect your studies?



#### Sleep/Meals

- How many hours of sleep do you need to wake up feeling rested, refreshed?
- Do you feel you get enough sleep now?
- Do you occasionally skip meals?



#### Free Time

- Which of your free time activities are most important to you?
- Which of these activities help you to relax?
- Is there something that you would really like to do or try?

Students must secure both parent and counselor signatures on both documents before registering for additional advanced courses. At these mandatory counselor meetings, counselors ask students to describe their reasons for taking on a heavy workload, their college goals, and their outside commitments. Counselors will also bring up students' past performance and mental health to encourage students to take on a healthy load, particularly if the students have visited counseling services or wellness services due to stress in the past. That said, counselors and administrators should be careful not to inadvertently punish or stigmatize students who seek mental health support.

5) High School Course Catalog, Institution D, 2018-2019.

6) Ibid., 77-78.

## Consider Investing in Additional Counselors and Advisors to Support Recommended Limits

At Institution G, administrators rely on counseling staff to ensure that each student's course load aligns with their time constraints and capabilities. Contacts at Institution G report that if a student wants to exceed the institution's recommended limit of three AP courses per year, they must meet with their counselor, advisor, and potentially school leadership. At these meetings, staff, parents, and the student collaborate to determine an appropriate load. At the institution, some students take four or even five AP courses, whereas counselors recommend that others take only one. To ensure that workloads are appropriate, college counselors, the grade-level dean, the head of the upper school, and mental health staff meet to approve every student's schedule for the year.

Though Institution H does not recommend an AP course limit for all students, they do ask counselors to recommend course loads for each individual student. Students must meet with their dedicated advisor, class dean, and college counselor (as rising twelfth-grade students) individually before registering for courses. Class deans reserve the right to prohibit tenth-grade and eleventh-grade students from taking on an extreme course load and might ask the student to choose an AP course to drop.

### Strategies to Encourage Students to Take on Reasonable Course Loads at Institution H

1

Administrators discuss the student's interests, past academic performance, external commitments, and college goals to help the student determine an appropriate load.

2

Administrators clarify how much outside work each course requires.

3

Administrators reference the qualifications of past students who took on the same load to help the students understand the level of performance necessary to succeed.

Administrators may consider training teachers to reduce counselor workloads by conducting career development/course selection conversations. **Pages 53-55** of EAB's [Meeting the Career Readiness Imperative](#) describe how teachers can serve as industry-based advisors to students.

Contacts at Institution G report that their institution has the advantage of a high college counselor to student ratio, which allows their counselors to meet individually with most students to discuss viable course loads. The counseling-intensive process associated with recommended limits may not be viable at larger public institutions with fewer counseling staff and more students.

#### Ask Teachers to Support Student Course Selection Through Advisory Periods to Reduce Counselor Workloads

At Institution H, almost every teacher hosts an advisory period of between 10-14 students. Advisories meet daily for a quick check-in every morning and meet once weekly for a longer meeting. Though these teacher-advisors may use advisory meetings for multiple purposes, they dedicate most advisory meetings in March to the course registration process.



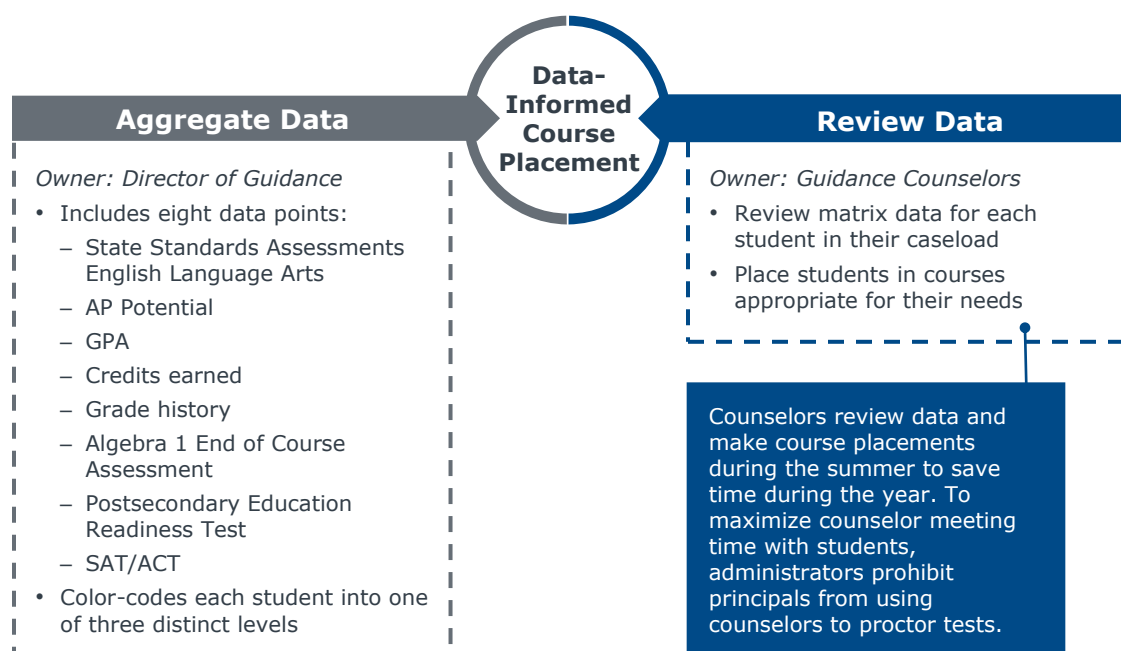
## Consider Using Advanced-Course Placement Matrices to Help Counselors Recommend Student Course Loads

EAB's study [Closing the College Access Gap](#) recommends that educational institutions should remove stringent prerequisites to improve equity in access to advanced courses. Administrators should avoid relying on prerequisite grades alone to limit AP course enrollment but should instead consider multiple measures of academic performance in the course selection process to mitigate bias.

