

## Frequently Asked Questions - DCPS Ranking System as Applied at SWW

### **In a Nutshell, What is the Unfair Grade-Bump Related Ranking Issue About?**

DCPS ranks all students in a graduating class based on each student's official DCPS GPAs. Normally, all students in a single class have had equal academic opportunities so a comparative rank is arguably a fair comparison of student achievements. However, each class consists of three different categories of students each having had different academic opportunities resulting in different maximum GPAs. Put simply, there is not a level playing field that justifies ranking these students in the same pool.

As noted above, DCPS ranks all students in a graduating class based on each student's official DCPS GPA. However, at SWW each class consists of three categories of students each having had different academic opportunities resulting in different maximum GPAs. The three categories of students at SWW that are ranked together are:

1. Four Year Students (4-Year students). These are students who started at SWW as freshman and did not enter the George Washington University Early College Program (GWECP). In junior and senior year, they take 7 credits per year with, for most students, a maximum of 4 AP classes each year (weighted with a 1.0 grade bump). They are required to take unweighted electives, a senior project, and internship that will decrease the GPA of students whose GPA is above 4.0. Until this year, the 4-Year students were not offered any "honors" classes.
2. Students in the George Washington Early College Program (GWECP). These students generally take all of their classes at GWU their junior and senior years.<sup>1</sup> They are not required to take unweighted electives, a senior project or internship. GWU classes that meet DCPS requirements are treated as AP classes and given a 1.0 grade bump. Other classes may be taken but, as noted in the SWW grading policy, any classes that are not weighted as AP classes, are **not** included in the student's DCPS transcript.<sup>2</sup> The effect of this is that **all** of the GWECP student's grades calculated in their official DCPS GPAs junior and senior year

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<sup>1</sup> There are approximately 12-15 students in this program in each class. According to the SWW website, "GWECP students "take **all** of their courses junior and senior year at GW." We believe, however, that a few may still take a class at SWW, for instance PE.

<sup>2</sup> As the grading bump policy on the SWW website explains "For traditional students, this means that all high school courses they've taken, both bumped and unbumped, are included in the GPA. In contrast, for GWECP students, only bumped courses\*\*—those required by DCPS for graduation that appear on the DCPS-approved list—are calculated into the GPA during their junior and senior years." <http://www.swwhs.org/academics/grade-bumps-and-gpa/> The only exception are PE/Art/Music requirements that most of the GWECP students have already satisfied in their first two years at SWW. In contrast to the GWECP students, 4-Year Students are required to take unweighted classes junior and senior year, including electives, an internship and senior project, that which will decrease the GPA of 4-Year Students whose GPAs exceed 4.0.

are weighted as AP classes. Exacerbating the disparity, SWW treats a semester GWU class as a full year SWW class, giving the student one full DCPS credit for each semester-long GWU class, which is double that given to 4-Year students per semester class. Consequently, GWECP students can take 10 or more AP weighted credits a year in contrast with the 4-Year students who are generally limited to 4 AP weighted credits a year, and have to take other unweighted classes which decrease a GPA over 4.0.

3. Students who transfer into SWW. Most of these students bring with them grades earned in "honors" classes to which DCPS applies a .5 grade bump. Some have taken as many as eight honors classes before transferring into SWW. Consequently, Transfer students' GPAs are higher than most 4-Year SWW students because they have taken "honors" classes that were not available to SWW students.<sup>3</sup> This category of students comprises a varying percentage of a graduating class; currently Transfers comprise approximately 20% of the junior class.<sup>4</sup>

**The important and undisputed fact is that each category of SWW students have had different access to and opportunities for weighted grades which result in different potential maximum GPAs and consequently it is severely unfair to rank these students in a single pool.** As an illustration, consider three students who each take all available courses and receive top marks. At the end of their junior year their GPA would be as follows:

- The 4-Year SWW student's maximum GPA is 4.24
- The GWECP student's maximum GPA is 4.46;
- A Transfer student who joined SWW in the junior year can have a maximum GPA as high as 4.40.

