

The Case for Abolishing Class Rank

December 12, 2016

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By Alfie Kohn

When students are rated with letter or number grades, research shows they're apt to think in a shallower fashion – and to lose interest in what they're learning – as compared with students who aren't graded at all. Alternative methods for reporting student progress are not only less destructive but also potentially more informative. Given the absence of pros to balance the cons, then, you have to wonder why grades persist.

The only explanation that seems even halfway persuasive is the fear that kids won't get into college if they aren't tagged with a GPA. But of course that doesn't explain why grades would be used in middle school (or, heaven help us, elementary school), where students' performance is of no interest to colleges.[1] Moreover, some (public and private) high schools do not give any grades at all, and their graduates are regularly accepted by both large state universities and small, selective colleges.

Logic and evidence argue for getting rid of grades, but that doesn't have to happen overnight. School officials might start the process by setting up a student/teacher/administrator/parent committee to investigate the topic. That committee presumably would read the research on the damaging effects of grades and interview staff

members at (or perhaps visit) a school that's already grade-free.

Moreover, there are intermediate steps that can be taken before abolishing grades completely. For example, a high school might start by eliminating them for freshmen, giving students one more year to be able to focus on the learning itself. Or, at a minimum, they can eliminate the particularly noxious practice of ranking students against one another, which turns academics into a competitive sport and designates the victor as "valedictorian."

That last suggestion is worth considering in its own right. The vicious rivalry and inevitable resentment on display as a handful of overachievers battle it out over tiny differences in GPA has led some schools to stop ranking, or at least to identify a batch of high-scoring kids as co-valedictorians – a tiny step in the right direction.

Predictably, these moves often stir up furious objections, and not exclusively from parents of top-graded students. In part, such rage reflects a deep strand of social conservatism that resists logic or evidence. Elsewhere, I've suggested that it's rooted in an ideological commitment to conditionality (the belief that anything desirable must be earned; no free lunch!), scarcity (viewing excellence as something that, by definition, can be attained only by a few), and deprivation (a conviction that children ought to have to struggle). In my experience, people who are outraged by the prospect of eliminating class rank tend to react similarly to the practice of handing out **thanks-for-playing trophies** after a children's soccer game, since this threatens the principle that all but the conquering heroes must go home empty-handed.

When pressed to defend the idea of class rank (and the practice of identifying a valedictorian), proponents rely principally on two arguments. First, they contend that recognizing a single student for exceptional achievement demonstrates our support for excellence and hard work. Second, such an arrangement is said to prepare youngsters for life, which is regarded as unavoidably competitive. These assertions are often accompanied by dismissive, sarcastic references

to the hurt feelings of “the losers” – which, of course, includes every student but one.

These six quick responses may be useful to anyone who encounters such claims:

1. The differences in grade-point averages among high-achieving students are usually statistically insignificant. It’s therefore both pointless and misleading to single out the one (or ten) at the top. Indeed, very qualified students at high-performing schools may end up looking less desirable to colleges just because they’re not in that select group. This possibility seems to have been more decisive in convincing some high schools to stop ranking their students than the deeper and more widespread harms of this practice.

2. Ranking provides little if any practical benefit. Class rank has much less significance to college admissions officers than a range of other factors, and the proportion of colleges that view it as an important consideration has been dropping steadily. Even a decade ago, according to the **National Association for College Admission Counseling [NACAC]**, nearly 40 percent of high schools had either stopped ranking their students or refused to share those numbers with colleges – a shift that apparently has had no effect on students’ prospects for admission. More recently, “college admissions officers said they have seen a steep drop-off in the number of applicants who come from schools that rank students.”

3. What is rewarded by singling out those with the best grades isn’t always merit or effort but some combination of skill at playing the game of school (choosing courses with a keen eye to the effect on one’s GPA, figuring out how to impress teachers, etc.) and a willingness to sacrifice sleep, health, friends, reading for pleasure, and anything else that might interfere with one’s grades.

“The most important reason that class rank is on the decline is because it really isn’t a direct measure of student achievement,” David Hawkins of NACAC told the **Washington Post**. Of course, one might argue that class rank should be on the decline primarily

because of its destructive effect on kids – regardless of how well they play the game. One reporter described the process as follows:

As early as ninth grade, top students figure out the selection procedures and find ways to improve their standing in comparison to classmates. They'll take, for instance, an "easier" Advanced Placement course – AP Biology instead of AP Chemistry. Others don't take certain required classes – namely courses that don't carry bonus points – until the latter half of their senior year, after class rankings are tabulated and sent out in college applications. More worrisome is the practice of teenagers who won't pursue an interest in, say, photography for fear of lowering their average. Those classes normally do not carry bonus points. "A client of mine told me that taking music or journalism was out of the question because she couldn't justify what it would do to her GPA," [education consultant David] Altshuler recalls. "I can tell you there was a lot less joy in her curriculum." [2]

4. If the chance to be a valedictorian is supposed to be a motivator, then the effect of class rank is to demotivate the vast swath of students who realize early on that they don't stand a chance of acquiring this distinction.

5. What we're talking about here is extrinsic motivation, which is not only different from, but corrosive of, intrinsic motivation (interest in the learning itself). This ultimately harms everyone, including the top students. As I noted earlier, the use of an extrinsic inducement such as grades promotes a more superficial approach to learning and diminishes students' engagement with it. Research by educational psychologists also suggests that it leads students to prefer less-challenging tasks. The effect of class rank, honor rolls, and grade-based scholarships – all of which are essentially rewards for having been rewarded – is to make grades even more salient and thus to exacerbate all three of these disturbing effects.

6. Pitting students against one another for the status of having the

best grades takes the strychnine of extrinsic motivation and adds to it the arsenic of competition. It not only shifts the focus from learning (what students are doing) to achievement (how well they're doing it) but also teaches students to regard their peers not as friends or allies but as potential obstacles to their own success. Thus, ranking makes the high school experience unnecessarily stressful while simultaneously destroying the sense of community and any potential for peer support that can help students get through those years intact.

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Is there any disadvantage to getting rid of class rank? Well, doing so might eliminate bragging rights for a handful of sleep-deprived students with the highest GPAs. And it might pose a slight inconvenience to colleges that (a) would rather have applicants presorted for their convenience and (b) are desperate for their own higher ranking (since U.S. News & World Report looks at the number of students at each college who were in the top ten percent of their high school class).

Judged by meaningful criteria, getting rid of class rank is an obvious first step – but only a first step – toward restoring sanity, supporting a culture of learning, and promoting intellectual excellence (as opposed to an emphasis on academic rewards). Ideally it should be followed by moving away from grades altogether, which some schools have already proved is not only possible but enormously beneficial.

*Parts of this essay were adapted from my book **The Myth of the Spoiled Child**, published in paperback in 2015 by Beacon Press.*

NOTES

1. My point, of course, is that it should be a no-brainer for schools that educate young children to eliminate grades. But if high school educators are brave enough to take the lead in doing so, the benefits are likely to echo throughout the

community: Elementary and middle schools would then be unable to point upwards to justify what they've been doing. They would be deprived of the depressingly common rationalization that sounds like this: "Well, we have to use worst practices on our children....to get them used to the bad stuff that's going to be done to them when they get to high school."

2. Ana Veciana Suarez, "There's Glory for No. 1, But Competition's Hard," Miami Herald, June 1, 2003.

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