

**THE TEST:** The measure is controversial, but students who take AP exams—even if they don't do well—are better prepared than those who don't.

# HOW TO BUILD A BETTER HIGH SCHOOL

BY JAY MATHEWS

**M**ORGAN WILBANKS WAS IN FOR A SERIES OF shocks when he transferred to the Jefferson County International Baccalaureate (IB) School in Alabama at the beginning of his sophomore year. The little-known school near Birmingham, which tops NEWSWEEK's list of America's Best High Schools,

is on the leading edge of a growing movement to make secondary education much more rigorous. Wilbanks, then 16, found himself taking tough courses right from the start. In his Advanced Placement (AP)

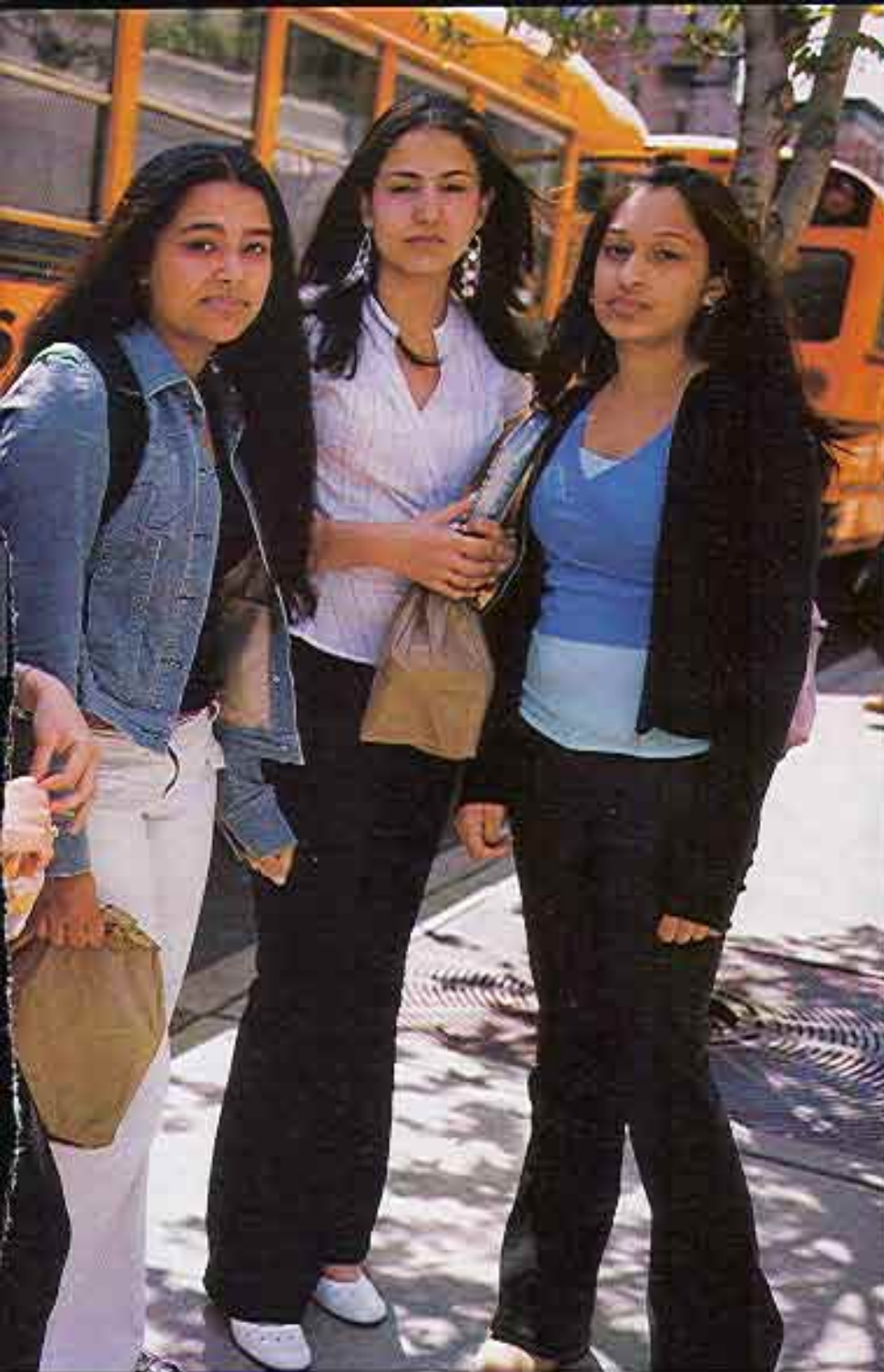
European-history class, teacher Jeffrey Clayton gave startled students this initial assignment: memorize the map of Europe and be able to draw every country, along with 10 capitals, 10 rivers and 10 bodies of water. And that was just a warm-up. Clayton and other teachers told Wilbanks that he would be tackling nearly a dozen similarly demanding courses before he received his diploma. A few of the school's 325 students fled, prefer-

ring a less strenuous life at a regular public school. But Wilbanks, looking back this month a few weeks before graduation, says it was a "great experience" that prepared him well for the University of Alabama—where he'll major in chemistry and aim for medical school.

