

WEST CHESTER AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

Introduction

During the 2015-16 school year, a High School Leveling and Weighting Committee was formed to conduct an analysis of the District's current system for leveling and weighting high school courses. The initial committee was comprised of high school counselors, high school principals, the Supervisor for Pupil Services, the Director of Secondary Education, and the Assistant Superintendent. In accordance with the District's Comprehensive Plan, the Committee was charged with analyzing the District's current system of leveling and weighting to determine if revisions should be considered.

After researching numerous high-performing school districts, obtaining feedback from counselors, and college admission officers through interviews and surveys, as well as surveying our own students, the committee recognized that specific aspects of our current leveling, weighting, and class rank system do not maximize post-secondary opportunities for students.

As a result of the study, the committee established three goal areas that sought to improve the system for leveling and weighting of high school courses and the class rank system. Beginning in the spring of 2016, the committee expanded to include a broad representation of educators and community members who participated in a process of developing considerations for each goal area. These goals were prioritized for potential implementation beginning with the Class of 2021 or 2022 depending on a final School Board decision.

Goal One: Improve the articulation and description of rigor levels.

The High School Leveling and Weighting Committee's research indicated that the current rigor levels do not maximize post-secondary opportunities for students.

Since the 2009-2010 school year, student enrollment data revealed the District has reduced the number of students in the Basics/Standards level by 48%, while raising enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) by 42%. This data suggests an opportunity to eliminate the Basic/Standards level.

The high schools currently offer as many as five different rigor levels (Basic, Academic, Honors, Seminar, AP) while many of the highest achieving districts offer only three or four. Research conducted since the 1980s details how too many rigor levels can limit student growth for different subgroups of students, especially by over-representation in the lowest level of courses. Enrollment data for the 2015-2016 school year in the Basic level confirmed that the research findings were matched in our high schools. For example, 40% of the students in Basic classes were African-American or Hispanic, and 76% of enrollees in these classes were Special Education students.

The committee recognized that the descriptions of the current rigor levels in the high school course selection guide express required attributes and behaviors for students rather than what the courses offer students. For example, the current description of the Honors level "requires the student to be responsible, mature..." This description suggests that a preceding level does not establish such expectations for students. The recommended descriptions would support an emphasis on critical thinking skills and growth-oriented expectations appropriate for each level. The purpose of the Honors level would be positively stated, "to develop higher-order thinking skills using a challenging pace and enriched content."

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Goal Two: Re-name the rigor levels to reflect rising student expectations.

In conjunction with a review of descriptions for each rigor level, the High School Leveling and Weighting Committee also reconsidered the titles assigned to the levels. In addition to the enrollment and achievement data supporting the elimination of the Basic/Standards level, the very name of this level stood in contrast to the District's mission to "educate and inspire students to achieve their personal best." In the process of researching other high achieving schools, the committee selected Career & College Prep as a level name that would by its very title express a purposeful foundation for all students.

The committee's research also confirmed that the Seminar level is not clearly understood and/or recognized by many colleges and universities. For example, 59 survey responses from a wide variety of colleges and universities, indicated that many college admission officers lack an accurate understanding of the Seminar level. This confusion stems from the common practice of recognizing the Honors level as the level that precedes AP. In order to maintain the high quality of the Honors and Seminar curricula, the committee resolved this issue by searching for terminology that would more clearly define the distinction between these two levels. Accelerated Honors has been recommended because this title is better understood by university admissions officers. The accelerated term also aligns with the highest rigor level offered in our middle schools.

Goal Three: Revise the quality point and class rank system.

The High School Leveling and Weighting Committee then began to examine the value of reporting class rank and the current quality point system used to determine a student's grade point average (GPA). The committee triangulated practices and data from within the district, at other successful high schools, and through the lens of college admissions.

The committee concluded that discontinuing the reporting of class rank would benefit not only a student's opportunities for college admissions and scholarships, but it would also promote a healthier high school experience. Survey data from students reveals that the competition for class rank is stressful and demoralizing. For example, 33% of the graduating seniors from the Class of 2016 expressed that they were sometimes, often, or most of the time stressed out about class rank. An examination of high school transcripts also shows that most students ranked in the top third of their class, selected courses based on their pursuit of a higher rank rather than exploring their interests. The committee recognizes that West Chester Area School District high schools are outstanding high schools. Given the success of our students, class rank stands as an obstacle to promoting a healthy school culture that values the rich and comprehensive high school experience.

Research of other successful high schools found that many of them have eliminated class rank. A compelling data point was found through *US News & World Report's* ranking of public high schools in Pennsylvania; according to these rankings, eight out of the top ten high schools do not rank their students. A survey of many high schools that do not rank also reported that the decision to discontinue rank has not negatively impacted college admissions. In fact, the schools that recently moved to discontinuing reporting class rank did so to enhance college admissions and scholarship opportunities for students (i.e. Unionville, Penncrest, and Lower Moreland).

