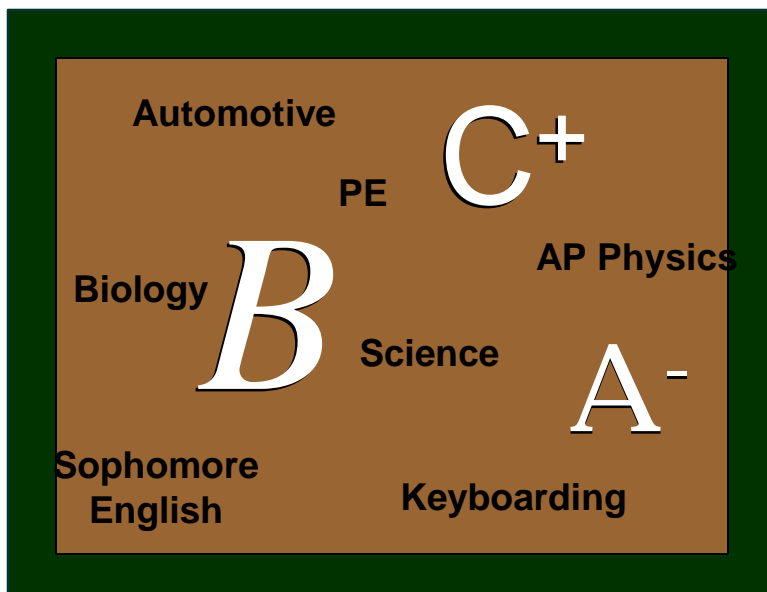


Occasional Paper no. 35

Weighted Grades:



A Conundrum for Secondary Schools

by Gail C. Downs, M.S.
Center for Research and Evaluation

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A MEMBER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MAINE SYSTEM

Weighted Grades: A Conundrum for Secondary Schools

Introduction

Maine high schools, as well as secondary schools throughout the nation, have been grappling with the issue of how best to assign grades. Developing an appropriate grading system has become paramount in Maine since the University of Maine instituted a program that makes a full tuition scholarship available to the two highest ranked students in their senior classes. The scholarship is awarded to students who enroll at the Orono Campus following graduation from high school. If the recipient maintains a 3.0 grade point average, the award continues for four years, providing a substantial financial benefit.

These high stakes have Maine college-bound students searching for strategies that will give them the highest rank in class possible. School administrators are being pressured to assign "weighted" values to more rigorous classes so that students enrolled in these classes would earn more quality points toward their grade point averages than students enrolled in average classes. School administrators, parents, teachers, and students are struggling to develop fair and equitable grading systems for their districts. However, what is fair and equitable?

Overview

About half the school systems in the country are currently assigning weighted grades and the number is increasing (Manzo, 1998). When computing a student's grade point average (GPA), different school systems may assign from four to eight points for an earned "A" in a comparable Advanced Placement (AP) English class. Furthermore, schools that do weight other types of courses (besides AP courses) assign inconsistent labels such as honors, advanced, college prep, accelerated, Level IV, etc. (Cognard, 1996). These discrepancies demonstrate the need for adopting a national standard for schools that elect to weight grades.

The problem is not only how to convey to colleges the meaning of a particular grade, but how best to award grades that encourage learning and equity (Lockhart, 1990). Some educators argue that

weighted grades are necessary in order to entice bright students into pursuing honors courses, while others are concerned about elitism if a weighted grade system is adopted (Mitchell, 1994). Even schools that weight grades often do not distribute school awards and distinctions based on weighted grades. This paper discusses the perceived advantages and disadvantages of weighting grades, describes how some school districts have developed weighted grading systems, provides information regarding the impact of weighted grades on college admissions, and examines possible legal ramifications.

Advantages and Disadvantages

School systems that responded to questionnaires sent out by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented listed both positive and negative aspects regarding weighted grades. The advantages cited include the following: more students taking rigorous classes, top students who graduate at the highest rank in class (RIC) are taking the most demanding classes in school, better student self-esteem, higher acceptance rates into colleges and universities, and the opportunity for students to improve their GPA and to win college scholarships. The disadvantages centered on the tracking of students, greater stress among students, students at the lower end of the academic spectrum being left out, and greater parental pressure to take weighted classes (Cognard, 1996).

Schools in twelve Maryland counties that use some form of grade weighting listed what they felt were the advantages and disadvantages. Their comments were compiled in a report by Lockhart (1990) and are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Advantages	Disadvantages
Ensures top ranking in class for advanced students.	Lowers class ranking for other than advanced students.
Encourages top students to take rigorous classes.	Limits course selections of college-bound students.
Increases grade point average.	May encourage students to attempt course work beyond their ability level.
Helps advanced students be more competitive during the college admission process.	Weakens the integrity of the grade.
Increases advanced students' chances for success in obtaining scholarships.	Suggests to students who are not in courses carrying weighted grades that their work is less important.
Allows teachers to give a greater range of grades.	Instruction becomes less differentiated in advanced as well as in grade level classes.
Highlights academic achievement.	Could lower student motivation to attain good grades in courses where grades are weighted.