The discrepancy is larger by the end of senior year. An excel sheet showing these differences is attached. **The fact is that a 4-Year SWW student mathematically never can have a GPA higher than the GPA that a GWECP or Transfer student can attain. They simply do not have access to the same weighted courses.**

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<sup>3</sup> Starting this academic year, about 10 SWW classes have been designated "honors" classes. For current SWW sophomores, juniors, and seniors, this change has no effect because DCPS has refused to apply the "honors" designations retroactively (even though these classes have no substantive change to syllabus, instructor, or rigorousness). For future students, this will soften the disparate impact between 4-Year SWW students and Transfers, but it will not completely eliminate it because SWW did not designate many classes as "honors" that other schools do, such as science and language classes. Further, students transferring into SWW from outside DCPS also carry their grade bumps for whatever classes their former school designated as "honors" and that could include art and music classes. In short, DCPS and SWW bumps grades for courses never available at SWW. We note that this practice is contrary to many school district policies across the country that do not weight honors courses of students transferring in where the receiving district's student body has not had access to a similar course.

<sup>4</sup> By our count, there are 29 students in the junior class who transferred into SWW during the sophomore and junior year. The junior class has 153 students.

Here are two examples of how this GPA disparity plays out in our unitary class ranking system. Beginning senior year, a 4-Year student who took 4 AP classes in junior year and got all solid A's will have a GPA of 4.24. A GWECP student who got 4 B+s will have a GPA of 4.38, and will be ranked above the straight-A 4-Year student. A sophomore Transfer student who freshman year, got 2 B+s in the his/her 4 "honors" classes will have a GPA of 4.14, and will be ranked above that of a 4-Year student who got all A's and has a 4.0.

A related issue is that SWW reports the maximum GPA to various entities including the Common College Application. Colleges therefore will compare SWW students' GPAs with this bar which is unfair if that maximum GPA is that of a GWECP or Transfer student. DCPS should instruct SWW to report separate maximum GPAs for each category of students.

### **How do Ranking these Groups of Students Together Affect Class Ranks?**

We have requested official information on the disparate impact of this ranking system but the administration has not provided it. Here is what we know or have pretty good information to suspect - and we are confident that if and when official information is provided it will support the following facts:

- The top 3 students in the senior class are all GWECP students.<sup>5</sup>
- The majority of students in the top 10% of the junior and senior classes are either Transfer or GWECP students.<sup>6</sup>
- A 4-year SWW junior who took the school's standard curriculum freshman and sophomore years and got all A's (no A- grades) is tied for 14<sup>th</sup> in his/her class. Yep, barely in the top 10%.<sup>7</sup> And this student could not have done any better because this student did not have access to the same courses as a GWECP or Transfer student.
- There are 38 Transfer and GWECP students in the junior class. Given their access to weighted grades 4-Year students do not have, it is reasonable to assume that at least half of these, 19 students, are in the top 25% of the class (that is approximately the top 38 students).<sup>8</sup> This means that if a student is ranked above number 38, and the GWECP/Transfer students were excluded

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<sup>5</sup> Mr. Trogisch stated this in the February 1, 2017 LSAT meeting.

<sup>6</sup> This is based on information provided by students who have shared their ranks which indicates that only three 4-Year SWW students are ranked in the top 10 of the junior class.

<sup>7</sup> There are 153 students in the current SWW junior class.

<sup>8</sup> We believe that actually more than half of the top 25% of this class are GWECP or Transfer students.

from rank, that student's rank would drop by 19 places and that student would solidly be in the top 25% of the class (an important scholarship threshold) even taking into account a smaller class size by elimination of Transfer and GWECF students).

