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NEWS UPDATE

Schools try to remove stress of class rankings

Choosing K12 courses based on interests and skill over GPA requirements

By Matt Zalaznick

1/26/2017



NO MORE GPA IN EDUCATION—Graduates at Millard South High School in Omaha, Nebraska will no longer be ranked based on GPA in coming years. Administrators hope this will result in students focusing more on content and skills, rather than grades.

Millard Public Schools near Omaha, Nebraska, will switch to a college-like ranking system that designates graduates as magna cum laude, summa cum laude and cum laude.

This was after administrators there discovered students had been loading their school-year schedules with honors and AP classes, and taking required, unweighted courses during summer school.

“We want students to choose courses based on their interests and skill, not because they’re weighted courses that will result in higher GPAs,” says Heather Phipps, Millard’s associate superintendent of educational services.



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The district reached out to college admissions officers and found that dropping [traditional GPA-based rankings](#) would likely not hurt students' [college opportunities](#).

Most colleges and universities now have complex selection procedures that prioritize the academic rigor of high school courses and other factors over class rank, Phipps says.

The growing number of districts that no longer rank graduates based on academic performance hope to convince their most ambitious learners not to overload their schedules with AP or other accelerated courses where those students aren't really interested.

"We're trying to create a system in which kids are more focused on learning than they are on chasing the A," says Dana Monogue, assistant superintendent for teaching and learning at the School District of Elmhurst, a system in a Milwaukee suburb that eliminated rankings five years ago.

Still, some of the district's students take all 20 of its AP classes to burnish their applications to elite colleges, says Monogue.

Along with eliminating rankings, the district encourages high school teachers to create class syllabuses that define learning outcomes. This should allow students to consider the content of an honors class, rather than fixating on the potential for earning a weighted grade.

[Guidance counselors](#) also help students choose a schedule that is more well-rounded subjectwise, rather than packed with accelerated classes.

Do no harm?

Rankings can actually hurt students when they apply to college, says James Scanlon, superintendent of the West Chester Area School District near Philadelphia.

For instance, a college admissions officer may not think as highly of a student who finishes No. 25 (compared to placing in the top 10), even if it's in a high-achieving district, he says.

For that reason, West Chester, where most students go to college, will no longer rank students starting in 2017-18. The change had strong support from parents, Scanlon adds.

"It's still important to have high expectations and we still want to offer high-level classes," he says, "but there's a lot of pressure on kids and we don't need to add to that by creating this false number."

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