Survey data, interviews, and meetings with college admissions officers confirms a recommendation to discontinue class rank in our high schools. Since the early 1990's, the importance of class rank in the

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college admissions process has declined. Other academic factors such as overall grades, rigor level of courses, college admission test scores, activities, and strength of school profiles all exceed the importance of class rank.

The committee also engaged admissions officers from West Chester University, University of Delaware, and Penn State University, three of the most applied to and enrolled in colleges by WCASD students. Each of the admissions officers provided ample feedback throughout the process that was extremely helpful to the committee. All three schools supported the recommendation to discontinue class rank because, in most cases, it does not benefit students in the admissions process. In fact, in many instances, it can have a negative impact on both admission and scholarship opportunities.

Throughout the process of analyzing the class rank system, the committee also examined the quality point system used to determine a student's GPA. The committee found that the current distribution of quality points is inflated. For example, a student may earn 5.7 quality points for an A+ at the AP level and 4.2 quality points for an A+ at the Basic/Standards level. A comparative review of the school profiles of other successful high schools reveals that most schools did not exceed 5.0 quality points. College and university admission officers have also shared some concern for inflated GPAs as compared to other high schools. It is common practice for college admissions offices to re-calculate an applicant's GPA to a standard format. Furthermore, West Chester University described how it is their practice to cap a GPA for an applicant at 4.0 regardless if the student has a 4.1 or 4.9 high school GPA. Given this information, the committee recognized that an effort should be made to curtail our quality point system closer to a traditional 4.0 scale. This work can be accomplished through the administrative guidelines which will accompany the Class Rank policy.

Recommendations:

The administration is presenting two recommendations for board approval. These recommendations are put forth to the board in priority, and would be fully implemented for the Class of 2021. Each recommendation is in accordance with the Comprehensive Plan's High School Programming Goal that seeks to maximize post-secondary opportunities for students.

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High School Leveling, Weighting, and Class Rank Recommendation

Recommendation One: Adopt the revised names and descriptions for the high school rigor levels.

***Career & College Prep:** Career & College Prep level courses develop students' essential skills and acquisition of content knowledge within the subject area. This level emphasizes the development of increased rigor through classroom interactions and progressing demands for independent work in preparation for college and career readiness.

Honors: Honors courses follow a rigorous curriculum prescribed by each department and develop higher-order thinking skills using a challenging pace and enriched content. Both in-class instruction and outside assignments focus on self-directed learning through activities and assessments that emphasize written and oral communication.

***Accelerated Honors:** Accelerated Honors courses prepare students for Advanced Placement studies. Courses at this level are designed to provide students with access to the most rigorous curriculum that extends well beyond grade level standards. These courses promote both collaborative and self-directed learning through activities and assessments that emphasize written and oral communication.

Advanced Placement: Advanced Placement, or AP, refers to college-level courses taught according to the syllabi approved by the College Board Advanced Placement Program and/or to courses designed to prepare students for College Board AP tests. Successful performance on AP tests may lead to college credit and/or advanced placement in college courses. While course descriptions provide information about the course content on which the AP exam will be based, WCASD teachers have the flexibility to determine how the content is presented.

** Per extensive feedback received, the recommendation is to retroactively implement this goal for current high school students beginning in the fall of 2017.*

Recommendation Two: Revise the Class Rank Policy (214) to consider the following elements:

- For the Class of 2021 and beyond, class rank will not be recorded on high school transcripts.
- For the Class of 2021 and beyond, class rank will only be provided to institutions of higher education or other appropriate institution or agency upon their request. The request must be for purposes of an admission's decision, scholarship determination, financial aid determination, or any other reason as deemed necessary by the West Chester Area School District.
- For the class of 2021 and beyond, a quality point system will be established that does not exceed 5.0.
- For the Class of 2021 and beyond, high school transcripts will include both weighted and unweighted grade point averages.

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Future Considerations

The scope of the work completed by the Leveling and Weighting Committee is far-reaching and its impact on the future of our high schools cannot be understated. This is the first time that our district has thoroughly examined the specific practices and methods used to determine how we value the education of individual students, not only when they graduate from our high schools but throughout their entire academic experience. As a result of this examination, the committee wanted to be certain to share with the School Board and our community its considerations for future study and policy.

1. The district should review the leveling, weighting, and class rank policy once every five years to ensure that the structures in these areas maximize post-secondary opportunities for students.
2. Middle school leveling practices should be examined for the purposes of best practices and alignment to high school.
3. Through the revisions to the class rank policy, consideration should be given to discontinuing or providing the option for current high school students to exclude class rank from their transcripts.
4. The school profiles that accompany students' transcripts in the college admission process should be updated to more accurately reflect the strength of our high school programs. Also, any changes that may result from the work of the committee should be explained on the profiles.
5. Based on the revised description of the rigor levels, principals should review the teacher recommendation process for clarity and consistency.