### **What is the Harm or Why Should We care?**

This inequitable system is harmful in several respects. First, it has a real impact on our students' abilities to get into the colleges and summer programs of their choice and on their ability to secure scholarship money so that they can attend college. There is no way to know for sure whether or not a student has been denied a college acceptance because of an unfairly computed rank.<sup>9</sup> And, most colleges and scholarship programs do not *require* that rank be provided. However, *if the rank is provided*, then colleges and programs will consider it in making admission decisions and will assume that all students in the ranked pool are equally situated in terms of maximum GPA. While the importance of class rank in college admissions has decreased in the last decade, it is still important, more so than extra-curricular activities, work experience, and even counselor recommendations, particularly for public universities.<sup>10</sup> Over 60% of colleges consider class rank of "considerable" or "moderate" importance (2006).<sup>11</sup> When rank is provided, colleges use it as another indicator of their own selectivity and competitiveness (e.g., US News & World Report College Rankings). This means that where rank is provided, they are less likely to accept students ranked above the thresholds they want to be able to report.

It is true that almost all students that attend SWW get into college and many into one of their top choices. However, this view is shortsighted. Not all students are admitted to their top school choices, and although rank may not be as important as it once was, by providing it, DCPS is giving colleges yet another quantitative data point that could make or break the acceptance chance of that student. **If DCPS is going to provide that data point, it needs to be fairly computed.**

More importantly than the effect of rank on college or summer program acceptance, is the fact that many scholarships require that *if a school ranks students*, the student be in a certain percentage of their class (i.e. top 10, 25 or 30%). A list of some of these scholarships is attached as an addendum. Even DCPS awards scholarship money based on rank (*i.e.*, to valedictorians and salutatorians). So the fact that certain SWW students have an advantage in the ranking system because of grade

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<sup>9</sup> One anecdote provided by a junior, who was rejected from a summer program he applied for because he was not in the top 10% of his class. He was a few students away. There were more than 5 Transfer students with grade bumps ranked above him having taken "honors" classes did not offer. Had he been fairly ranked, he would met the top 10% requirement. Notably, all the programs that require high ranks also say that that requirement is waived if the school does not provide a rank. If DCPS did not rank him at all, he might have gotten accepted.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nacacnet.org/research/publicationsresources/marketplace/documents/classrank.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.nacacnet.org/research/publicationsresources/marketplace/documents/classrank.pdf>

bumps results in students literally and unfairly being “bumped out” of important scholarship rank thresholds.

In addition, the inequity means that to be ranked at the very top of their class, or even be assured a spot in the top 10%, a student must forgo the typical high school and college experience and enter the GWECP. For those that don't, the system pressures them to take more AP classes to try to close the gap in their GPAs vis a vis those of the Transfer and GWECP students. Further, any student from outside SWW that has had opportunity to take honors courses not offered at SWW can decide to transfer to SWW in that critical junior year (when class spots open up due to the movement to the GWECP) and know that their honors courses will give them an advantage over the main student body. This is not a system that equitably compares students that have had equal access and opportunity and as such the ranking system is not measuring true comparative academic achievement. Any student and parent who understands this interplay will think strongly about the choice of attending SWW.

Finally, this is an important issue because we tell our children that if they work hard and do the best they can, they will usually get what they deserve. This inequality perpetuated by the school system completely undermines that tenet and makes students feel that DCPS does not value fairness or their achievements in a rigorous academic setting. This issue, and particularly the disregard of a petition signed by 300 students and a unanimous LSAT proposal, has caused much fervor in the community has been the subject of discussion among students. The kids feel that fundamental fairness issues are being ignored. The school does not need this added instability and emotional furor. Our students need to know that they can count on their school system to treat them fairly. Particularly in light of what is going on now in our country, it is important to correct what unfairness we can, even small-scale issues, to help this generation of kids retain hope.