For example, **pages 49-50** of **Closing the College Access Gap** suggest a strategy to use past academic experience to increase qualified, underrepresented student access to advanced courses without asking students to enroll in more courses than they can handle. Though administrators at Institution G and Institution H do not use this tactic specifically, department heads at both institutions approve or reject students for AP courses based on their past academic performance. Contacts report this approach helps limit student course loads.

One large, urban district profiled in EAB research developed an advanced course placement matrix that aggregates data on student academic performance to sort students into three distinct levels: green, red, and yellow. Students identified in the green and yellow ranges are automatically recommended for placement in at least one AP course.<sup>7</sup>

### Advanced-Course Placement Matrix Data Sources<sup>8</sup>



Counselors at institutions with recommended AP course limits could use advanced course placement matrices to hold productive course registration conversations with students who wish to take on more than they can handle. The data synthesized by the matrix also allows counselors with large caseloads to quickly inform themselves on the academic background of each of their students.

7) Pete Talbot, Alyssa Buccella, Lachezar Manasiev, and John Nelson, "Closing the College Access Gap," *EAB*, 2018, 50. <https://eab.com/research/district-leadership/study/closing-the-college-access-gap-2/>

8) *Ibid.*, 49.

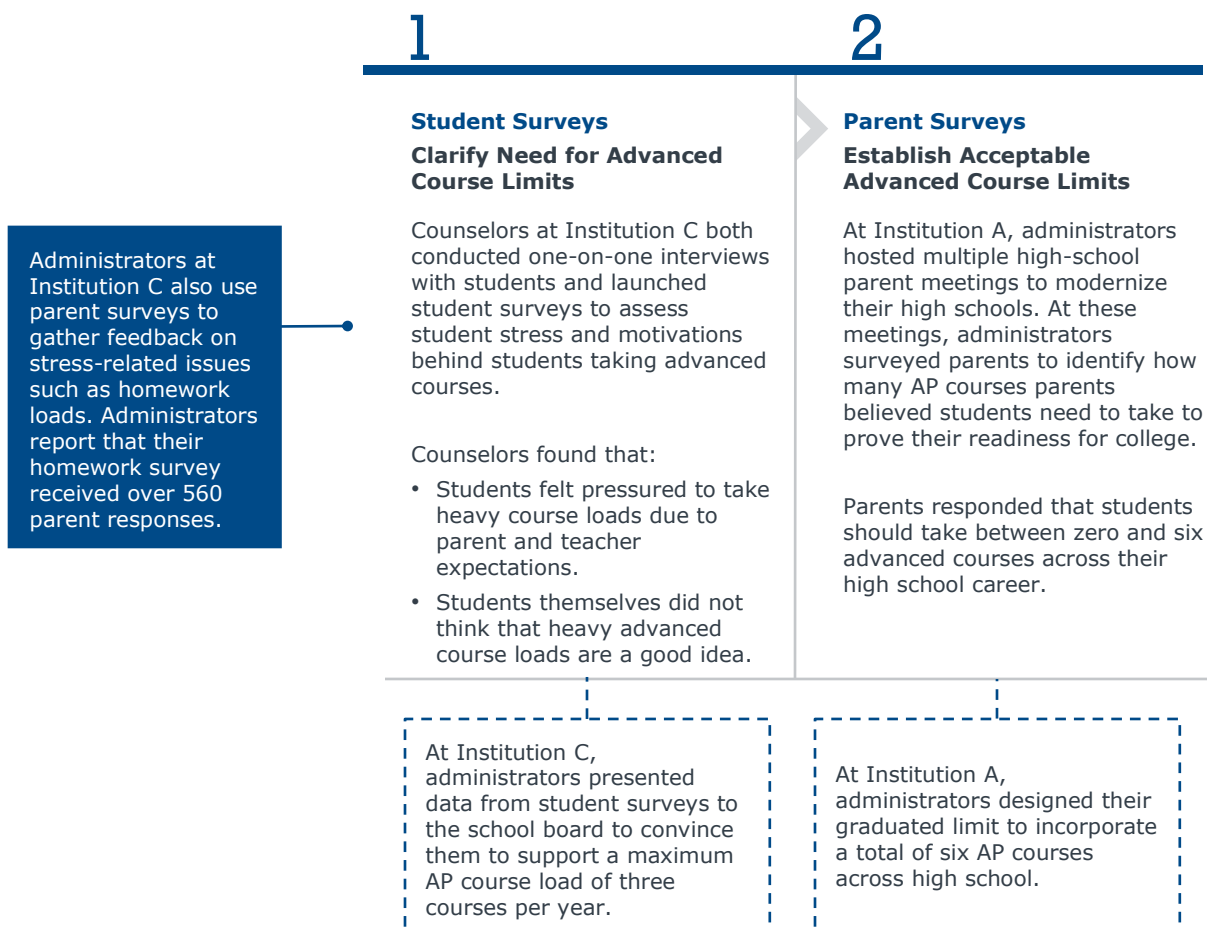
### 3) Development

#### Design

#### Use Parent and Student Surveys to Assess Stakeholder Interest in Limits and Identify Acceptable Per-Year Limits

At Institution D, contacts recommend that administrators gather feedback from parents, students, and teachers before moving forward with an advanced course limit. Contacts emphasize the importance of engaging parents as early in the process as possible assess parent interest in potential limits and increase buy-in. Administrators at Institution A and Institution C both used surveys to collect initial feedback related to advanced course limits. Administrators should consider combining the approaches used at both institutions into a unified process.

