

## Class Rank Gets Major Overhaul

On January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008, the Council Rock Board of School Directors voted to eliminate their policy regarding class rank. That decision paved the way for the administration to implement a new system of determining a student's placement in comparison to their peers. Prior to the vote, Citizens For Education publicly stated concern for the lack of sufficient and acceptable public engagement in this decision, and requested that the board postpone their vote to allow for more public dialog, feeling that a proper public vetting would mean more ideas and possibly a better system in place for all students. At that time, the administration acknowledged there may be "unintended consequences" to this system, and that careful monitoring will be done to identify them.

Beginning with the class of 2012 (rising 9<sup>th</sup> graders) a weighted GPA will be implemented and no rank will be reported. Large high schools, such as Council Rock, must have a way to compare a student to their peers and the decision was made to report placement within class, when required, in deciles (top 10%, 20%, etc.) based on the weighted GPA.

According to research conducted by the Council Rock administration, many high schools are moving away from a class rank, however there were many questions raised about how Council Rock is planning to implement the weighted GPA, and what effect that might have on a student's course selection and college admissions. The administration acknowledged, after researching many other high schools, that there is "no right answer" for a weighted GPA.

In the current system, which includes class rank, classes are weighted based on the rigor of coursework. Honors and nearly all AP classes are assigned the highest weight (8), followed by a slightly lower weight for a handful of less rigorous AP classes (7), then Accelerated classes (6), Academic classes (5) and Special Education classes (4).

It is widely accepted that the Special Education classes should be at equal weight to the Academic classes. The weighting of the Special Education classes at a lower level than Academic devalues what those students are doing in their appropriate area of study. However the new system of weighting the GPA poses several contradictions to our current system and therefore raises questions and concerns.

Below is a chart detailing how the new weighted GPA will be calculated:

	A	B	C	D	F
AP	4.8	4.3	3.3	1.8	0
Honors	4.5	4.0	3.0	1.5	0
All Others	4.0	3.0	2.0	1.0	0

Honors and most AP classes are currently on equal footing. In fact, for years, the district has promoted Council Rock Honors classes as being just as rigorous as AP

classes. In the new system, however, the formula for the weighted GPA makes that no longer the case. Because grades in AP courses will carry a higher weight than Honors, the message is that AP courses are more demanding and Honors classes are easier, which current and former students widely agree is untrue.

Humanities classes, which are listed as Honors level courses will no longer carry the highest weight in the new GPA structure. Accelerated classes will not be weighted at all. Creating a system where Accelerated and Academic classes are equally weighted prompted many questions regarding why a student would choose to do more rigorous coursework with no perceived benefit.

Citizens For Education believes that while there may be “unintended consequences,” - a problem that could impact a student’s acceptance to the college of their choice - there will also be predictable outcomes to this decision.

1. Students will take more AP classes and in earlier years, especially those students toward the top of the class, because of the perception that they are more “important,” regardless of whether it is the appropriate placement. This creates more stress and higher stakes testing for those students.
2. Students will take fewer Honors classes, which benefit students in their rigor and depth of instruction but are devalued in the new system
3. Students will take fewer Accelerated classes, in favor of the less rigorous Academic classes, as the “easy A” will boost their GPA
4. Students who do choose to stretch themselves and take Accelerated classes, but receive only one B, could end up in a lower decile than a student who takes the less rigorous Academic path and receives all A’s
5. Humanities students will feel pressure to leave the program in favor of the higher weighted AP classes, thus decimating the Humanities program
6. Curricular decisions, and choice of textbooks, will be driven by the new weight system; the Honors classes, and possibly the Accelerated classes will become less rigorous, or “dumbed down” over time to reflect their lower value
7. For the first few years, students, for whom the new weighted GPA will apply, could be in classes with students under the current rank system thereby creating a situation where the younger student’s grade would be worth less than the older student receiving the same grade in the same class doing the same work.
8. Students who stretch themselves by taking Honors classes, but receive grades of B’s and only one C, could end up in a lower decile than a student who takes the much less rigorous Academic or Accelerated track, and receives all A’s.
9. The Academic student who currently, with all A’s, would have a 4.0 out of a possible 4.0 reported as their GPA, will now have that same GPA reported as 4.0 out of the expected maximum of 4.5, which may affect how a college perceives them as an applicant
10. Students will opt out of World Language classes after level 3 (the generally accepted minimum required for many colleges) in favor of higher weighted AP class options

11. Students may opt out of traditional tracks, such as Physics in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, in favor of the higher weighted AP classes in Biology or Chemistry.
12. If a student chooses Honors classes (including World Language and Humanities) over the AP classes afforded them, the counselor recommendation form that is part of all college applications will not indicate that the student took the “most rigorous course of study,” which could hurt top performing students in the increasingly more competitive college selection process

In its presentation to the board, the administration recalculated the GPAs and ranks of the top 10% of the class of 2007 from both high schools, and used the recalculation to demonstrate that the new system would not have moved these students out of the top decile. Citizens requested that the same comparison be done for the other 90% of students. That comparison has not been furnished at the time of this writing.

The comparison of the rank and GPA of the top 10% of students under the current and new system that was presented to the board showed that most students did stay in the same decile. There were, however, a handful of students who would have moved from the top 10% to the second 10%, and one student who was listed as #1 in the current system, who would not have reached the top 5% with the new weighted GPA. Since a #1 student cannot reach that rank without taking all Honors/AP full time classes, and having a 4.0 un-weighted GPA, it can be assumed that student chose Honors over AP classes. Had that #1 student made similar course selections under the new guidelines, their movement from the #1 position, to not even placing among the top 5% of the class, could have had impact at some highly selective colleges. Counselor advice with course selection will begin to play a major role for these students, and any errant choices could have a detrimental effect on a student’s college admissions.

Citizens believes that the data on the other 90% of students will show that the change to a weighted GPA will have major, adverse implications for many students, not reflected in a review of the top 10% of a class. We foresee that there will be considerable movement across deciles based on the chart above. Any negative impact in a student’s decile could affect their chance of being admitted to the college of their choice.

This topic is a top priority for Citizens. We believe that it is important to study as much information as possible, as soon as possible, to bring concerns to light. Waiting until affected students move through the high school to see the impact of these changes may be too late to help the more than 1,000 students in each grade level of the high school. Citizens will continue to ask appropriate questions and review relevant data so that if “unintended consequences” appear more than likely, we can advocate for change before those consequences adversely affect students. We will continue to report on this topic in future newsletters.