

**Press Conference Statement by Board Chair Mike Kelley
February 25, 2010**

Recently, members of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City School Board voted 4 to 3 in favor of offering honors classes in addition to standard level classes in 6 courses: biology, chemistry, physics, US history, world history, and civics and economics. Whenever our board has a split vote, we are concerned, especially when it is 4 to 3 along racial lines.

The board recognizes that the district has not met its goal of closing the achievement gap and that there is mistrust in some segments of the community that we are on a path that will result in real change. While we know that actions and results speak louder than words, we would like to emphasize that the resolution to add these 6 honors classes sought to be responsive to the concerns we heard regarding equity of access, the likelihood of more racially segregated classes, and support for students who have not been successful in the current standard classes.

To help ensure equity of access to honors level courses, enrollment to core honors and AP courses will remain open to any student. We have eliminated the unsanctioned practice of requiring a teacher recommendation and there is no requirement for a minimum grade in a prerequisite course. Guidance counselors and teachers will continue to provide advice to students and parents, but now with the preferred option for most students being enrollment in honors level courses. We expect these measures to help create a diverse student composition in the honors courses.

To help ensure that all students are successful, the board has committed additional resources to revise and invigorate the standard level classes so that they are engaging to students who may not be as enthusiastic about the subject matter or who have experienced difficulty in the past in science or social studies classes. The board has directed that highly qualified teachers teach standard courses and that these courses continue to have smaller enrollment. The district is developing additional support measures for both teachers and students to accelerate the progress toward excellence that we know our students are all capable of achieving in both standard and honors level courses.

The board and administration will actively monitor student enrollment and achievement in these and other classes. We remain committed to lead and press for these changes and will hold all parties, including the board, accountable for effective implementation and the improvement of student achievement. We invite and expect continued feedback from the public when you feel we are not meeting our goals, and invite suggestions on how we can further improve.

Background

Our district already offers honors and standard level courses for high school mathematics and English, but, unlike most, if not all, other school districts in North Carolina, our district offers students only a single level in sciences and social studies. Both standard and honors levels are part of the NC Standard Course of Study and an increasing number of students from our district have been enrolling in honors level in these courses through the NC Virtual Public School. In August of last year, the school board unanimously adopted priorities for the superintendent that included reviewing and submitting recommendations on honors opportunities in science and social studies.

In considering whether and how to offer honors courses in science and social studies, the school board discussed proposals at four consecutive board meetings, held a public hearing, and solicited input from high schools and the public. The majority of input from the public was supportive of adding an honors level. There was not consensus among teachers on whether or how to offer an honors level. Comparisons of student performance for African-American or Latino students in high school classes with and without honors sections revealed no clear differences in achievement. Board members were concerned that the current classes are not meeting the needs of many students, including minority and fragile learners who are either under-enrolled (chemistry and physics) or have low EOC test passing rates in the other courses. While some Board members felt that prior to adding honors courses, the district should first redouble its efforts to significantly improve the performance of students currently not achieving success in standard courses, the majority view was that the district could do both.