#### Combined Preliminary Survey Process at Institution A and Institution C

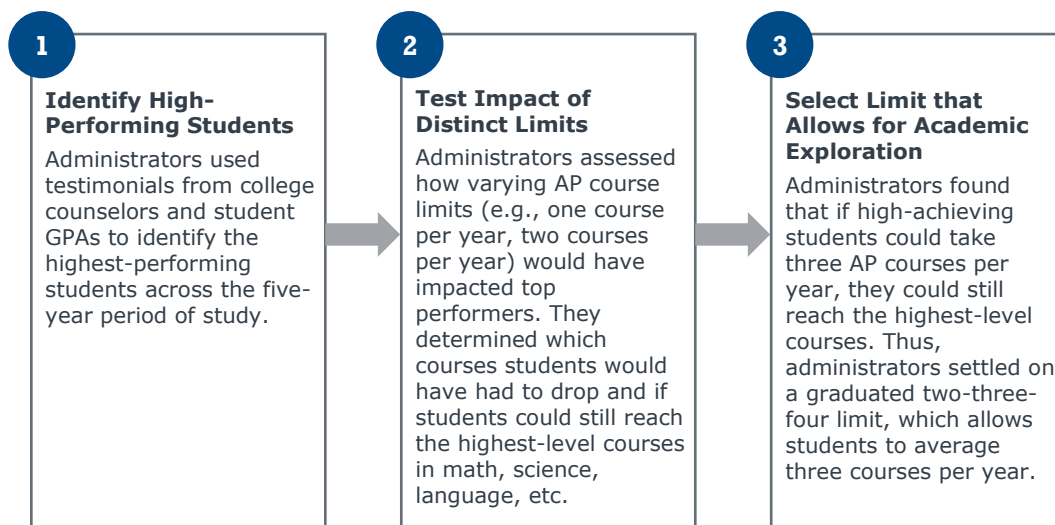


#### Audit Past Student Course Loads to Ensure That Students Can Challenge Themselves Under Potential Limits

At Institution F, administrators wanted high-performing students to be able to reach the most advanced courses in their subject area of interest under any potential advanced course limit.

Before settling on a specific limit, the institution’s registrar, associate head of school, and college counselors analyzed five years of student course load data to determine how AP limits would have affected these high-performing students’ trajectories.

### Course Load Audit Process at Institution F



### Complement Course Load Audits with Student Time Audits When Designing Course Limits

At Institution D, administrators used expected time commitments for AP courses (40 minutes per night, 2.5 hours per week) to set their institution’s recommended limit at two AP courses per year. Administrators also accounted for typical extracurricular commitments, family time, and sleep when determining their recommendation.

### Profiled Institutions Conduct Research with Other K-12 and Postsecondary Institutions to Assess Potential Limits

Contacts at Institution F acknowledge that because of the prestige of their school, admissions officers know the quality of their student resources and past performance and are thus less likely to question the rigor of their courses.

Administrators at Institution A, Institution F, and Institution C contacted college admissions officers to assess the impact of potential limits on the admissions process prior to implementation. Administrators at Institution A asked EAB to assess limit impact, whereas counselors at Institution F and Institution C leveraged their existing relationships with college admissions officers to conduct interviews. Counselors at Institution F interviewed administrators at their 30 most-matriculated postsecondary institutions and all in-state public institutions.

**30+**  
postsecondary institutions  
—interviewed by  
counselors at Institution  
F— reported that advanced  
course limits would not  
impact student success in  
college admissions.

All profiled institutions found that advanced course limits would not disadvantage their students in the college admissions process. In fact, counselors at Institution C found that college admissions officers focus more on the overall student—including their commitments outside of the institution—rather than on a specific threshold of AP



courses. Similarly, admissions officers told contacts at Institution F that advanced course limits might help students develop more interesting and varied extra-curricular activities and interests, which in turn might benefit students during the admissions process.

Administrators at Institution F also interviewed independent schools that implemented or planned to implement advanced course limits to determine how those schools designed and enforced their limits with students.

## Assessment and Impact

### Use Campus Climate Surveys to Assess Limit Impact on Stress and Student Workloads

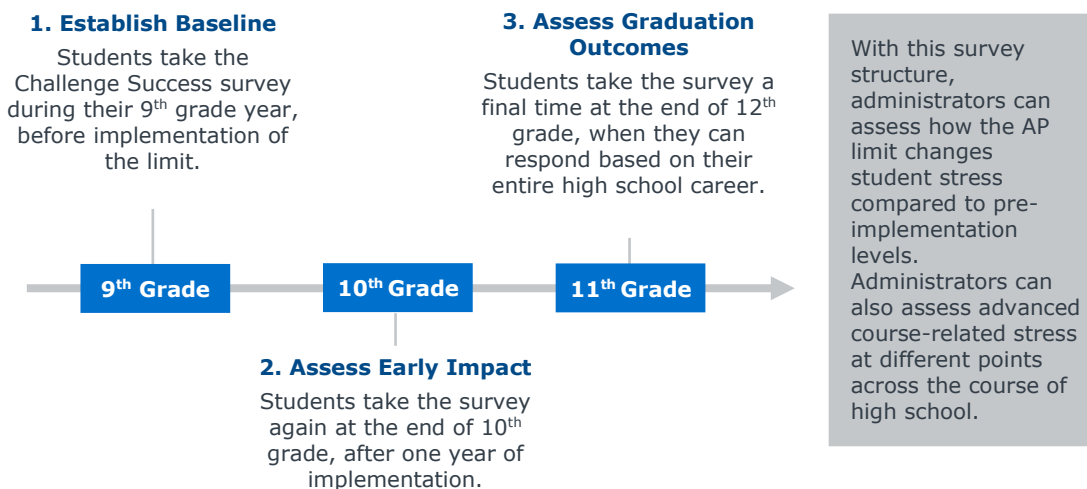
Administrators at most profiled institutions use student surveys to assess student stress levels. Rather than develop their own surveys, administrators typically rely on surveys developed by external non-profits, vendors, and government agencies. Surveys include state climate surveys (e.g., [California Healthy Kids Survey](#)), [Challenge Success](#) surveys, [Panorama Education](#) social and emotional learning surveys, and Indiana University's [High School Survey of Student Engagement](#).

At Institution C and Institution G, students also take surveys that assess their attitudes toward their courses. These surveys measure student perceptions of course rigor, the extent to which students feel prepared, and student engagement.

A dedicated department for research and analysis at Institution D analyzes and synthesizes survey data for administrators. Similarly, the student support director, counselors, nurses, and learning specialists from all divisions at Institution G meet to analyze and discuss school climate data. At Institution G and Institution D, administrators use student survey data to inform board and district policy. Specifically, administrators use survey data to develop and implement new stress reduction techniques, including shared assessment calendars and time limits on homework.