In order to illustrate how weighted grades can make a significant difference in a student's RIC (rank in class), one school district recalculated the non-weighted grades to weighted grades for the top 25 students in three schools. At one school, the student ranked number 11 in a non-weighted system became number 1 in a weighted system. This student had taken ten AP courses resulting in a 3.850 GPA on a 4.0 system. His weighted GPA was 4.224 on a 4.0 system. Similar differences occurred at the other two schools where one student changed RIC position from 18 to 8, and at the third school the student ranked number 16 moved up to 7. These significant changes in RIC could influence admissions and scholarship decisions (Lockhart, 1990).

Admissions directors at most colleges cite GPA and RIC as important indicators of success. Directors at two highly selective universities report that the weighting of grades can make a difference in admission (Lockhart, 1993). In addition, scholarships may be awarded on the basis of weighted GPA and RIC.

Weighting strategies and systems: One school's two-year efforts to develop a weighted-grade system

Ashenfelter (1990) described one Illinois school's two-year efforts to develop a fair and equitable weighted-grade system. Before the project got underway, grades in most courses counted equally when

computing a student's GPA. Although satisfactory completion of health and physical education was required for graduation, grades in these courses were not included in the GPA and RIC. However, with this system gifted students had little incentive to enroll in AP or honors classes; they enrolled in less rigorous classes in order to earn a higher GPA. The system failed with respect to *encouraging learning*.

In the process of developing a weighted grade system, the school added one point to AP classes so that an A now was worth six points and a B in an AP class had the same point value (five) as an A in a regular class. Even with this new system a student's GPA could suffer if the student enrolled in extra courses. Compare the GPA of one "all-A" student who enrolled in four five-point courses and one six-point course (GPA = 5.20) with another "all-A" student who enrolled in five five-point courses and one six-point course (GPA = 5.17). The student who enrolled in an extra course was penalized with a lower GPA, a factor that discouraged student learning. To compensate, the system was amended to add one-half honor point for each course taken beyond the four-course minimum in any semester. Using this new method to re-compute the GPA for the two students above, we find that the GPA for the student taking five courses is increased to 5.40, while the GPA for the student taking six courses is increased to 5.50.

Board members then became concerned that departments with few or no AP classes would experience declining enrollments if students selected courses based on the possibility of earning a six-point A. A recommendation was made to award 5.5 points for an A earned in honors classes and to encourage departments to petition to designate additional courses as honors courses. Furthermore, the board recommended that an A in a low-level class be devalued from the standard 5-point A to a 4.5-point A.

At the end of two years, a new system was adopted with the following standards: Students were required to take six classes every semester. Physical education did not bear credit but health did. An extra half-point could be earned by taking a seventh class. It was decided that grades would be weighted in the following manner: 4.5-point A in basic and special education classes, 5-point A in regular classes, 5.5-point A in honors classes, and 6-point A in AP classes. Both a weighted and non-weighted GPA would be computed on transcripts submitted for college admission.

Other strategies and systems

A 1983 National Association of Secondary School Principals study reported that 73% of schools used "all" courses in computing GPA; the most frequent course exception being physical education. The study recommended that grades should be weighted if the procedure provides a more truthful representation of students' academic accomplishments and a better prediction of subsequent academic performance in college. A caution was attached to the recommendation that weighted grades and the resulting RIC may not be an appropriate basis for school awards and distinctions.

A "Windows" system described by Siegel and Anderson (1991) allowed students to "window out" selected courses from their weighted GPA calculation. Under this system an A could earn from 4 to 8 points depending on the difficulty of the course, and the student could limit the courses figured into his/her GPA calculation. Based on two semesters per year for four years, a student's GPA calculation would be limited to the best 22 credits in the fifth semester, best 25 in the sixth semester, best 29 in the seventh semester, and best 32 in the eighth semester. The final best 32 courses must include eight English credits, six social studies credits, four science credits, and four mathematics credits; the student could then select any other ten course credits for inclusion into the GPA calculation. The purpose of this system was to encourage students to enroll in lower weighted courses in which they had an interest without adversely affecting their final GPA.

The results of transcript analyses showed:

- ◆ a larger shift in RIC with windows than without for 85% of the students,
- ◆ a student with consistently high grades could be passed in class rank by a student with several Cs and Ds,
- ◆ students windowed out more academic than nonacademic courses,
- ◆ 37% of the courses windowed out were algebra I, geometry, Spanish I and biology,
- ◆ colleges questioned the high percent of courses excluded from the GPA, and
- ◆ most students selected courses on the basis of college subject pattern requirements.

Based on these results and input from colleges, the district limited the kinds of courses that could be windowed. The weighted GPA would be calculated on all courses in English, foreign language, mathematics, science, social studies, and all AP courses regardless of department. An adequate number of

other courses would be included to meet minimums for each semester. Although both weighted and non-weighted GPAs would be included on the student's transcript, only a weighted RIC would appear.

