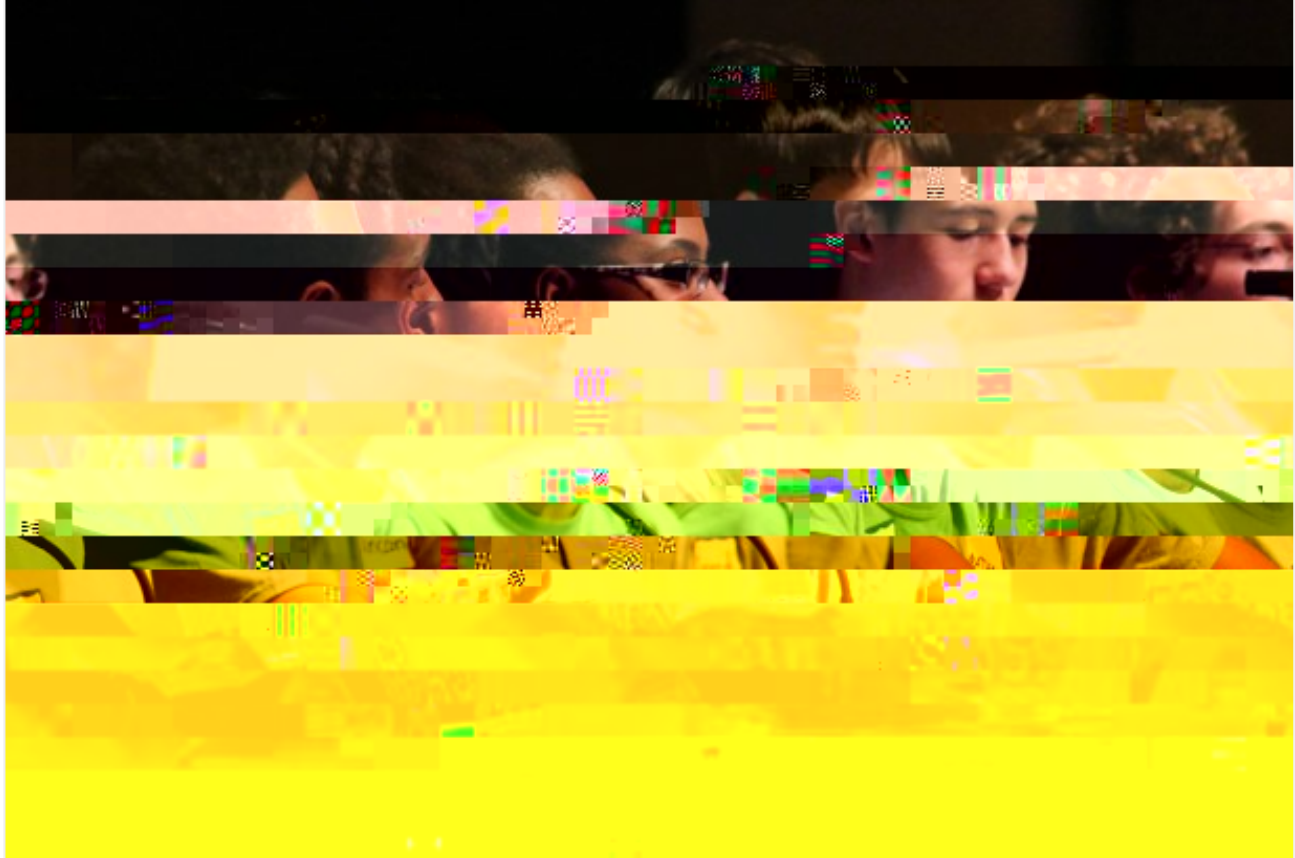


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Evanston, Ill.--It's lunchtime at Evanston Township High School, and a group of students, teachers, and sta are meeting in a classroom. There's free pizza and

When Witherspoon came to Evanston nine years ago, the tall, white-haired superintendent expected to find a different kind of job. He's spent his career leading large, urban districts with tight budgets; ETHS is the only school in District 202, and its per-student operational budget is nearly twice the state average. None of his previous districts had a high school with fireplaces in the entrance hall, a planetarium in one of its interior courtyards, and two on-site swimming pools.

Witherspoon knew that ETHS was diverse. The school educates teenagers whose parents are high-powered lawyers and teenagers who are homeless. Today, about 43 percent of students are white, 31 percent are black, 17 percent are Hispanic, and 4 percent are Asian. More than four in 10 students come from low-income families.

"When I came here, though, what surprised me was how segregated the school was internally," Witherspoon remembers. When he walked the hallways or visited a cafeteria, he saw a diverse mix of students. When he popped his head into classrooms, he did not.

"It didn't take a rocket scientist to look at it more carefully and predict that level of segregation by the level of the class," he says. "Our Advanced Placement classes were disproportionately white, and our classes for struggling students were disproportionately nonwhite."

The more Witherspoon looked at the data, the more he saw that the school wasn't focused on preparing all students for advanced work. There was only one pathway to AP, and it led through honors courses. Honors students read different books, completed different assignments, and were held to a higher academic standard. They were on the college track.

This kind of divide [isn't unusual](#). But to Witherspoon, it was unconscionable. He didn't want to excuse the school's racial and socioeconomic achievement gap on parenting or peer pressure or third-grade teaching. And neither did many of his staff members. "We don't want to just say that we're a place where we're a

What Does the Change Look Like?

Witherspoon began by building on earlier efforts to boost academic achievement. ETHS already had a number of academic supports in place, like AVID, a nonprofit program that helps students in advanced classes build study skills. Under his new administration, those supports expanded to include department study centers, early morning extra help, Saturday study sessions.

In 2009, the district started requiring all staff to participate in a two-day seminar that taught them how to have constructive conversations about race. "We didn't just want to aggregate the data by race without having a protocol to talk about race," says Marcus Campbell, principal and assistant superintendent. The seminars made some parents uncomfortable.

"No question, there was discomfort," Witherspoon says. "There were even people who used terminology like, 'quit stirring it up,' things like that."

Then the district proposed something even more controversial. For years, scores on an eighth-grade standardized test had determined which students were placed into ninth-grade honors or non-honors classes. Witherspoon's team proposed replacing that system with mixed-level courses in which all ninth-graders would enroll. The classes were designed to align with AP requirements, their sizes were small, and students could earn honors credit by performing well on certain assessments.

The school board approved the new "earned honors" approach to humanities classes in 2010. Some parents of honors students threatened to pull their kids out of school. A mom told the *Chicago Tribune* that at least one parent was considering withdrawing. They were worried the new system would

Senecal's parents, who were born in Haiti, both went to college, and he had always planned on taking AP courses. "But I did notice that most of my peers weren't," he says. There was "kind of a stigma of--it would be too hard."

Senecal ended up earning a perfect score on the AB calculus exam. "I had a great teacher," he says. Team ASAP helped, too, by introducing him to a community of AP students. "You want to find people who Õ

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