Administrators at Institution F customized the Challenge Success Survey to assess their institution's advanced course limit implementation. The survey already measures hours of sleep and hours of homework per night, but administrators added questions to assess the extent to which students value and enjoy the institutional experience in academic, athletics, and the arts. Administrators hope to see increased engagement with the institution after the limit implementation.

### Survey-Based Limit Assessment Process at Institution F for Initial Student Cohort





### ► Consider Conducting Student Interviews to Assess Nuances in Survey Data

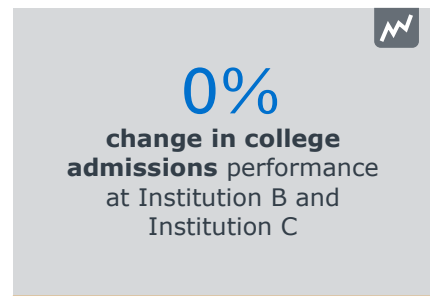
At Institution C, counselors randomly select students for one-on-one interviews to investigate survey trends (e.g., increased homework loads, increased stress). Counselors also run small focus groups with students to investigate potential stressors.

## Track College Admissions Success to Ensure Limits Do Not Impact Student Postsecondary Outcomes

For additional EAB research on how advanced course limits impact admissions decisions, consult the report [The Impacts of School-Provided GPA, Class Rank, and Advanced Course Limits on Admissions Decisions](#).

All profiled institutions with strict advanced course limits track or plan to track their student's performance in college admissions. Administrators at Institution F developed protocols through the college counseling office to track admit rates. Contacts report that because a single year of admissions success does not provide enough data to evaluate the success of their limit, they will not look at college admissions data until three classes have graduated under the limit.

Institution D uses both [Naviance](#) and a student survey to track admissions performance. For more information on Naviance and similar platforms, see [page 72](#) of EAB's study [Closing the College Access Gap](#).



At Institution B and Institution C—two institutions that have had limits in place long enough to assess their impact on college admissions—contacts report that they have not seen any decline in student acceptances since imposing limits.

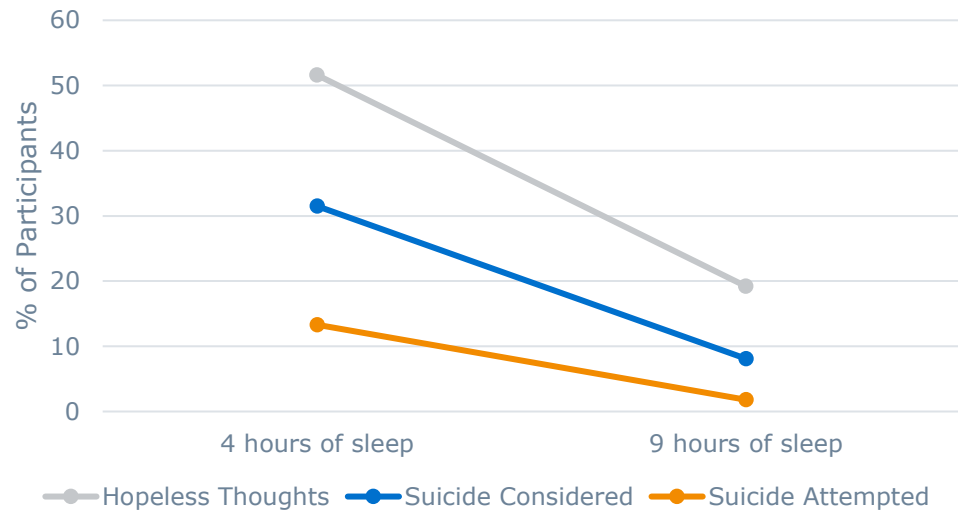
## Profiled Institutions Have Not Yet Determined the Impact of Advanced Course Limits on Student Stress

Though contacts at Institution A, Institution Fs, and Institution C anticipate that advanced course limits will lead to reduced workloads, decreased student stress, and an increased likelihood that students select courses based on interest, administrators have not yet measured the impact of limits on student stress or academic outcomes. Contacts at Institution B report that the impact of the limit is difficult to measure because numerous other factors impact student stress and student workloads beyond advanced course limits alone.

Course limits may not reduce student stress directly—contacts from Institution G report that student perceptions of stress tend to expand to fill any empty spaces. That said, strict AP course limits should (if homework loads remain constant) increase the amount of time that high-achieving students can commit to healthy, stress-relieving tasks and coping mechanisms (e.g., sleep, exercise, time with friends and family). These tasks may in turn improve student engagement and reduce student stress. In the context of sleep specifically, recent data from Fairfax County Public Schools suggests that increased sleep is associated with decreased mental health concerns among district students.

## Impacts of Increased Sleep on Student Stress at Fairfax County Public Schools<sup>9</sup>

Researchers surveyed 27,939 students in grades eight, 10, and 12 at all Fairfax County Public Schools.



Contacts from Institution B cite the workload reductions linked to strict AP course limits to anecdotally assert that their advanced course limit has reduced student academic stress. In addition, teachers at Institution C support the institution's limit. Teachers report that student course loads prior to the limit were impossible, and many teachers suggest that administrators reduce the course limit from three to two courses.

