



# Educational Leadership

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**Challenging the Status Quo**

## How I Challenged the Status Quo

Recently, we asked *Educational Leadership* readers to write about a time when they challenged the status quo. Here, six educators tell us what happened when they spoke up for change. From school library policies to teacher evaluations, these educators looked at what had always been and envisioned what could be.

### AP for All

**Robyn R. Jackson**

For three years, I had taught advanced placement Language and Composition at a diverse high school in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., yet my class of approximately 35 students did not reflect the diversity of the school's population. School policy stipulated that in order to take my AP class in 11th grade, students had to take an honors class in 10th grade—and that was the problem. I decided to challenge that policy and let any interested student take my class.

I told the principal that I wanted to try this new approach and showed him research suggesting that the number of AP classes a student takes in high school is a more accurate predictor of college success than a student's grade point average. I also detailed my plans to support the students. The principal knew me as a teacher and decided to trust me. In fact, he had been considering making such a policy change in the school himself, but many staff members were resistant. I would act as a test case showing the rest of the staff that this approach could work.

I visited every 10th grade English class to invite students to sign up for the AP class that I would be teaching in the fall. My colleagues thought I was making a huge mistake. "Those kids aren't AP material," they pointed out. Undaunted, I continued recruiting and soon had 96 students signed up. This new group, which included African American students and students with diverse learning styles and needs, more accurately reflected the school population.

Then I began to panic. Many of these students were unprepared for AP-level coursework. How could I get them to pass the AP test at the end of the year? That summer, I revamped the way I taught, adopting a more unorthodox form of teaching based on seven principles of effective instruction:

1. Start where your students are, but focus on where they are going.
2. Envision where students should be at the end of their time with you and clearly communicate this vision to them.

3. Demystify the academic process—the classroom should have no secrets.
4. Measure whether students can apply what they have learned.
5. Focus on quality rather than quantity.
6. Provide careful scaffolding for students and then remove that scaffolding as they progress.
7. Never work harder than your students.

I offered to bake cookies for my AP classes if 95 percent of the students signed up for the AP test. I required study groups that met once a week outside of class, created online discussion groups for students, used a class Web site to encourage an online community, and taught the lost art of sentence diagramming.

Many teachers considered these strategies to be unorthodox. What perhaps made them unorthodox was that they were conceived entirely in response to student needs. I didn't have a preset strategy when I started. Instead, I outlined to students where I wanted them to be by the end of the year and asked them what they thought they would need to get there. They told me what they needed; I created lessons, tools, and venues in response. I made my students my partners.

At the end of that first year, the percentage of students who scored a 3 or above on the AP test increased: In the previous year, approximately 56 percent of 35 students had scored at least a 3; the following year, approximately 60 percent of 96 students did so. This meant that three times as many students were successful than in the year before. Soon, other teachers in the school were inviting any interested student to take their AP courses. Where there had initially been only one section of AP Language and Composition, now the school was running three or more of these classes.

As we began to remove the gates and open access to rigorous, challenging courses for all students, the entire culture of the school changed. Although the initiative was risky, it was worth it because it created new options for our students.