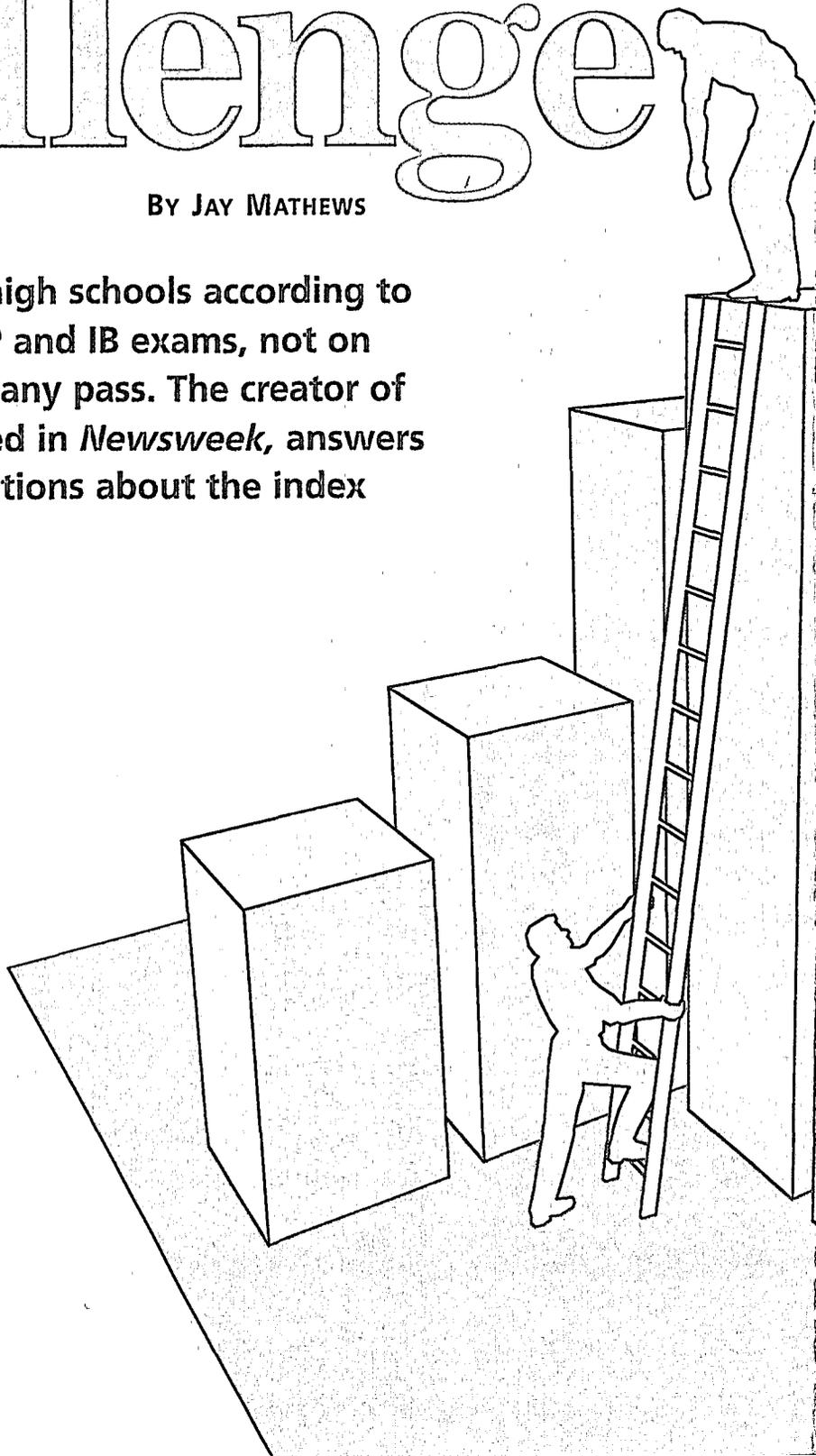


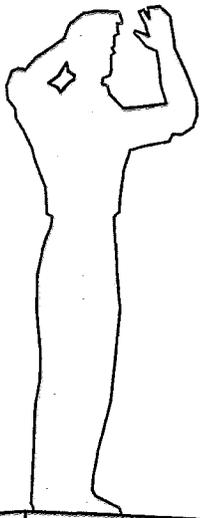
Meeting *the* Challenge

BY JAY MATHEWS

The Challenge Index ranks high schools according to how many students take AP and IB exams, not on how well they do or how many pass. The creator of this index, which is published in *Newsweek*, answers some frequently asked questions about the index and why he compiles it.



Jay Mathews (mathewsj@washingtonpost.com) is a columnist for the Washington Post in Washington, DC.



Excellent high schools challenge *all* students. How effective is your school in achieving this goal compared to high schools across the United States?