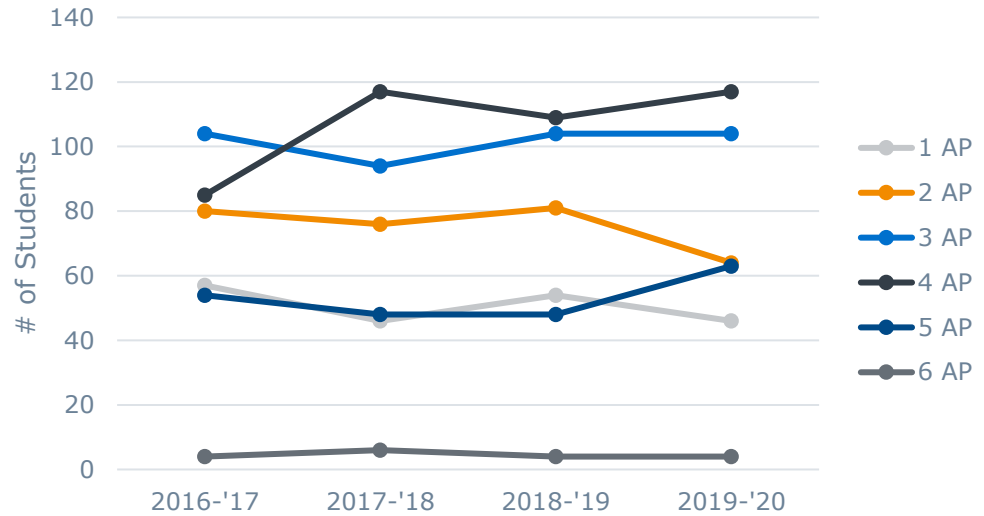
## Recommended Limits May Not Meaningfully Impact Student Workloads

Contacts from Institution D note that because students may choose to exceed the recommended limit, student advanced course enrollment has not meaningfully shifted. Students continue to take four, five, or even six AP courses each year, despite the district's recommendation of two per year. Contacts cite the fact that the district continues to weight grades in AP courses as the reason students have not reduced their course loads. District administrators should consider eliminating weighted GPA alongside course load recommendations to increase recommended limit effectiveness.

9) A. Winsler, A. Deutsch, RD Vorona, PA Payne, Szklo-Coxe M., "Sleepless in Fairfax: The Difference One More Hour of Sleep Can Make for Teen Hopelessness, Suicidal Ideation, and Substance Use," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* (2014): vol. 44, no. 2. <http://winslerlab.gmu.edu/pubs/WinslerSleep.pdf>

## No Shifts in Twelfth-Grade AP Course Enrollment at One High School at Institution D<sup>10</sup>

Despite the institution's recommended limit of two AP courses, the number of students taking two AP courses has not



### Profiled Institutions Do Not Anticipate Academic or Engagement Concerns Due to Limits

Though administrators at profiled institutions did not assess how advanced course limits impact student academic performance or student engagement, contacts at Institution F report that advanced course limits primarily impact high-achieving students who pursue top performance in every course. Contacts do not anticipate that advanced course limit will impact this mindset.

<sup>10</sup>) "AP Enrollment Three Years," High School in Institution D, provided September 18, 2019.

## 4) Communication

### Teachers, Parents, and Students

#### Use Research to Assuage Stakeholder Concerns About Admissions Performance and Academic Engagement

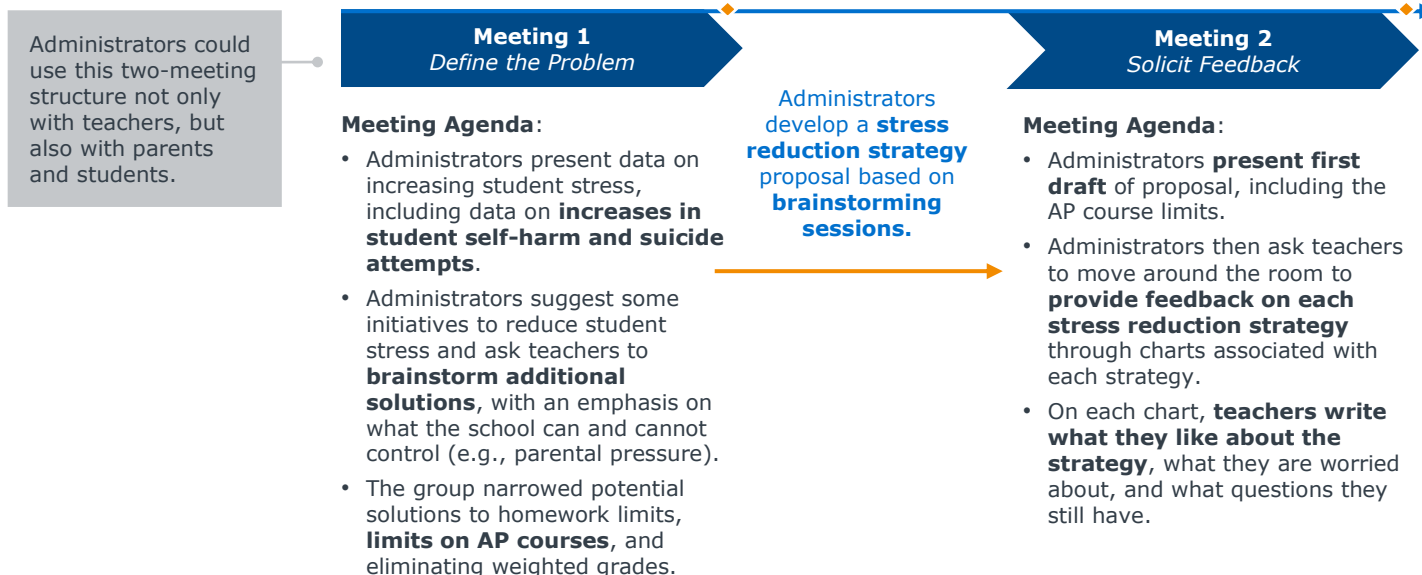
At all profiled institutions with strict limits, administrators rely on preliminary research with postsecondary institutions, other K-12 institutions with limits, and internal constituents to communicate the need for and viability of advanced course limits. For example, administrators at Institution F referenced the institution's research process with colleges and the amount of time spent researching the decision (i.e., two years) at parent meetings to help assuage parent concerns. Similarly, administrators at Institution B reference their internal research on the college admission rates of their students since limit implementation to mitigate parental pushback.

At Institution A, administrators solicited specific research questions from teachers regarding what they think students and parents need to know about limits prior to implementation. Teachers emphasized concerns related to college admissions, so administrators then asked EAB to investigate the impact of advanced course limits on admissions through interviews with admissions officers.

