

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Students of color face hurdles getting into high-achieving, advanced classes

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and

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Elijah Goldberg thought he could handle precalculus in 11th grade; his guidance counselor at Brighton High School, he says, did not.

■ “It seemed like they were scared I would fail a class and it would make the district look bad,” he said. “It was a big argument — I had to get my mom involved.”

■ Frustrated, he took the class in the evening at Monroe Community College instead and earned an A-. He took the transcript back to his school and showed it to them — proof he had been correct about his own ability.

Goldberg, who graduated from Brighton in 2016, was diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia as a student. His learning disabilities created an academic hurdle — one he knew he could clear, but that his school thought would trip him up.

“I felt like the administrators didn’t believe in me — I was definitely discouraged from taking AP classes and getting ahead,” Goldberg said. “I don’t know if that’s because of my race or because I struggled early on.”

Goldberg is one of many black students in Monroe County’s suburban schools who report they’ve had to argue to get into AP or other advanced courses, an allegation amply supported by federal data. In some districts, white students are more than three times as likely to be enrolled

in at least one AP course.

Kidest Yigezu transferred to the Greece Central School District as an eighth-grader and was automatically placed into classes where she received unneeded extra help in math and English. On a weekly basis, she said she’d

Elijah Goldberg, a 2016 graduate of Brighton High School, said he struggled with ADHD and dyslexia as a high school student and often had to advocate for himself when administrators doubted his abilities. JUSTIN MURPHY/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

head to the counselor’s office and ask to be switched into advanced classes, but to no avail.

Now a senior at Greece Arcadia High School, she credits a teacher who knew her older sister for changing the course of her education. Penny Cherney,

Many districts said they are working on dismantling the former, but the latter is a more difficult problem to solve. It is a matter of continuing education on antiracism and implicit bias, and some districts are further along than others.

who teaches English as a New Language at Arcadia, had approached Yigezu in the library to offer her help.

Having someone advocate for her changed everything, Yigezu said. After their conversation, she was transferred into advanced math and science classes, which put her on track to take more AP classes throughout high school.

“If it wasn’t for her (Cherney), I would still be stuck in those classes,” Yigezu said. “She kind of was (an advocate) and I’m so thankful for her. But like, especially now, the fact that I needed someone else to step in for me — the fact that my voice wasn’t enough — is kind of disappointing. Not everyone is going to have someone like her to back them up.”

More often than not, students must be their own advocates. While that’s true for white students as well as students of color, Isaac Beru, a senior at Rush-Henrietta Senior High School, said he’s constantly worried about presenting the most perfect version of himself in school. It’s like a new skin he slips into around white people, he said.

“I have a beautiful white people voice,” Beru said. “I could completely be someone different, and I’m OK with that. I feel like it’s a survival skill.”

The need to put on a performance is exhausting, Beru said, but he’s worked hard to make it work. He just wishes counselors and teachers would be a little more understanding of the stress placed on students of color in the course of succeeding in school.

“You need guidance,” Beru said. “Even a certain direction forward — just show me the path, and I’ll do it myself.”

There are two traditional barriers to access to advanced coursework: mandatory prerequisites and the subjective opinions of guidance counselors or teachers who control enrollment.

Bo Wright has been superintendent at Rush-Henrietta since the summer; before that he had experience in urban districts, including Rochester and New York City, as well as suburban schools like Solway, outside Syracuse.

He has been pleased with the way Rush-Henrietta has embraced action around equity even before his arrival, he said. In many cases, districts tackle the topic only after having been threatened by New York state over disproportionality in discipline or test scores.

“What they’ve been good about here is allowing people to see the need and the value before it got to a point where you lost the ability to make choices for yourself,” he said. “I’m encouraged by the kinds of conversations in districts across the state and country including in places where you wouldn’t expect them to be happening, because I think they’re timely. ... “Regardless of where you are or the type of district, these are the conversations we should be having.”

In the meantime, it is only a minority of black students in suburban schools who manage to test themselves with the most challenging courses their schools offer.

The year after Elijah Goldberg took pre-calculus at MCC, he was placed into AP calculus at Brighton. It was hard — just as he knew it would be. He passed and now is enrolled at Williams College.

“It was so much more interesting and fun when I was challenged,” he said. “But I could handle it.”

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