Parents and even some educators might cringe at the idea of turning adolescence into a forced march toward college. What about time

RANKING		RATIO	% FREE LUNCH†
29	Bethesda-Chevy Chase*—Bethesda, Md.	3.874	10
30	Manhasset—N.Y.	3.853	4
31	Lincoln Park*—Chicago	3.811	51
32	Newport—Bellevue, Wash.	3.809	6
33	Design & Architecture—Miami	3.804	42
34	W.T. Woodson—Fairfax, Va.	3.748	6
35	St. Petersburg*—Fla.	3.742	22
36	King*—Tampa, Fla.	3.715	40
37	Myers Park*—Charlotte, N.C.	3.686	18
38	East Chapel Hill—Chapel Hill, N.C.	3.622	12
39	Pittsford Mendon—Pittsford, N.Y.	3.584	2
40	Science Academy of South Texas—Mercedes, Texas	3.570	42
41	Bellevue—Wash.	3.551	6
42	Greeley—Chappaqua, N.Y.	3.519	0
43	Great Neck North—Great Neck, N.Y.	3.518	4
44	Washington-Lee*—Arlington, Va.	3.491	32
45	South Side*—Rockville Centre, N.Y.	3.469	10
46	Banneker*—Washington, D.C.	3.432	27
47	Brighton—Rochester, N.Y.	3.422	7
48	Metro Academic & Classical*—St. Louis	3.362	18
49	Dobbs Ferry*—N.Y.	3.357	8
50	Langley—McLean, Va.	3.334	1
51	Yorktown—Arlington, Va.	3.286	16
52	Enloe*—Raleigh, N.C.	3.269	18
53	Miami Palmetto—Miami	3.259	14
54	Spruce Creek*—Port Orange, Fla.	3.247	10
55	Wyoming—Ohio	3.244	3
56	North Mecklenburg*—Huntersville, N.C.	3.241	14
57	Monta Vista—Cupertino, Calif.	3.236	2
58	Booker T. Washington*—Tulsa, Okla.	3.220	22
59	Mills University Studies—Little Rock, Ark.	3.216	50
60	Oxnard—Calif.	3.211	45
61	Alabama School of Fine Arts—Birmingham, Ala.	3.186	6
62	Warwick*—Newport News, Va.	3.170	30
63	Ft. Myers*—Fla.	3.152	20
64	Vandermeulen—Port Jefferson, N.Y.	3.123	2
65	Indian Hill—Cincinnati	3.122	2





"The single most important way to improve high schools is to improve elementary and junior high schools," says education historian Diane Ravitch of New York University. "If a student arrived in ninth grade ready for instruction in math, science, history, literature and foreign languages, then no further reform is needed." But with reform of the early grades underway for more than a decade, looking at high school now is a "natural progression," says Tom Vander Ark, education director of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which started focusing on secondary education three years ago. "It felt like a very

large problem that wasn't getting sufficient attention," he says.

No one hopes for success more than the graduates of English High. Georgetown Travis, class of '84 and now a staff assistant at the school, says 1,300 students in grades 9 to 12 is a strain on everyone. Budget cuts have meant losing highly regarded art and music programs, and the library desperately needs updating. The headmaster does his best, Travis says, but it's a constant struggle. Without some help, schools like English will continue to struggle if they want to crack the top 100.

WITH JULIE SOLEFO AND WILLIAM LEE ADAMS

## AT THE HEAD OF THE CLASS

Public schools are ranked according to a ratio devised by Jay Mathews: the number of Advanced Placement and/or International Baccalaureate tests taken by all students at a school in 2004 divided by the number of graduating seniors. For a list of every school scoring more than 1,000, see [Newsweek.com](http://Newsweek.com).

RANKING		RATIO	% FREE LUNCH
1	Jefferson County IB*—Irendale, Ala.	10,755	2
2	International Academy*—Bloomfield Hills, Mich.	8,422	0
3	Stanton College Prep*—Jacksonville, Fla.	7,385	8
4	Eastside*—Gainesville, Fla.	6,682	39
5	H-B Woodlawn—Arlington, Va.	5,747	14
6	Science/Engineering Magnet—Dallas	5,545	30
7	Paxon*—Jacksonville, Fla.	5,373	13
8	Pensacola*—Fla.	5,362	63
9	Raleigh Charter—Raleigh, N.C.	5,089	0
10	Hilleborough*—Tampa, Fla.	5,085	50
11	Richard Montgomery*—Rockville, Md.	5,029	13
12	Highland Park—Dallas	4,500	0
13	Coral Reef*—Miami	4,528	28
14	Joricho—N.Y.	4,347	2
15	McNair Academic—Jersey City, N.J.	4,342	40
16	Cold Spring Harbor—N.Y.	4,317	1
17	Wootton—Rockville, Md.	4,307	2
18	Atlantic Community*—Delray Beach, Fla.	4,291	23
19	Eastern Sierra Academy—Bridgeport, Calif.	4,250	18
20	Dreyfoos School of the Arts—West Palm Beach, Fla.	4,205	5
21	Troy*—Fullerton, Calif.	4,165	1
22	Great Neck South—Great Neck, N.Y.	4,161	4
23	George Mason*—Falls Church, Va.	4,098	8
24	Interlake*—Bellevue, Wash.	4,018	31
25	Harding University*—Charlotte, N.C.	4,017	38
26	Edgemont—Scarsdale, N.Y.	4,015	0
27	Wilson Magnet*—Rochester, N.Y.	3,895	63
28	Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies—Los Angeles	3,892	37

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