#### Engage Stakeholders in the Limit Design and Approval Process

Contacts at Institution A designed a two-meeting structure to engage teachers and convince them to support the AP course limit. Contacts report that if teachers do not support an AP limit, they will undermine it with parents and students and limit its effectiveness. Administrators hosted two meetings with teachers at each high school dedicated specifically to the AP course limit. Administrators used the first meeting to characterize the immense problem of student stress and solicit potential solutions. Administrators then used the second meeting to collect teacher feedback on their proposed solution.

#### Teacher Engagement Meeting Structure at Institution A



## Discuss Potential Limits and Collect Feedback Through Parent and Student Events

Contacts at profiled institutions report mixed reactions from parents regarding AP course limits. At Institution A, contacts report that most parents were thankful for limit implementation, as they felt it would enable their students to take on more reasonable workloads and remain competitive in college admissions. At Institution F, contacts report that most parents were happy with limit implementation, but some parents expressed concern that the institution could not predict how the limit would impact their student's college admissions.

To collect feedback and address parent and student concerns, administrators at Institution B, Institution F, and Institution D rely on parent nights. At Institution D, administrators host quarterly parent nights for eleventh- and twelfth-grade students and one parent night a semester for ninth- and tenth-grade students. Administrators at Institution B host yearly student assemblies on the course selection process and host a course selection information night for families. Administrators at all three institutions use specific strategies to address the advanced course limit.

### Parent Night Advanced Course Limit Communication Strategies at Profiled Institutions



At Institution C, contacts report that the large size of open-forum parent meetings can often prevent administrators from engaging meaningfully with parent concerns. Though administrators do host community forums every two months where external experts present to parents, when administrators launch a new initiative, they first publish a press release with facts and data related to student stress and the need for advanced course limits. The district's superintendent then schedules "coffee hours" (i.e., office hours) at local libraries and at the senior citizen center to allow parents and community members to address their specific concerns individually.



### Publish Advanced Course Limit Rationale and Design in Press Releases and the Student Newspaper

At Institution F, administrators published a newsletter that explained their limit and the rationale behind it, which they then sent out to all parents. They also gave their student newspaper an exclusive interview about the limit, as parents receive much of their information about the school from the newspaper. Similarly, administrators at Institution A completed an interview with the local newspaper and sent out board meeting minutes to the entire community.

## Postsecondary Institutions

### Clearly Indicate Limits in Transcripts and in Student Recommendations

Administrators at Institution F plan to include a clear explanation of the institution's course limit on student transcripts (if possible) and on the front page of the school profile. Administrators plan to clarify in what class the limits become effective (e.g., the class of 2022) and explain the exact structure of the limit.

In previous EAB research on advanced course limits, interviewed college admissions officers recommend that institutions clearly indicate their limits on both student transcripts and the school profile to ensure admissions officers recognize the limit for each student.<sup>11</sup> Admissions officers recommend that institutions include the following information.

### Strategies to Communicate Changes to GPA Calculations and Advanced Course Limits in School Profiles<sup>12</sup>



#### Advanced Course Limits

- Indicate any limits to advanced courses **and the degree to which the school applies them** (e.g., eleventh-grade students limited to three AP courses in the year, twelfth-grade students limited to four AP courses in the year).
- Clearly indicate when the school **enacted** the policy and when it becomes **effective**.
- Clearly indicate if the school **grants exceptions** to the limit.

Profiled admissions officers also recommend that school counselors use secondary school reports (i.e., letters of recommendation) to clarify the rigor of a specific student's course load relative to other students at the school.<sup>13</sup> At Institution C, counselors note in secondary school reports that a student who takes six AP courses across tenth grade and eleventh grade and performs well in those courses is one of the top students in the class. Counselors reference the institution's advanced course limit and note that the institution encourages students to take a variety of courses outside of the AP curriculum.

11) Luke Churchill, Matthew McCarthy, and Olivia Rios. "The Impacts of School-Provided GPA and Advanced Course Limits on Admissions Decisions," *EAB*, 2018, 17. <https://eab.com/research/district-leadership/resource/the-impacts-of-school-provided-gpa-and-advanced-course-limits-on-admissions-decisions/>

12) Ibid., 18.

13) Ibid.

## Discuss Limits During Standard College Admissions Counselor Visits and Phone Conversations

At Institution A, Institution F and Institution C, administrators ask school counselors to bring up the institution's AP limit when in conversation with college admissions officers. When school counselors speak to regional admissions officers throughout the year, they share information about the advanced course limit directly to the officer who will read student applications. Counselors at Institution F host over 150 admissions officer visits each year, send counselors to visit postsecondary institutions, and ask administrators to serve on college admissions advisory boards.

Administrators at Institution A, in alignment with past EAB research,<sup>14</sup> plan to reach out directly to admissions officers at the institution's most-matriculated institutions to inform officers of the institution's limit.

### ► **Communicate Details of Advanced Course Limits During Initial Research Calls with Admissions Officers**

When interviewing admissions officers to conduct research on the viability of advanced course limits, counselors at Institution F communicated the specific plans and time frame for the school's proposed advanced course limit. In this way, counselors could save time in future discussions about the advanced course limit, as admissions officers already understood the limit's context and structure.

<sup>14</sup> Luke Churchill, Matthew McCarthy, and Olivia Rios. "The Impacts of School-Provided GPA and Advanced Course Limits on Admissions Decisions," *EAB*, 2018, 19. <https://eab.com/research/district-leadership/resource/the-impacts-of-school-provided-gpa-and-advanced-course-limits-on-admissions-decisions/>

## 5) Complementary Stress Reduction Initiatives

### Homework Limits

#### Write Homework Policies That Include Time Limits

At many profiled institutions, administrators set specific time limits for high-school homework on a per-class or per-night basis. Administrators at some profiled institutions establish separate homework limits for standard, honors, and AP courses. At Institution A and Institution D, administrators set homework limits on a per-week basis. Administrators at other profiled institutions often use homework limits to complement advanced course limits.

