

RAD directions:

- 1. Read and mark the text**
- 2. Go to Classroom and respond in the RAD document.**
- 3. Be ready to discuss by deadline.**

How many tough high school courses are too many?

By Annie Martin, Orlando Sentinel

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ORLANDO — Kyana Julian took her first Advanced Placement course — human geography — during her freshman year at Orlando’s University High School. Her counselor, she said, told her taking tough courses was a must if she wanted to get into a good college.

Schools often encourage top students like Kyana to take rigorous classes. But some students and parents say there’s too much pressure on students to load up on tough courses. Kyana said she felt frustrated because administrators and counselors seemed to give the same advice to students, regardless of their academic performance or interests.

“They don’t look at a student as an individual — it’s more like a statistic,” she said.

School leaders say they have good reason to push students. They want teenagers, particularly those from low-income families or others who are underrepresented, to know about the advantages of taking rigorous classes.

Many colleges say they pick applicants who have already shown they can succeed in college-level work, such as AP classes. Public universities in Florida recalculate students’ GPAs to give extra weight to AP and other difficult classes because success in those courses shows they are ready for college, said Gordon Chavis, the associate vice president for enrollment at the University of Central Florida.

“We clearly want students to have a better command of the subject matter, and if (the counselors are) pushing them to take more difficult courses, it’s because they want the students to be better prepared,” Chavis said.

High school counselors want to make sure students have as many options as possible, said Mary Bridges, senior director of academic and guidance services for Orange schools.

“What we’re trying to look at is every student having a post-secondary plan and then making sure they’re in the right courses to get to the next step,” Bridges said.

The state also offers incentives to schools to fill Advanced Placement and other accelerated courses, exempting them from state class-size requirements and awarding points in the grading system to high schools that enroll a high proportion of students in advanced classes.

While AP classes are not required, students may be enrolled in them even if they don't ask for them, Bridges said. Counselors often look at performance on state tests and the PSAT, a precursor to the SAT college placement test, to determine who might be a good fit.

"What we don't want to do is miss students who could do well," Bridges said. "If you're not the teacher pet type or you're not very vocal, you might not get the experience."

Kyana, who boasts a weighted GPA of nearly 5.0 after her first two years of high school, fits the profile of a student who is a strong candidate for AP courses. But she said she thought her AP classes at University were watered down. Though she earned A's, she fell short of earning a 3 on the exams, typically the score required to earn college credit.

"The sole purpose of taking the AP class was completely lost," said Kyana, now a 17-year-old junior at Lake Howell High in Seminole, Florida.

After a parent broached the matter during a recent Orange County School Board retreat, Chairman Bill Sublette said he had also heard from parents who thought their children were being pushed too hard.

"I personally don't want any child in an AP course who doesn't want to be there and (whom) the parents don't want to be there," Sublette said.

Parents, students and counselors should determine what's best for each student, said John Williamson, vice president of AP curriculum and instruction for the College Board.

"Ultimately, what I've seen is schools are trying to provide more and more opportunities for students and they're trying to allow students to have more choices later on," he said.

Statewide, more students are taking AP exams. This year, 200,061 Florida students took at least one test, a 10 percent increase since 2011, according to the College Board, which runs the program. Even students who don't score well enough to earn college credit are more likely to graduate from college on time, Williamson said.

Over the summer, Seminole schools Superintendent Walt Griffin met with every principal to review student data and pinpoint students who could use an extra push.

"I want to make sure that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, their ethnicity, have opportunities for advanced coursework," Griffin said.

Angie Gallo, a vice president of the Orange County Council of PTA and PTSA, said she recognizes that some students won't enroll in tough classes unless somebody at school pushes them. She said she had to speak to several employees at Orlando's East River High before her daughter was allowed to drop an AP class.

"If the child is in an AP class, and they can't handle it or they're stressed out, there should be a fail-safe," Gallo said. "These classes are important — a 'C' is still a 'C,' even if it's an AP class."

Bridges agreed that counselors should speak with parents who are concerned about their children's schedule. But she said educators also want to make sure students are not held back by light course loads.

"I think it's educational malpractice to not give a student an opportunity, if they're capable of doing well in a rigorous class, to put them in an easy class or not push them at all," Bridges said.

Go to Google Classroom and open the document associated with this RAD. You will need to write a 400-600 word specific response to the article. Possible response topics might include the following, but you do NOT have to answer any/all of these questions:

- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- How do you feel about AP courses? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.
- What isn't in this article? Discuss.