Since 1998, I have ranked public high schools for *Newsweek* on the basis of student participation in college-level courses. I call it the “Challenge Index.” *Newsweek* calls it “America’s Best High Schools,” a phrase that gets me a lot of trouble, but I am used to that. The index is an unusual way of quantifying the high school experience, but I think it is more revealing than any of the other numbers educators use to rate schools, such as average SAT score or percentage of seniors going to four-year colleges.

Next year I hope to do another ranking for *Newsweek*, and I will be using data from the AP and International Baccalaureate (IB) tests being given in May of this year. In hopes of inspiring the readers of *Principal Leadership* to send me their data at mathewsj@washpost.com, I invite schools leaders to review the most frequently asked questions about the index to determine if their school qualifies for the *Newsweek* list. Some of my answers to these questions may at first seem weird to professional educators, but keep reading and see why I firmly believe that schools that don’t give average students a taste of college trauma aren’t doing their job.

Q: How does the Challenge Index work?

A: I take the total number of AP or IB tests given at a school in May and divide by the number of seniors graduating in June. All schools that achieve a ratio of at least 1.000—meaning they have as many tests in 2005 as they had graduates—will be included on the list on the *Newsweek* Web site, and *Newsweek* will likely identify the top 100 schools in the magazine. The full 2003 list is now available on the *Washington Post* Web site at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/education/shoulders/challenge/2003nationalindex.htm.

I compiled similar national lists for *Newsweek* in 1998 and 2000. In the *Washington Post*, I have reported the Challenge Index ratings for every public school in the Washington area every year since 1998. Those ratings and more information about the Challenge Index can be found at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/education/kto12/challengeindex/.

Q: Why do you count only the number of tests given and not how well the students do on the tests?

A: In the past, schools have usually reported their student passing rates on AP or IB tests to illustrate the success of their programs. By passing rate, I mean the percentage of students who scored 3, 4, or 5 on the 5-point AP test or 4, 5, 6, or 7 on the 7-point IB test. Those scores, the rough equivalent of a C or better on a college course, make a student eligible for credit at many colleges.

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I do not count passing rates because I find that most U.S. high schools keep their passing rates artificially high by allowing only A or very strong B students to take the courses. In some cases, schools open the courses to all students but wrongly encourage only the best students to take the tests.

AP and IB are important because they give all students a chance to experience the trauma of heavy college reading lists and difficult college examinations. Adelman's 1999 study for the U.S. Department of Education, "Answers in the Tool Box," (available at www.ed.gov/pubs/Toolbox/) showed that the best predictor of college graduation, from the records of a cohort of 8,700 students, was not good high school grades or test scores, but how many challenging courses a student took in high school. When schools deny their average students a chance to have that experience, they should not be rewarded with higher ratings because their passing rates are high.

The Adelman report and interviews with hundreds of teachers and students over the last 20 years have convinced me that a student who works hard but struggles in an AP or IB course, and does poorly on the AP or IB test, is still better prepared for college than a student who takes an easier course and test. By taking AP or IB courses and tests, the student has gone one-on-one against the academic equivalent of Michael Jordan and Jordan has won, but the student has gained a visceral appreciation of what is required to play at that level. To send a student off to college without having

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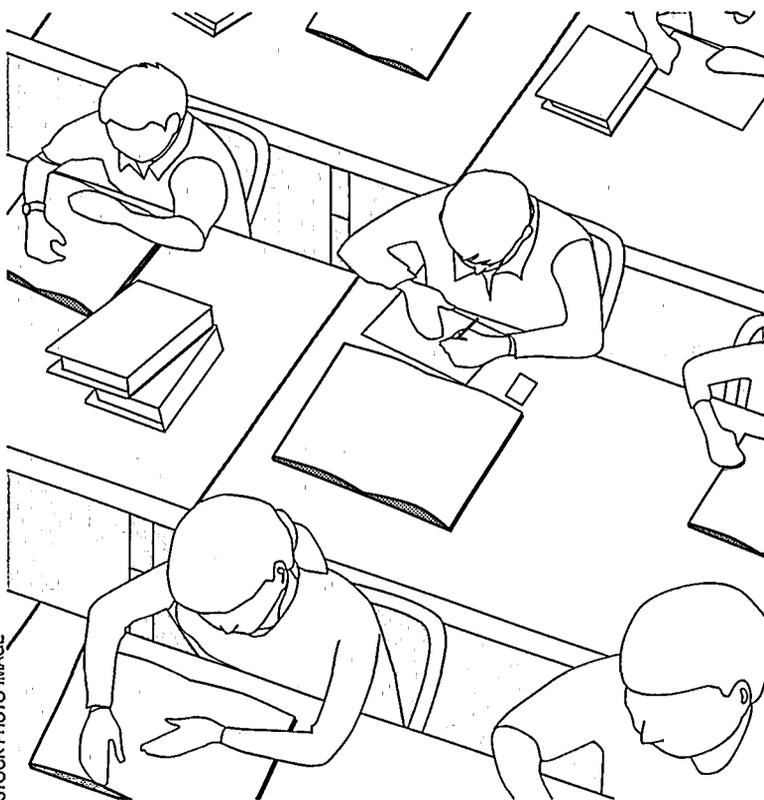
had an AP or IB course is like insisting that a child learn to ride a bike without ever taking off the training wheels. It is foolish and, in my view, a form of educational malpractice. But most U.S. high schools still do it.

