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Elena Frigola is an 11th-grade student in Culver City, Calif.

## To Increase Equity, School Districts Eliminate Honors Classes

Supporters say uniform classes create rigor for all students but critics say cuts hurt faster learners

By [Sara Randazzo](#) / Photographs by Lauren Justice for The Wall Street Journal

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CULVER CITY, Calif.—A group of parents stepped to the lectern Tuesday night at a school board meeting in this middle-class, Los Angeles-area city to push back against a racial-equity initiative. The high school, they argued, should reinstate honors English classes that were eliminated because they didn’t enroll enough Black and Latino students.

The district earlier this school year replaced the honors classes at Culver City High School with uniform courses that officials say will ensure students of all races receive an equal, rigorous education.

These parents disagreed.

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“We really feel equity means offering opportunities to students of diverse backgrounds, not taking away opportunities for advanced education and study,” Joanna Schaenman, a Culver City parent who helped spearhead the effort, said in the run-up to the meeting.

The parental pushback in Culver City mirrors resistance that has taken place in Wisconsin, Rhode Island and elsewhere in California over the last year in response to schools stripping away the honors designation on some high school classes.

School districts doing away with honors classes argue students who don’t take those classes from a young age start to see themselves in a different tier, and come to think they aren’t capable of enrolling in [Advanced Placement classes](#) that help with [college admissions](#). Black and Latino students are underrepresented in AP enrollment in the majority of states, according to the Education Trust, a nonprofit that studies equity in education.



Culver City High School eliminated honors English classes to try to improve racial equity, but many parents disagree with the move.

Since the start of this school year, freshmen and sophomores in Culver City have only been able to select one level of English class, known as College Prep, rather than the previous system in which anyone could opt into the honors class. School officials say the goal is to teach everyone with an equal level of rigor, one that encourages them to enroll in advanced classes in their final years of high school.

“Parents say academic excellence should not be experimented with for the sake of social justice,” said Quoc Tran, the superintendent of 6,900-student Culver City Unified School District. But, he said, “it was very jarring when teachers looked at their AP enrollment and realized Black and brown kids were not there. They felt obligated to do something.”

Culver City English teachers presented data at a board meeting last year showing Latino students made up 13% of those in 12th-grade Advanced Placement English, compared with 37% of the student body. Asian students were 34% of the advanced class, compared with 10% of students. Black students represented 14% of AP English, versus 15% of the student body.

The board saw anonymous quotes from students not enrolled in honors classes saying they felt less motivated or successful. One described students feeling “unable to break out of the molds that they established when they were 11.”

Tuesday marked Ms. Schaenman’s first time attending a school board meeting in person in years. She wandered the hallways of City Hall with fellow parent Pedro Frigola looking for the right room, clutching a stack of copies laying out the two-page resolution they and a few dozen other parents are asking the board to adopt.



Parents shared their concerns around honors classes being pulled from the curriculum at a school board meeting in Culver City, Calif.

PHOTO: SARA RANDAZZO/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Frigola said he disagrees with the district’s view of equity. “I was born in Cuba, and it doesn’t sound good when people are trying to achieve equal outcomes for everyone,” he said.

His ninth-grade daughter, Emma Frigola, said she was surprised and a little confused by the decision to remove honors, which she had wanted to take. She said her English teacher, who used to teach the honors class, is trying to maintain a higher standard, but that it doesn’t always seem to be working.

“There are some people who slow down the pace because they don’t really do anything and aren’t looking to try harder,” Emma said. “I don’t think you can force that into people.”

For a unit on research, Emma said her teacher gathered all the reference sources they needed to write a paper on whether graffiti is art or vandalism and had students review them together in class. Her sister, Elena Frigola, now in 11th grade, said prior honors English students chose their own topics and did research independently.

In Santa Monica, Calif., high school English teachers said last year they had “a moral imperative” to eliminate honors English classes that they viewed as perpetuating inequality. The teachers studied the issue for a year and a half, a district representative said.

“This is not a social experiment,” board member Jon Kean said at a meeting last spring. “This is a sound pedagogical approach to education.”

Gail Pinsker, a Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District spokeswoman, said the shift this school year “has increased access and provided excellent educational experiences for all of our students.”

Several school districts have scaled back plans to eliminate honors classes after community opposition. San Diego’s Patrick Henry High School planned to eliminate 11th-grade honors American literature and U.S. history last year, but reinstated both after listening to students and families, a district spokeswoman said.

The school district in Madison, Wis., pulled back on plans last year to remove stand-alone honors classes and now lets students earn an honors label within general classes. A Rhode Island district made a similar move.

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Those who support cutting honors classes point out that the curriculum of honors courses often doesn’t differ substantially from regular classes. Honors classes often move at a faster pace and the students complete more



assignments. Some can boost [grade-point averages](#) or give students an advantage when applying for college.

Critics say attempting to teach everyone at an elevated level isn’t realistic and that teachers, even with the best intentions, may end up simplifying instruction. Instead, some educators and parents argue schools should find more ways to diversify honors courses and encourage students to enroll who aren’t self-selecting, including proactively reaching out to students, using an opt-out system, or looking to teacher recommendations.

“I just don’t see how removing something from some kids all of a sudden helps other kids learn faster,” said Scott Peters, a senior research scientist at education research nonprofit NWEA who has studied equity in gifted and talented programs.

In Culver City, Mr. Tran said he isn’t going to mandate that other departments move away from honors but that he would listen to any teacher-driven suggestions. As for English, he said he is throwing his support behind the high school’s teachers to try to elevate education for all students.

“We will keep moving forward,” he said.

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A sign in a yard across the street from Culver City High School.

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