

# The Case for Weighting Grades and Waiving Classes for Gifted and Talented High School Students

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A great deal of controversy surrounds questions of weighted grades and waiving classes. The center of the controversy appears, indeed, to be that no systematic study has been completed on either of these topics. Therefore, an attempt was made to alleviate that problem by researching the questions of weighted grades and waiving classes in a comprehensive way.

Four approaches to research occurred. First, interviews with teachers, counselors, and administrators were conducted in the four high schools of the research team. Second, questionnaires that asked for short-essay responses were sent to state and regional high schools. Third, 300 questionnaires that asked for a fill-in response were sent out nationally under the auspices of The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented. Fourth, short-answer questions were sent to college admission directors of selected public and private colleges. Also, a review of published literature was conducted.

Questions guiding the study of Weighted Grades included: Should a school district weight grades? If so, under what circumstances and in what way(s)? What is the main definition of "equity" when the question of weighting classes is discussed? What do colleges and universities demand in their admission procedures? And, most important of all, what best aids students in their learning and in their future?

Questions guiding the study of Waiving Classes included: What classes should be waived? How is the waiving of a class best accomplished? What is required of a school district to accomplish that? And, most important of all, what best aids students in their learning and in their future?

This research study on weighted grades indicates that the majority of schools that responded weight some classes, though there is no consistency among schools as to which classes or grades are weighted, how much each grade is weighted, and/or how labeling (on transcripts or in published course nomenclature) occurs. However, all schools which weight grades have one thing in common: a commitment to defining "excellence" and to giving credence to what excellence means to them through the process of weighting grades. Respondents state a correlation between their decision to weight grades and their interest in reinforcing able students to take the most demanding courses.

The study on waiving classes also shows a lack of national consistency on how classes are waived, what classes might be waived, how such classes are graded, and by what means they are or are not figured into the grade point average (GPA). One consistency does occur in all but two of the returned materials: no class is waived unless students show mastery of material. Therefore, "waiving" is not often defined in its root sense but as a word that means "alternative methods of completing course objectives." Those "alternative methods" include final examinations, demonstrations, portfolios, exhibitions, and the like. When students are allowed to skip/waive lower-level classes, such classes usually generate no credit and students are often required to take more advanced classes in the same academic discipline.

As a result of these assessments of weighting grades and waiving classes, some conclusions appear to be clear. For weighting grades, the cumulative advantages of equity for students, the importance of encouraging students to take honors and AP classes, the fact that simple, unweighted GPA may place students at a disadvantage for college admissions and/or scholarship awards indicate that high schools should weight grades. Weighted grades appear to benefit students in most cases, according to national and regional responses and the literature in the field. As a result of the assessment on waiving classes, school districts and at times state legislatures recognize the importance of alternative ways by which a student's individual needs might be met. Although graduation requirements should not be minimized, the waiving of classes is assumed to be a needed option when classes are a repetition of students' knowledge, when course learnings and/or outcomes have been completed by students in ways other than in class, and/or when a particular course is unable to give certain students the kind of knowledge their own particular abilities indicate should be made available to them.

## Reference:

Cognard, A. M. (1996). *The case for weighting grades and waiving classes for gifted and talented high school students* (RM96226). Storrs, CT: The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, University of Connecticut.

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### *Conclusions*

1. The majority of high schools in the study reported that they use some form of weighted grades.
2. There is no consistency among schools as to which classes or grades are weighted, how much each grade is weighted, and/or how labeling on transcripts occurs.
3. Simple, unweighted Grade Point Average systems may place students at a disadvantage when they apply for college admissions and scholarships.
4. Weighted grades appear to benefit students in most cases. Weighted grading systems foster equity and encourage students to take the more challenging classes.
5. There is no consistency among schools on how classes are waived, which classes may be waived, or how waived classes figure into a student's Grade Point Average.
6. Generally, no class is waived unless students show mastery of material.
7. When students are allowed to waive lower level classes, they usually receive no credit for the course, and often they must take more advanced classes in the same academic discipline.