Q: Why do you divide by the number of graduating seniors, and does that mean you only count tests taken by seniors? Don't you know that juniors, and sometimes even sophomores and freshman, take AP tests?

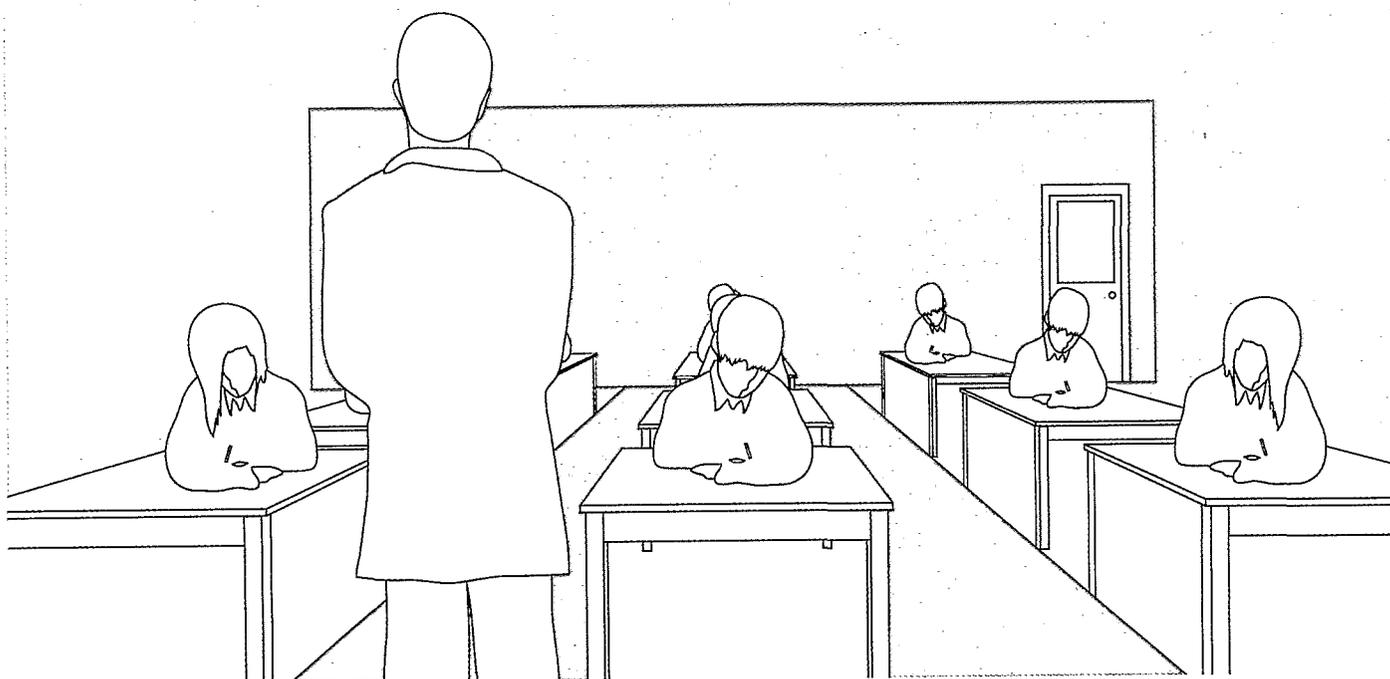
A: I divide by June graduates as a convenient measure of the relative size of each school. That way a big school like New Trier High in Winnetka, IL, which gave 1,859 AP tests and graduated 911 seniors for a rating of 2.041 in 2002, will not have an advantage over Rye Neck High in Mamaroneck, NY, which gave only 154 AP tests and graduated only 76 seniors for a rating of 2.026. On the *Newsweek* list they were right next to each other at number 169 and number 170. I count all tests taken at the school, not just those taken by seniors.

Q: How can you call these the best schools or the top schools if you are using just one narrow measure? A successful high school is measured by more than just AP or IB tests.

A: Indeed it is. If I could quantify all those other things in a meaningful way, I would try. But teacher quality, cocurricular activities, and other important factors are too subjective for a ranked list. Participation in challenging courses, on the other hand, can be counted, and the results expose a significant failing in most high schools (though not the ones that have made the list). I think that this measure is the most important quantitative measure one can make of a high school, and one of the strengths of this list is the



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narrowness of my criteria. Everyone can understand the criteria and discuss it intelligently, as opposed to the *U.S. News* college list that just has too many factors for many people to put their mind around.

