September 2017 | Volume **59** | Number **9** | Pages 2-3, 6

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**Stepping Out of Rank**

**Sarah McKibben**

As class rank loses luster among both school leaders and college admissions officers, districts question, "Is this good for our kids?"

Jeremy Branch stood in front of the West Chester Area, Pennsylvania, school board and made an admission: "For the majority of students in West Chester, class rank *hurts* more than it helps." An assistant director of enrollment management at Penn State University, he has seen applicants, time and again, rejected solely on the basis of that number.

If a student ranks 90th in his class—even if he comes from a competitive, high-achieving district like West Chester—it pulls him down in an evaluation, Branch told ASCD. "Rank can make a top-flight kid, with an *A* average and who's challenged himself with all sorts of honors and AP classes, look middle of the road to admissions counselors."

It's kind of like the movie *Inception*, Branch says. "Rank puts this idea in your head that somebody may not be as strong as they really are."

**Gaming the System**

Since that school board meeting in November 2016, West Chester has eliminated the practice of ranking students. It is among a growing number of districts to do so, following in the footsteps of elite private schools who have either dropped rank or never tracked it. According to a 2016 analysis from the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC), fewer than half of U.S. high schools still report class rank.

Grading expert Thomas Guskey, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Kentucky, has long argued that class rank is a practice designed to *select* talent, rather than *develop* talent. In his view, schools that strive to develop talent want as many students as possible to succeed, while schools that select talent set out to maximize differences among students. That can breed unhealthy competition, pitting students against one another for the top spot in the class—a distinction that can be determined by as little as "one hundred thousandth of a decimal point" in a weighted GPA.

When teachers handed back tests in West Chester, for instance, "within 30 seconds, every kid vying to be in the top 20 would've already figured out their average in the class—and everybody else's average," says Robert Sokolowski, the district's assistant superintendent. Some students, he recalls, were even being bullied in connection with their ranking. When report cards came out, the number-one ranked student received harassing text messages from her classmates, asking, "What are you taking next year?" and making comments like, "I'll be ahead of you!"

"The culture wasn't healthy for our students," he acknowledges.

In Millard Public Schools in Omaha, Nebraska, "students designed their educational program around class rank, not their interests," says associate superintendent Heather Phipps. They skipped out on travel and other educational opportunities to take unweighted courses over the summer (which added points to their GPAs) - and crammed in additional weighted AP and IB courses during the school year.

"This is a game," students candidly told Phipps. "And it's important you learn how to play the game if you want to be at the top."

**You Are Not a Number**

Districts often say their greatest concern about eliminating rank is the possibility that the change might affect college admissions. However, the metric is falling out of favor among admissions officers, according to the annual "State of College Admission" survey from NACAC. In 2006, 26 percent of college admissions officers said class rank was of "considerable importance" in admissions decisions. By 2014, that number dropped to just 14 percent. Almost half of admissions officers in the latest survey said class rank is of "limited" to "no importance."

A student's grades and the academic rigor of courses they take matter most in an evaluation, the survey finds. Other factors that edge out rank include SAT and ACT scores, essay or writing samples, and counselor/teacher recommendations. The message conveyed by Yale, Stanford, Harvard, and other top schools, Phipps says, is that admissions is shifting toward a more "holistic evaluation" that looks at a host of factors beyond class rank.

J.T. Duck, director of admissions at Swarthmore College, an elite private school outside of Philadelphia, says that about 45 percent of applicants this year included class rank on their transcripts. If the metric is provided, "it's helpful and we'll look at it," he confirms. But admissions counselors will still dig deeper to "figure out how it got created."

Some rankings are weighted, exclude 9th grade achievement, don't count certain courses, and are affected when students transfer schools. "There are all these nuances that matter," Duck says.

"I don't want students to feel like, ‘I am my class rank,’ " he adds. "Because in our admissions process, they are much more than that. We never look at class rank in isolation and say, *That perfectly captures this kid's performance.*"

Personally, when it comes to class rank, Branch says he could take it or leave it. "Admissions counselors have so many other things to go off of—GPAs, SATs, level of classes, attendance, recommendation letters—that rank is usually one of the last things we look at anyway."

What he worries about are those "proverbial tie-breaker situations" that come down to rank. A student might place in the middle of his class but go to one of the best high schools in the country, he notes. "Why should that kid be penalized and made to look average when he's phenomenal?"

**A Methodical Rollout**

Sokolowski says he's seen evidence of student ranking in West Chester schools dating back to the 1860s, but it was only recently that a committee set out to determine, "Is this good for our kids?" When they decided that it wasn't, he expected parent pushback to include comments like, "If it was good for me, then it's good for them," or "It sounds like you're moving to an ‘everybody gets a trophy [mindset].’ " Instead, the committee heard an outpouring of stories about how rank hurt students’ admissions prospects, disqualified them from scholarships, or nixed their chances of being accepted into college honors programs.

