

How the AP Program FAILS to Support the Vision, Mission, and Goals of Penn Charter

To address this, we used Penn Charter's Strategic vision as a framework.

1. *"Our curriculum will continue to prepare students for admission to their top-choice colleges, but it also will evolve to position them for success after college by expanding beyond the walls of the school and connecting them with the world."*

Strategic Vision Goal 2 - Program
Content

Goal 2 of the Strategic Vision calls on us to prepare our students by developing courses and curriculum that create and leverage experiential educational opportunities. This includes work with service partners, field trips, class retreats, intensives, study abroad, exchange trips, etc. All of these opportunities and experiences are made more difficult when constrained and confined by an inflexible AP curriculum and calendar. The AP curriculum does not provide adequate flexibility or time for teachers and students to stop and discuss current events (elections, developments in climate change research, etc.) as they emerge and evolve. Additionally, AP exams are non-negotiably administered during the first two full weeks in May each year; there is no option to deviate from this testing calendar.

2. *"Utilize current brain research about how children learn best to develop more strategies for individualizing learning within the curriculum and through learning support services."*

Strategic Vision Goal 2 - Program
Content

In the hundred and twenty years since its founding, the College Board/Advanced Placement program has not kept pace with the research that shows how students learn best. Particularly in independent school settings, most teachers agree that deep, synthetic learning does not result from a ton of "covering" a large amount of subject content at a breakneck pace in order to pass a summative, sit-down exam. Current research informing best practices in education at all levels points away from rapid acquisition of wide-ranging content knowledge. Instead, we are seeing a greater shift to the development of

transferable intellectual, social-emotional, and relational skills such as problem solving, analytical reading and thinking, collaboration, synthesis across disciplines, and empathic development, all of which are better taught, learned, assessed, and experienced through pedagogy that extends beyond the scope of the AP. Leading research indicates that students are better served by deeper examination of fewer topics, project-based learning, experiential education (service, global connections, outdoor education), and authentic presentations and demonstrations of knowledge to internal and external audiences.

3. *“Promote excellence in teaching by supporting faculty to develop and advance their professional practice.”*
Strategic Vision Goal 3 - Teaching

Syllabi for AP courses need to be approved by the College Board, a process that requires significant time and focus of both teachers and administrators. This approval process also discourages teachers from developing curriculum and creating syllabi that differ from the generic AP versions. Moreover, the College Board does not share a centering of Quakerism or other values integral to Penn Charter. How can we promote faculty growth and student learning in this way if teachers are wedded to a syllabus that is not of our own making? That syllabus can inform their teaching and practice, but it should not dictate it.

4. *“The student-teacher relationship is at the heart of Penn Charter. We will hold tight to this essential relationship -- even as we see a new vision for a 21st century teacher.”*

Strategic Vision Goal 3 -
Teaching

This student-teacher relationship continues to be at the heart of what we do, and both students and teachers report time and time again that this is what makes the Penn Charter experience engaging and rewarding. Students (current and alums) consistently relay that their experience (engagement, interest, success) in an AP course was largely dependent on the teacher of that course and not necessarily on the AP curriculum. (See Appendix D & Appendix F)

5. *“In Curriculum 21: Essential Education for a Changing World, educators advocate a shift in the teacher's role ‘from that of the information provider to one of a catalyst, model, coach, innovator, researcher, and collaborator with the learner throughout the process.’”*

Strategic Vision Goal 3 - Teaching

The pace and content of much of the AP curriculum (especially in the humanities) still lends itself to a teacher-centered, stand-and-deliver model of pedagogy. When employed exclusively, this approach does not support meaningful student learning, retention, and skill development; it also limits what excellent educators can accomplish with increased agency and ownership.

6. *“To promote excellence in teaching, we will build a faculty of lifelong learners who collaborate with students in a process of continuing revelation and joyful learning.”*

Strategic Vision

Goal 3 - Teaching

If we want faculty to be life-long learners they need to be at the center of curriculum development and experts on how students learn and how to maximize student learning. If we want more collaboration (student-student; student-teacher; teacher-teacher) we need to be more flexible with course design and pedagogy. A “mile-wide, yet inch deep” AP curriculum does not allow for any of the above in sustained or meaningful ways.

7. *“Provide structured opportunities and ample time for the development of cross-divisional and interdisciplinary work as well as collaboration among teachers and between students and teachers.”*

Strategic

Vision Goal 3 - Teaching

The AP program is neither cross-divisional nor interdisciplinary. It also does not promote collaboration among teachers, as we typically do not offer multiple sections of APs taught by different teachers. The AP provides limited room for student-teacher collaboration in the development and delivery of learning in community.

8. *“A new school-day schedule will make time for project-based work, interdisciplinary and cross-divisional work. And it will allow flexibility, as the classroom continues to expand through use of the Internet, outdoor campus spaces, internships and other learning opportunities and resources in metropolitan Philadelphia.”*

Strategic Vision Goal 4 - Time

A new school-day (or year-long) schedule is made much more difficult with the AP curriculum, especially if it is designed to promote interdisciplinary and cross-divisional work. The inflexibility of the AP schedule and calendar inhibits a re-envisioning of calendar constructs that might include intensives, more service learning, and global travel.

9. *“Plan time for reflection and mindfulness. View a students' day and year holistically, supporting balance and a healthy pace.”* Strategic Vision Goal 4 - Time

Many AP courses do not create or support a healthy academic pace; this can easily carry over to an unhealthy school/life balance for our students. Students report feeling pressured to take AP courses, because they are often the only advanced, upper-level classes offered at the school. Instead of pursuing discovery and rigor based on passion, students are often choosing courses based on what they perceive will look good on a transcript. Given the tremendous amount of content on each exam, teachers have no choice but to emphasize the coverage of content over skill development. There are few opportunities to take advantage of current events or student interests for fear of falling behind. Furthermore, Penn Charter students are already at a disadvantage since our school year begins in early September and many other schools around the country begin in early August. Given that the exam dates are the same regardless of one's location, this puts even greater pressure on teachers to rush through topics. In return, students often receive more homework, which results in greater stress and anxiety.

10. *“Expand educational opportunities beyond the 44-acre campus to include off-site learning with academic, cultural and corporate institutions in metropolitan Philadelphia.”*

Strategic Vision Goal 5 - Space

It is difficult to think about expanding opportunities for students beyond this campus if we are wedded to an AP curriculum and external national exam schedule that are inflexible and predetermined.