As for the words *top* and *best*, they are always based on criteria chosen by the listmaker. If two people were to create separate lists of best directors, one person's list might depend on Academy Award nominations, while the other person's list might be based on ticket sales. What I am measuring in these schools is clear. Some may not agree with my choice of criteria, but I have not found anyone who understands how high schools work and does not think AP or IB participation is important. I often ask people to tell me what quantitative measure of high school success they think is more important than this one. Such discussions can be very interesting and productive.

Q: Why don't I see famous public high schools like Stuyvesant in New York City or Thomas Jefferson in Fairfax County, VA, or the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy in Aurora, IL, or Lowell High in San Francisco on the *Newsweek* list?

A: I do not include any high school that accepts more than half of its students on the basis of such academic criteria as grades and test scores. Many high-profile schools are terrific places and boast some of the highest average test scores in the United States, but it would be deceptive for me to include such schools on this list. The Challenge Index is designed to honor schools that have done the best job in bringing average students into college level courses. It does not include schools that have no, or almost no, average stu-

dents. My list measures how good the schools are, not just how good their students are.

There were some magnet schools on the 2003 *Newsweek* list, but only those that admitted students through a lottery, on a first-come-first-served basis, with ethnic balance, or with other formulas that did not give such great weight to grades and scores. For example, the number one school on that *Newsweek* list, the International Academy in Bloomfield Hills, MI, is an IB magnet school that draws students from 13 neighboring districts through a lottery.

Q: Aren't all the schools on the list doing well with AP or IB? Why rank them and make some feel bad that they are on the lower end of the scale?

A: Ranking gets me into trouble, and in a way, I deserve it. Every school on the 2003 list was in the top 4% of U.S. high schools based on my criteria. They had all demonstrated exceptional AP and IB strength. I rank schools because I want people to pay attention to this issue and its importance in improving of U.S. high schools. As a journalist, I learned long ago that people cannot resist looking at ranked lists. It doesn't matter what list—SUVs, ice cream stores, football teams, or fertilizer dispensers. People want to see who is on top and who is not. So I rank to bring attention to the topic, nothing more, in hopes that people will then discuss the list and in the process think about the issues it raises.

Q: Is it not true that school districts that pay for the students' exams skew the results of your Challenge Index? Should not an asterisk be attached to those school districts that pay for the AP exams?

A: If I thought that those districts that pay for the test and require that students take it were somehow cheating, thus giving themselves an unfair advantage that made their programs look stronger than they were, I would add that asterisk or discount those schools in some way. But I think the opposite is true. Districts that spend money to increase the likelihood that their students take AP tests are adding value to the students' education. Taking the test is good; it gives students a feel for the demands of college. It is bad that students in AP courses may choose not to take the tests and instead spend May of their senior year sunning on the beach or shopping for prom garb. If paying students' testing fees persuades students, indeed forces them, to take the test, that is good, just as it is good if a school spends money to hire more AP teachers or makes it difficult for students to drop out of AP without a good reason. I was happy to see that in the Washington, DC, area, when Fairfax County began to pay the test fees and require students to take the tests, many surrounding districts followed suit.

Q: Why don't you count the college exams that high school students take at local colleges?

A: I do, but schools must submit enough information so I can ensure that the college course final is comparable to an AP or IB test. One Virginia high school has shown me copies of their local college tests for this purpose. I would

also accept a description of the test from a high school or college official. If the test is at least two hours long and includes free response questions, I count it.

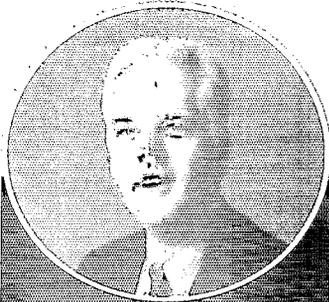
Q: Why do some states have so many schools on your list and others so few?

A: The more schools I study, the more I come to believe in the power of high school cultures, which are different in different parts of the country for reasons that often have little to do with the usual keys to high school performance—the incomes and educations of the parents.

California and New York have more schools on the list than the other states; that is no surprise. It is more difficult to explain why much less populous Virginia should rank right after those two large states in the number of challenging high schools, and why Iowa, with some of the highest test scores in the country, should have only one high school that meets the criteria for the list.

My tentative explanation is that some school districts have the good fortune of working with school boards and superintendents who see that districts serve their students better when AP and IB is available to all students.

Once a few districts in a state open up their AP and IB programs, many others follow. And once a state has success with AP or IB programs, its neighboring states begin to wonder why they aren't doing the same. **PL**



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