#### Homework Limits at Profiled Institutions

At Institution E and Institution G, teachers may not assign additional homework when a class does not meet. Thus, students at Institution E only receive four nights of homework for each class across the week (classes meet four out of five weekdays).

Institution	Homework Limit
<b>Institution B</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 30 minutes per night for an honors course</li><li>• 45 minutes per night for an AP course</li></ul>
<b>Institution A</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Two hours of homework per week for each core course.</li><li>• 1.5 hours of homework per week for each elective course.</li><li>• One hour of homework each week for health and physical education courses.</li></ul>
<b>Institution E</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 20-30 minutes per class for a standard course</li><li>• 30-45 minutes per class for an honors course</li><li>• 45-60 minutes per class for an AP course</li></ul>
<b>Institution F</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 45 minutes per class</li></ul>
<b>Institution G</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 30 minutes per class for a standard course</li><li>• 40-45 minutes per class for an advanced course</li></ul>
<b>Institution D</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• At one institutional high school, administrators ask teachers to assign 2.5 hours of homework per week for each advanced course.</li></ul>

#### Ask Teachers to Avoid Assigning Homework Over School Breaks

To further reduce student homework loads, administrators at Institution A created a policy that asks teachers to keep winter break, Thanksgiving break, and spring break free of homework. Similarly, administrators at Institution C ask teachers to avoid giving homework on weekends and vacations if possible. Administrators request that teachers identify a clear purpose for homework assignments and encourage teachers to assign exit tickets to check mastery, rather than rote practice problems.

#### Use Homework Surveys and Teacher Performance Goals to Increase Homework Limit Compliance

Contacts at Institution G report that homework time limits are not always effective because the same assignment may take different students vastly different amounts of time. On a related note, contacts at Institution A report that teachers do not always



adhere to homework policies. When administrators at one institutional high school surveyed students, they found that 40 percent of students received homework assignments to complete over spring break. They also found that teachers rarely check how long homework takes students in their courses.

For more information on how to design effective homework limits, consult **pages 34-40** of EAB's [Tackling the Student Stress Dilemma](#).

At this high school at Institution A, administrators presented homework survey data to teachers and solicited feedback on how to improve compliance with the homework policy. Administrators now ask teachers to place an estimated time that it should take students to complete the assignment on each homework assignment. Teachers must also regularly talk to students about homework and provide parents with guidance on how to reach out if they see their student completing excessive work each night.

To motivate teachers to change their practice, administrators added homework policy adherence to the high school improvement plan. Because of that change, teachers' compliance with the policy impacts their performance appraisal. Administrators also plan to continue to survey students to assess how their homework loads change.

## Advanced Course Supports

### Design School Schedules to Provide Additional Study Time, Reduce Homework Loads, and Increase Student Access to Teachers

At Institution E, Institution F, Institution D, and Institution G, administrators design school schedules to help students better manage their workload.

#### Schedule Components that Support Student Success in Advanced Courses at Profiled Institutions

For more examples of innovative schedules designed to reduce student stress, see **pages 42-44** of [Tackling the Student Stress Dilemma](#).



##### Free Periods

At Institution D, students may elect to take free periods to use as study hall. Administrators recommend that students who exceed the advanced course recommendation take at least one free period.



##### Dedicated Support Time

At one high school at Institution D, the schedule incorporates two to three 45-minute tutorial periods each week. Students may use this time to visit any teacher they choose to seek additional support.



##### Reduced Nightly Homework Load

At Institution F, administrators switched to a block schedule in which students take fewer courses per day but spend a longer time in each course. Because of this schedule, students receive homework for three classes per night, rather than five classes per night.



##### Optional Weekend Study Sessions

At Institution G, teachers host weekend study sessions on regular intervals to support students who need additional time to master AP course content.

### ► **To Support Students, Increase Student Access to Teachers**

At Institution C, administrators ask individual teachers to spend at least 45 minutes to one hour with each of their students at least once per semester to talk about strengths and weaknesses, assess how students are feeling, and provide feedback on student work. School counselors schedule additional check-ins with students who elect to take heavy course loads to make sure students are not suffering from undue stress. Similarly, at Institution B, administrators ask teachers to provide extra help before or after school if necessary to support individual students.

## **Provide Study-Skills Instruction Through One-on-One Interventions**

Administrators at Institution F recently opened a learning center to help students understand effective study techniques and executive functioning. Staffed by a learning specialist, this learning center provides small group lessons and one-on-one tutoring to help students learn how to better retain information and study intelligently. Administrators hope the learning center will discourage students from embracing negative study techniques such as avoiding sleep to study before a test.

Though not all students may seek out support at the learning center, all tenth-grade students at Institution F must complete a required life skills course taught by class deans and campus administrators. This class, which meets once per rotation in the block schedule, teaches students about healthy exercise, study, and sleep habits that encourage success.

### **Ask Students to Serve as Peer Tutors to Scale Course Support**

At one high school at Institution D, students provide peer tutoring to all those who need additional support at the campus tutoring center. Similarly, peer tutors at Institution B provide support either before or after school. Peer tutoring allow administrators to support students without hiring additional employees.

## **Implement Support Strategies Targeted Specifically at Student Stress Management**

At many profiled institutions, administrators developed initiatives targeted specifically at student stress to help students manage heavy workloads and other common stressors.

## Stress Management Initiatives at Profiled Institutions



### Provide Social and Emotional Learning Lessons

At one high school at Institution D, administrators recently implemented a social and emotional learning class:

- Students in all four grade levels will take a social and emotional learning course once a week for an hour.
- Students spend one third of social and emotional learning class periods on the stress-relief and listening skills taught by [School Connect](#), one third of class periods on team-building activities, and one third as relaxed time with food, movies, and light activities.
- Administrators worked with [CASEL](#), Stanford University, and School Connect to adopt the School Connect social and emotional learning curriculum for use in the high school.



### Implement Mindfulness Practices Such as Yoga

At Institution E and Institution D, students learn mindfulness strategies as part of the health and wellness/physical education curriculum.