Most parents were "very much in support of discontinuing it," and they wanted it to happen *yesterday*, says Sokolowski. But the district chose to phase out rank beginning with this year's freshman class.

For older students, West Chester made some concessions for the interim: adjusting the grading system to give electives neutral weighting, moving to a multiplier system to combat grade inflation, and rolling back the frequency of publishing rank on report cards. Before, students would see their rank up to seven times as freshmen and sophomores, notes Sokolowski. Now, they won't see it until the end of junior year (although parents can submit a transcript request before then).

**Providing Context Clues**

Once the Class of 2021 starts applying to colleges, West Chester plans to keep the elements of rank worth salvaging. To help admissions officers see a student's standing within a larger academic context, the district will include detailed grade-distribution bands on high school profiles. And for pre-admissions and scholarship considerations, parents can request a student's GPA decile standing in the class (to know if their child is ranked in the top 10, 20, 30 percent, etc.).

GPA or grade distributions give colleges "a sense of how many *A*s, *B*s, or *C*s were awarded in AP English junior year," Duck says. Offering clues about "what the grades mean in context is really helpful," he notes. "Otherwise, we're making assumptions about how well the student has done relative to the school."

**Mirroring College Recognition**

To recognize academic excellence at graduation, Guskey advocates that high schools "move toward the system used at colleges and universities, the criterion-based Latin honor system." Under the model, students are more likely to support each other because there's no cap on how many will earn a distinction, he says. "You're competing against a challenging and rigorous curriculum, not against your classmates."

Millard Public Schools will phase in college-like honor designations with its current sophomore class. Students who graduate with a 4.0 or above will be recognized as *summa cum laude*, students with a 3.75 to 3.99 will be *magna cum laude*, and students with a 3.5 to 3.74 will be *cum laude*. By mirroring the college honor system, "We'll be able to recognize students for educational excellence, but not at the exclusion of all but one student," says Phipps.

To eliminate top-spot competition, West Chester Area high schools will no longer name a valedictorian or salutatorian. A selection panel of students and staff will hand-pick two "honors speakers" through an audition process. Similarly, many universities select valedictorians by committee, based on achievement and service, a practice Guskey recommends replicating.

Other high schools allow for multiple valedictorians. For example, Washington Lee High School in Arlington, Virginia, named nearly 180 valedictorians this year—a recognition bestowed on every graduate earning a 4.0 GPA or higher. A speaker was selected from among the group to represent the Class of 2017 at the graduation ceremony.

**Telling the Whole Story**

Of course, determining whether to assign class rank depends on local factors, such as "state laws, college and university admission requirements, community attitudes, and what best meets the needs of [your] students," according to a position statement from the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

"Schools should make the decisions that are right for them and their communities about how to report class rank, or whether or not to tally class rank," agrees Duck.

A handful of states with guaranteed college-admissions policies still require schools to report some form of rank. In Texas, the top 10 percent of each high school's graduating class is promised admission to a state university. And in Florida, the Talented Twenty program holds a spot in state schools for the top 20 percent of each graduating class. Kentucky and Georgia also set aside state scholarship money for students falling within a certain percentage of their graduating class, adds Guskey. Military academies also require rank.

Branch says that ultimately, you have to "consider whether it's benefitting students in your particular school district." Look at postsecondary institutions where your students typically apply and ask admissions counselors, "If we stopped reporting this, how would it affect our students?"

Also, "talk to other school districts that have removed it and talk to some of the private schools that never had it," Branch advises. And reach out to districts that looked into removing rank but elected not to. "Sometimes we can get so far on the train of doing something that we don't talk to the folks who decided not to do it."

Howard County Public Schools in Maryland, one of the highest-achieving districts in the nation, still reports class rank (based on a weighted GPA). But this school year, the district's grading and reporting policies are up for review, says Gina Massella, Howard County's high school director. "There are a lot of questions and discussions around this," she notes.

The district "has done a tremendous job of opening up courses" so students can "stretch themselves and be challenged," she explains. As a result, rigorous AP, honors, and gifted courses have high participation rates. "We have a lot of kids with very healthy GPAs, but if you looked at their class rank, they may not be in the top 5 percent."

"So I'm not sure class rank tells the whole story of a student," says Massella.

**Beyond Rank and File**

Eliminating rank has "already changed the conversation" in Millard Public Schools, observes Phipps. Counselors and administrators are noticing that incoming freshmen are aligning course selection with their passions and talents. "That's the goal," she says, "for students to challenge themselves and take the most appropriate and rigorous course load they can because that's what they're interested in and that's what's best for them educationally. *Not* because they are trying to play a game and win class rank."

Neighboring school districts that still assign rank are "curious to see how this goes, as our students matriculate through high school," concludes Phipps. "They're watching." 

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