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Education

Eastbrook reaches for the top



Mark Hoffman

Eastbrook Academy students Corrie Osborne (left) and Hannah Hacker passed the Advanced Placement biology test last year as eighth graders. Both now plan to take the AP European History test.

By [Amy Hetzner](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Of the eight pre-high school students who earned passing grades this year on the Advanced Placement biology exam, two came from a small school on the north side of Milwaukee that recently celebrated its 10th anniversary.

The test results confirmed what Eastbrook Academy science teacher and high school head Joshua Beggs has noticed in the students he teaches: "If I teach to the top of the class, everyone comes along."

Eastbrook Academy is a 359-student school started in 1998 by a former Brookfield Academy teacher. The non-denominational Christian school, which enrolls about 43% of its students through the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, is graduating its first senior class this school year.

Having middle school students take the AP exams was intended to prepare them for a few years down the road when they take the tests for potential college credit.

It was an idea that first grabbed Beggs when he started ramping up his biology curriculum two years ago with his freshman class. They soaked it up.

"I was amazed," he said. "A lot of students could handle anything."

So he encouraged five freshman students to take the AP exam, usually a task reserved for upperclassmen. Of the Eastbrook ninth-graders who took the exam that year, one student earned a 3 and another earned a 4 on the 5-point exam. Many colleges accept scores of 3 and 4 on the AP exams for credit.

"It just took a little extra studying on weekends to get prepared for the test," said one of those passing students, P.J. Izzard, 16, a junior from Brown Deer who is taking independent-study chemistry this school year to prepare for the AP chemistry exam.

So, last school year, Beggs decided to see how far he could go in his science curriculum with his eighth-grade class. In the end, he had 10 of his students take the AP biology exam.

The students came in on Saturdays for two months before the test to review with Beggs, said Eastbrook freshman Corrie Osborne, one of the students who earned a passing grade as a middle-schooler.

The extra work was helpful in getting through the three-hour exam, which is divided between multiple-choice questions and essays, she said.

"It was really hard," said Osborne, 14, of Mequon. "They had a lot of technical terms I didn't know."

Fourteen-year-old Hannah Hacker didn't even make the review sessions.

She wasn't planning to take the test until, at the last minute, another student in her class backed out. She studied for two days straight before the exam.

"I was way surprised when I got a 3," said Hacker, of Milwaukee, who is now a freshman at Eastbrook. Both she and Osborne are planning to take the AP European history test at the end of the school year.

This year, 155,553 U.S. students took the AP biology test, said Jennifer Topiel, executive director of communications for The College Board, which administers the AP program. About half of those students, who tend to be upperclassmen in high school, earned passing grades of 3 or higher.

Only 21 of the biology test-takers were below the ninth grade when they took the exam, she said. The College Board does not encourage schools to offer AP courses before high school, she said.

"It's unlikely colleges would count" the scores for credit, either, Topiel said.

Both of the Eastbrook students who earned passing grades on the biology test as eighth-graders say they

plan to retake it, with the hope of getting higher scores.

Beggs also said he was reconsidering whether he should encourage as many students to take it in the future. When his eighth-graders took the test in May, he said he had about five students he expected could pass.

Those who did not pass got fairly low scores, and Beggs is afraid the results might do more harm than good.

"I don't want to push it on them," Beggs said. "I want to make sure they're asking for it."



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