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**More top high schools drop out of class-rank system**

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by **Kathy Boccella**, Staff Writer

For the West Chester Area School District, the last straw for class rank came when a University of Pennsylvania admissions officer told school officials that a highly qualified graduate had been rejected because she was ranked 15th out of 320 students.

"They said, 'If you didn't rank her, she would have gotten in,' " Superintendent James Scanlon said of the student, who had earned a 3.9 grade-point average in the high-achieving Chester County district.

Now West Chester may be joining a growing number of districts around the country in eliminating class rank in its high schools - a high-stakes strategy that educators hold could help some of their students get into the nation's elite colleges, since those schools often overlook candidates who aren't in the rarefied percentiles.

The movement has gained such popularity in New Jersey during the last 10 years, said Albert Betts, admissions director at Rowan University, that "we no longer use or even record class rank as part of our admission evaluation process."

Educators who favor dropping the system argue that in the best districts, where the students are highly competitive, the differences in grade-point average between the No. 1 and No. 20 or 25 students can be minuscule. Yet colleges might look unfavorably on that lower-ranked student.

A No. 25 in West Chester might be a No. 5 or 6 in another district, said Scanlon, whose school board will vote next month to eliminate ranking and adjust weighting systems - that can push GPAs well above 4.0 - to account for the more challenging courses, effective with next year's freshman class.

The district even heard from a Penn State admissions officer who said the ranking system "more often than not . . . hurts your students rather than helps them," said Rick Swalm, the school board president.

Once he explained what was at stake, Scanlon said, students and parents were on board almost unanimously.

"Some colleges only want to see kids in the top 5 percent," said Cole Boquist, 18, a Henderson High School senior who currently is 18th in his class, in the vicinity of the magical top 5 percent. He said he agrees that rank should go.

But it was a different story in the well-regarded Unionville-Chadds Ford School District, which took heat from top-performing students and their parents when it eliminated its decile ranking system - in which seniors are grouped in the 10th, 20th, 30th, etc., percentiles, - starting this year. Critics said students were told as freshmen to work hard and aim for the top decile, which is based on three years of grades.

"They believed they would get this recognition if they succeeded, and to pull the rug out from under them is unfair," said Timotha Trigg, a mother of a senior, who spoke out at several heated school board meetings.

The districts are among at least 13 in the Pennsylvania counties neighboring Philadelphia that are either doing away with rank entirely; keeping it under wraps for a few select colleges, such as military academies that require it; or changing the system to show how students compare with others in their class without assigning numbers.

The National Association of College Admissions Officers says the trend started at least two decades ago with private schools and eventually spread to public schools.

College admissions officers said they have seen a large drop-off in applicants from schools with class rank in recent years. At Penn, only 33 to 36 percent of students applying come with a rank on their transcripts. At Swarthmore College, it is fewer than half.

Jim Bock, Swarthmore dean of admissions, said ranking has value in that it helps schools to have some way of comparing students with their peers, whether it's a single number or a percentile or a chart.

"We're trying to build context," he said. "We want to know where does this student fall within your institution."

Some schools try to outfox colleges. Bock recalled one school that gave everyone in the class who scored above a 4.0 a No. 1 - all 83 of them.

"It's the Lake Wobegon effect, where everyone is above average. If you're getting rid of rank and pushing everyone to the top, it doesn't serve the student well, or us well," he said.

Eric Furda, dean of admissions at Penn, said that though more schools are dropping rank, they are providing some measure of a student's standing in class, such as a bar graph that shows a distribution of student scores. Without that information, the university has to rely more heavily on test scores.

For colleges, the trend comes with a troubling side effect. Their national ratings are based partly on the number of students they admit who are in the top 10 percent of their classes. Having only a percentage of students with ranks could affect the college's own standings in published rankings, such as those in U.S. News & World Report.

Some local schools never had class rank, or did away with it long go, along with the time-honored tradition of the No. 1 student taking the graduation stage as the valedictorian.

"It encourages a more egalitarian approach to valuing the education of every student," said MaryJo Yannacone, principal of Strath Haven High School in Wallingford, which has never used rank and allows all students to submit graduation speeches, with the winners selected by class officers.

In its 2015 survey, the National Association of College Admission Counseling reported that colleges' decisions relied more on grades in college prep classes, quality of curriculum, and school GPA than on class rankings.

But it's not just college admissions driving the change. School officials say rank increases an unhealthy competition among highly motivated students who tend to take courses most likely to boost their academic standing.

"It puts students against each other," said Cameron Brown, a senior at West Chester East High School, where she was ranked 40th with a 3.95 GPA, high enough to get into her first college choice, the University of Pittsburgh, to study nursing. "The top four or five are all fighting for that number-one spot."

She said students will avoid classes such as choir for classes that carry a higher weighted value in the ranking system.

Scanlon agreed, which is why the district also is looking at changing weighting for the more difficult Advanced Placement and honors courses.

"I think it will lower the tension and stress," he said, "because a lot of times they're all chasing this number to get the most points to get the highest GPA instead of focusing on what they're learning."

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