In another system, a rural New York school encouraged high ability students to follow a more rigorous academic curriculum by making a "hard B" carry more weight than a "soft A." The faculty established a weighted grade index that gave more weight to some classes than others. An elective with no homework and no academic requirements counted for two points, while a course that required research or college-level work counted for five points. To determine RIC a student with a B in a rigorous course would get a grade multiplied by a higher factor than a student who earned a B in a "no homework/no academic requirements" course. In addition, the teachers established an honors credit program by allowing a college bound student to design a yearlong special project in his/her own major interest area. If the project were approved, the student would be required to report every two weeks to an adviser and complete objectives in a timely manner in order to earn points toward a higher class ranking (Mead, 1991).

College/University admissions selection process

High school transcripts submitted to colleges and universities with prospective student applications are often the documents that determine which students are selected and which are offered scholarships. Hence, it is important to know how institutions of higher learning view transcripts.

Information from university and college admissions offices indicate:

- (1) A student's GPA, RIC, and the strength of the high school program weigh more heavily in the selection process than do SAT scores and extracurricular activities.
- (2) Weighted grades are more important if the college is unfamiliar with the applicant's school.
- (3) Even if an applicant's transcript shows honors and AP courses but the grades are not weighted, the majority of colleges/universities will not assign extra points.
- (4) In general, the majority of highly competitive colleges/universities indicate that students with weighted grades have an advantage (Cognard, 1996; Lockhart, 1990).

Talley and Mohr (1993) reported that 74% of surveyed private college admission directors said that students with weighted grades on their transcripts have no advantage over students whose transcripts do not include weighted grades. However, a comparison of students with the same basic transcript show that the student with weighted grades was chosen over the student with non-weighted grades 76% of the time. Responses from 559 college admission directors from private and public four-year undergraduate institutions express their preferences regarding grade weighting:

- ◆ 33% prefer non-weighted grades
- ◆ 27% prefer quality points added to honors and AP courses
- ◆ 22% prefer specific point values for different levels of courses
- ◆ 15% prefer that honors and AP courses be multiplied by a specific factor
- ◆ 3% had no preference

Of the 74% that reported using students' GPAs in computing freshman profiles, 47.5% reported using weighted grades in the computation while 48.1% used non-weighted grades; 4.4% use both.

Legal implications

Both the University of California and California State University systems add one point to non-weighted honors and AP courses when calculating the GPA for applicants. The median GPA for students admitted to UCLA and UC Berkeley is over 4.0 - a score impossible for students to attain if their schools have no honors or AP courses. Students with little access to AP courses are competing for admission against students whose GPAs are increased because of weighted grades; these students are clearly at a disadvantage.

Inglewood High, a California school that enrolls approximately 2000 students, most of whom are either Latino or African American, until recently offered just three AP courses. About 10 miles away, Beverly Hills High School offered more than a dozen AP courses. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Southern California chapter filed suit in Los Angeles Superior Court alleging that the Inglewood Unified School District, the state of California, the state board of education, and the state superintendent of public instruction are denying students equal and adequate access to AP courses. An attorney for the

ACLU claims these students should not be denied the ability to compete equally for admission to California's elite universities (Hill, 2000). The charge, "denying students equal and adequate access to AP courses" can be interpreted to mean "denying students equal opportunity for college admission and for scholarships." Is the real issue AP courses or is it weighted grades?

Summary

School systems developing a weighted-grade plan should consider how best to award grades that encourage learning and equity as well as how best to increase students' opportunities for college admission and scholarships. Weighted grades encourage students to enroll in rigorous courses while often discouraging them from enrolling in courses of interest that would enrich their lives. Instruction becomes less differentiated for all students when the number of course offerings decreases due to lack of enrollment in less academically focused courses, courses unlikely to provide weighted quality points.

Although many college admissions directors state that students with weighted grades on their transcripts do not have an advantage, admission results refute this claim. College admissions offices frequently do not assign added value for honors and AP courses on transcripts that report only non-weighted grades, placing those applicants at a disadvantage for admission and scholarships. Because a student's GPA, RIC, and high school program are valued more highly than SAT scores and extracurricular activities in the admissions selection process, weighted grades ultimately have a large impact on students' academic futures.

Finally, school systems should consider the possible legal ramifications of denying students equal and adequate access to courses that enable college applicants to be competitive for admission and scholarships. Although the current legal issue is one of course availability, the courses in question are classes that most often are assigned weighted grades.

In conclusion, school systems have the option of developing a weighted grading system to achieve educational goals and objectives. A school system that adopts weighted grades is not required to consider weighted grades under all circumstances, but can employ non-weighted grades when distributing

school awards and distinctions or when deemed appropriate. There are no rules or consistent guidelines for weighting grades, yet college applicants with weighted grades on their transcripts have a clear advantage for admission and scholarships at many colleges and universities. Therefore, this issue should be given significant consideration when implementing a specific policy.

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