

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF:

CLASS RANK

Issue at a Glance

Efforts to improve academic achievement and prepare all students for college and career readiness have rendered past methods of sorting and comparing students obsolete. School leaders, parents, and school boards are concerned that limited access to advanced classes and unevenness of school grading policies could lead to large differences in class rank—and hurt student prospects for admission. As such, schools have increasingly sought to stop reporting class rank.

The current use of student Grade Point Average (GPA) to calculate class rank has limited value in college admissions due to it only showing student comparison within a particular school. For the Fall 2023 admission cycle, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) member four-year colleges reported that the most consistent factors in admission decisions were grades in high school courses and strength of the high school curriculum followed by positive character attributes, counselor and teacher recommendations, and extracurricular activities.

- 72% of colleges attributed limited or no importance to class rank as a factor in admission decisions for first-time freshmen in Fall 2023.
- Colleges also attributed limited or no importance to class rank for freshmen admissions between 2012–23 (excluding 2020–22 when data was not collected due to COVID-19).
- The importance of test scores has substantially declined, while grades and strength of curriculum have remained of top importance.

Colleges and universities have responded by developing their own systems of ranking students and calculating projected class ranks. In addition, a number of universities recalculate student GPA by either adding or removing weighting to college-level courses or calculating GPA based solely on core academic courses. However, certain states have statutes requiring that state universities admit students based on class rank.

- Texas' "Top 10% Rule" is a state law that guarantees Texas residents admission to state universities for students in the top 10%. They also require that 75% of in-state first-year students be annually auto-admitted based on class rank. However, at the University of Texas, that has been cut down to 5% because of increased applications.
- Illinois developed a pilot program to grant automatic admission into some public universities for some students who graduate in the top 10%.
- Similarly, Florida has the "Talented Twenty Program," guaranteeing admission to a state university for students in the top 20%.
- Arizona offers an "Assured Admission" to the top 25% based on GPA or class rank.

- Mississippi offers guaranteed admission based on a combination of GPA, class rank and ACT/SAT scores, within the top 50%.
- Other states, including Iowa, Missouri, Montana, and Nebraska, have also implemented automatic or guaranteed admission policies based on factors such as class rank, GPA, and/or test scores.
- While not always formal guarantees, some states have policies that prioritize class rank, particularly in state systems with a large number of applicants.
- Even with these policies, some universities within a state system can remain highly competitive, and automatic admission does not guarantee admission to a specific campus or program.

National Principals Association Position

- Schools should hold high expectations and promote academic excellence for each student, not a select few.
- Each student should graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills to help them succeed in college, career, and life.
- To be able to prosper in an interdependent world, each student should acquire a body of essential knowledge and skills, including literacy and math skills.
- Schools should encourage students to assume a well-rounded, rigorous, and challenging course of study that helps them to be global citizens.
- High-quality standards and assessments with valid comparisons of student progress should measure what students know and can do—and enable valid comparisons between students in different schools across the country.
- Schools should encourage and recognize academic excellence in a spirit of cooperation, not intense competition that sets one student against another student.
- Grading policies should directly impact the delivery of instruction.

Recommendations for Policymakers

When making decisions regarding grading, GPA, and the use of class rank, school leaders should take into consideration the context in which their school operates—including state laws, state college and university systems, and all other higher education institution admissions requirements, and community and student character attitudes.

Grading

- Grades should be an accurate measure of course mastery and what students know and can do, which will help teachers give students and parents feedback on what academic areas need improvement.
- Grading practices should encourage and motivate each student to take rigorous courses and should not be punitive in nature.
- Particular attention should be paid to grading practices related to behavioral issues and homework—which should be viewed as independent practice.
- Students learn at different rates and should be given the time and assistance they need to master course content.

Grade Point Average

- GPA should include all courses completed by the student.
- GPA should comprise all high school-level courses including those taken while attending a middle level school (examples would include algebra and world language courses).
- GPA should be an accurate reflection of academic rigor.
- GPA should contribute to a valid comparison of class rank.
- GPA should include provisions for transfer students.

Weighting

- All students are encouraged to take a more rigorous course of study and be appropriately recognized for doing so.
- Weighted grades are not used to sort students and determine who receives recognition.
- Students are not discouraged from taking courses that are not weighted.
- Weighting of course grades should be applied only to externally moderated courses such as AP, IB, or dual enrollment courses to ensure the quality and consistency of course content across schools and teachers.
- The decision to weight grades should be accompanied by open enrollment policies in all externally moderated courses including AP, IB, and dual enrollment courses. Failure to do so:
 - Stratifies student opportunity
 - Represents a new form of tracking
 - Creates competition for scarce resources
 - Disadvantages schools that offer few AP or IB courses
- Students receiving weighted credit should be required to complete the course and summative assessment.

Class Rank

- A system of class rank should not carry an assumption that academic success is a scarce commodity available only to select students. Class rankings should only occur if the recommendations above for grading, GPA, and weighting are in place.
- Class rank should be cumulative. The rank should include all courses taken by the student and not be limited to a select few core courses. In addition, class rankings should include all students within a given class.
- Alternatives to reporting class rank include but are not limited to the following:
 - Grade distribution of the class including the range and median GPA
 - Estimated rank
 - Ranking of core courses only
 - Reporting of AP results
 - Latin honor system, which requires a specific GPA to graduate cum laude, magna cum laude, or summa cum laude