- At Institution E, students spend seven total class periods learning mindfulness and stress management strategies. All teachers also receive mindfulness training from a local institute and/or online courses.
- To help reinforce the wellness curriculum, administrators at Institution E host day-long wellness retreats for tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students. Students rotate between small group stations that focus on drug and alcohol prevention, stress management, and strategies to support friends in crisis. Administrators also invite external experts to speak at wellness retreats.
- At one high school at Institution D, students learn mindfulness strategies and breathing exercises during physical education courses. Students can also elect to take yoga after school or as a physical education class.



### Develop a Dedicated Wellness Center

At one high school at Institution D, a dedicated wellness team staffs a student wellness center on campus.

- The center employs a wellness outreach coordinator who welcomes students and plans wellness events on campus, a director/certified counselor, and school psychologists and/or external therapists.
- Students can visit the wellness center for any reason, whether to grab a snack, drink a cup of tea, relax, or seek support from wellness staff.
- Contacts report that the wellness center provides a central location for students to seek help in times of crisis or in everyday situations—the center can receive between 500 and 600 visitors per day.

## 6) Research Methodology

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### Project Challenge

Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions.

1. How do contact institutions design advanced course limits?
2. How do contact institutions communicate/plan to communicate advanced course limits to institutional stakeholders to mitigate pushback?
3. How do contact institutions measure/plan to measure the impact of advanced course limits? If applicable, what impact have contact institutions seen?
4. Do contact institutions allow/plan to allow students to pursue exceptions for course limits, and, if so, under what circumstances do they allow exceptions?
5. What supports do contact institutions provide students who pursue advanced coursework?
6. How do contact institutions communicate/plan to communicate advanced course limits to postsecondary institutions?
7. Do contact institutions also implement/plan to implement homework limits or other policies to reduce homework alongside advanced course limits, and—if so—how do contact institutions design those limits?
8. If applicable, why did contact institutions discontinue advanced course limits?
9. If applicable, what other measures do contact institutions implement to reduce student stress in place of advanced course limits?

### Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research libraries ([eab.com](http://eab.com))
- EAB interviews and analysis
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)
- Private School Review ([privateschoolreview.com](http://privateschoolreview.com))
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- School-Connect. "School-Connect." Accessed October 16, 2019. <https://www.school-connect.net>
- Unlocking Time. "Limit the Number of AP Courses Students Can Take." Accessed October 10, 2019. <https://unlockingtime.org/time-strategies-for-schools/limit-the-number-of-AP-classes-students-can-take>

## Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed administrators at districts, public schools, and independent schools that implement advanced course limits or advanced course load recommendations.

### A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Report

School	Designation	Location	Approximate Enrollment
<b>Institution A</b>	Public	Mid-Atlantic	14,000
<b>Institution B</b>	Public	Northeast	2,500
<b>Institution C</b>	Public	Northeast	2,500
<b>Institution D</b>	Public	Pacific West	12,500
<b>Institution E</b>	Independent	Mid-Atlantic	1,500
<b>Institution F</b>	Independent	Pacific West	1,500
<b>Institution G</b>	Independent	Midwest	1,500
<b>Institution H</b>	Independent	South	1,000

# Appendix A

## Summary of Advanced Course Limits at Profiled Institutions

Institution	Limit Type	Limit Structure	Exception Policy
<b>Institution A</b>	Strict	One AP course in tenth grade, two in eleventh grade, and three in twelfth grade	No exceptions
<b>Institution B</b>	Strict	One AP course in tenth grade, three in eleventh grade, and three in twelfth grade	Twelfth-grade students may apply to take four AP courses
<b>Institution C</b>	Strict	One AP course in tenth grade, three in eleventh grade, three in twelfth grade	Exceptions with parental permission
<b>Institution F</b>	Strict	Two AP courses in tenth grade, three in eleventh grade, and four in twelfth grade	Rare exceptions in tenth grade when students have taken all available honors courses in their areas of interest
<b>Institution D</b>	Recommended	Two AP courses per year	N/A
<b>Institution G</b>	Recommended	Three AP courses per year	N/A
<b>Institution H</b>	None (formerly Strict)	N/A	N/A
<b>Institution E</b>	None (no AP course limit, but the institution implements multiple strategies to reduce student stress.	N/A	N/A

# Appendix B

## Sample Completed Time Management Worksheet from Institution D<sup>15</sup>

Activity		Avg. Hours Per Week
<b>School Activities</b>		
School (e.g., 5 days x 7 hours)		<b>35</b>
<b>Work Outside of Class (projects, studying for tests, homework)</b>		
English	AP English Literature	<b>2.5</b>
Social Studies	Honors US History	<b>1.5</b>
Math	Honors Precalculus	<b>1.5</b>
Science	AP Biology	<b>3.0</b>
Language	Honors French	<b>1.5</b>
Elective 1	Art	<b>2</b>
Elective 2	Film	<b>1</b>
<b>Subtotal (School Activities)</b>		<b>48</b>
<b>Outside Activities (as applicable)</b>		
Hobbies/Interests	Sailing	<b>4.0</b>
Work/Job/Chores/Community Service	Barista	<b>8</b>
Religious Activities		<b>0</b>
Sports		<b>0</b>
Musical Performances		<b>0</b>
Other		<b>0</b>
<b>Subtotal (Outside Activities)</b>		<b>16</b>
<b>Daily Living Activities</b>		
Family Time		<b>7</b>
Sleep (recommended: 7 days x 9 hours = 63 hours)		<b>63</b>
Preparation Time (Eating, Showering, etc.)		<b>17.5</b>
Social time (social media, hanging out with friends)		<b>16</b>
<b>Subtotal (Daily Living Activities)</b>		<b>103.5</b>
<b>Total Hours in a Week (THW)</b>		<b>168</b>
<b>Total Hours Adding All Activities (THA)</b>		<b>167.5</b>
<b>THW – THA =</b>		<b>4.5</b>

Consider adding separate category for commute time to and from the school and to and from other activities.

<sup>15</sup>High School Course Catalog, Institution D, 2018-2019.