

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-8](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Education and the Workforce, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Poverty can have a profound effect on academic outcomes and college readiness and students from low-income families are less likely to go to college. The low rates of degree attainment for low-income students raises questions about whether the students who wish to pursue higher education have access to courses that support their readiness for college. GAO was asked to review college preparatory course offerings in U.S. high schools.

This report (1) examines the extent to which high schools of different poverty levels offer courses to prepare students academically for college, and (2) describes the challenges students in high-poverty schools face being prepared to attend college. GAO analyzed 2015-16 Education data on course offerings by school poverty level, type, and size, and developed a generalized linear regression model to explore whether certain school-level characteristics may be associated with course offerings; reviewed a generalizable sample of public 4-year college websites for course requirements for admission; and interviewed officials from Education and the Department of Justice. GAO also conducted site visits to 12 high-poverty high schools in 3 states selected to provide variation in course offerings, among other things. In this review, GAO focused on public 4-year colleges because they offer a bachelor's degree and are generally a more affordable 4-year option.

View [GAO-19-8](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov.

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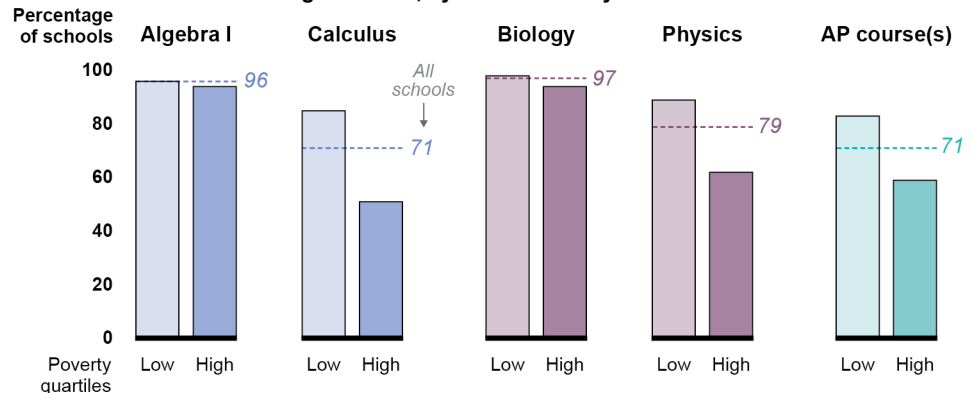
K-12 EDUCATION

Public High Schools with More Students in Poverty and Smaller Schools Provide Fewer Academic Offerings to Prepare for College

What GAO Found

Students in relatively poor and small schools had less access to high school courses that help prepare them for college, according to GAO's analysis of Department of Education (Education) data for school year 2015-16 (the most recent available). While most public high schools, regardless of poverty level, offered courses like algebra and biology, disparities in access were associated with school poverty level for more advanced courses like calculus, physics, and those that may allow students to earn college credit, like Advanced Placement (AP) courses (see figure). High-poverty schools were less likely to offer the math and science courses that most public 4-year colleges expect students to take in high school, according to GAO's analysis of college websites. GAO's regression analysis also showed that smaller schools and certain types of schools, like charter schools, are less likely to offer the college preparatory math or science courses that many colleges look for during the admissions process.

Courses Offered in Public High Schools, by School Poverty Level



Source: GAO analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education for school year 2015-16. | GAO-19-8

Note: The low poverty quartile represents those schools with 0-24.9 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL), and the high poverty quartile represents those schools with 75-100 percent eligible for FRPL.

Officials GAO interviewed in selected high-poverty high schools said their students can face a number of complex challenges in preparing for college. For instance, officials said that many students are academically behind when they enter high school and are unable to progress to more advanced courses. Further, high-poverty schools may not offer rigorous courses, such as AP courses, due to lack of resources or teaching staff. Students in high-poverty schools also face other stressors that can make going to college challenging. Officials at 9 of the 12 schools GAO visited cited the effects of poverty on their students, such as homelessness, hunger, and trauma, that make preparing for college difficult. School officials also said the steps involved in applying to and enrolling in college can be difficult to navigate for many students in high-poverty schools. Officials in selected schools reported efforts to address these challenges, such as offering free college courses and obtaining outside supports to assist with college advising.