### **Is this a New Issue?**

Yes and No. The impact of including the GWECP students in the ranking system is new because the 2015-2016 academic year, GWECP students did not get grade bumps for their GWU classes. And, in the 2015-2016 year only the seniors got the weighted grades. This year's senior class is the first class to be fully impacted by the effect of these grade weights. We also believe that the number of Transfer students per class has increased in recent years.

However, the issue of including them in the ranking system is not new. Rather, it was raised several times by parents on the working group that ultimately recommended grade bumps for GWU classes. Emails among this working group reveal several occasions where parents noted the unfairness in rank this policy would cause. One parent specifically noted: “These really are apples and oranges and should not be compared directly . . . we can recognize the shiniest apple and the juiciest orange.” So, the SWW administration knew this was going to be an issue.

## **What Has DCPS or the SWW Administration Done or Said on this Issue and What are the Responses?**

This issue initially arose in September with respect to the Transfer student grade bumps. DCPS responded to by permitting SWW to designate some classes as “honors.” While this action mitigates some of the disparity, it does nothing to address the unfairness to current sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

A meeting was held on January 25, 2017, at SWW with Dr. Jane Spence, Deputy Chief of Schools, and Dr. Drewana Bey, Instructional Superintendent of Secondary Schools for Cluster 8. The meeting focused on Transfer students being given grade bumps for “honors” courses not available at SWW. A large parent group and 300 students had signed a letter asking DCPS to retroactively give SWW classes an “honors” designation and associated grade bumps to ease the GPA disparity between the 4-Year students and the Transfer students. Dr. Spence adamantly refused to do so but invited the community to propose other solutions to address the undisputed unfairness of this system.

The LSAT met on February 1, 2017 to discuss options to address this issue. Folded into this discussion was the related issue of the GWECP students being included in the same ranking system with the 4-Year SWW students. There was standing room only at this meeting which was almost entirely dedicated to this issue. The LSAT unanimously approved two measures (see attached meeting minutes). First, the LSAT approved creating a subcommittee to explore the ranking and grade bump issues and make recommendations. Second, the LSAT approved a temporary measure to be implemented immediately to address (but not cure) the unfair disparity caused by ranking students with different maximum GPAs together while a more permanent solution was being explored. This temporary fix was that SWW would, upon request, attach an addendum to a student’s DCPS transcript that would provide an alternative class rank for that student only among the pool of similarly situated students and explain why the alternative rank was being provided (i.e. that the official ranked pool consisted of students with different maximum GPAs). This alternative rank would be something colleges, scholarship committees, and summer programs could choose to consider or disregard. Notably, because SWW has a ranking system, this alternative rank would enable 4-Year SWW students to apply for scholarships that require a certain class rank, measured against the general student body and available courses.

The LSAT members, parents, and students at the meeting considered this temporary transcript addendum with an alternative rank a “win-win” for all students as it casts each student in their best light rank-wise, in comparison to similarly situated students. GWECP and Transfer students would still have their official ranks (based on the system that gives them an advantage) and the 4-Year students would be able to show what their rank would be in a system with a level playing field. It was not a perfect proposal and would not eliminate the unfairness in official ranks but was something to ameliorate it until a permanent solution could be implemented. At the LSAT meeting, all agreed it was important to do implement this quickly so that it could be included in

seniors' transcripts that were to be sent out in mid-February to colleges, scholarship committees, and other students' summer program applications. Principal Mr. Richard Trogisch, and two top administrators, Ms. Sylvia Isaac and Ms. Simone Anderson were all present at the LSAT meeting and endorsed this proposal.

However, the SWW administration did not take any action on this until February 28, when Mr. Trogisch informed some concerned parents that despite the unanimous LSAT vote, and endorsement by SWW officials including himself, no addendum with an alternative rank would be implemented. Specifically Mr. Trogisch stated "I cannot publish GPA's that are derived here at the school, the GPA are the responsibility of the district." He also referred to a written DCPS policy stating this. We have requested he provide us with a copy of this policy but no one at DCPS can locate it. We have done an online search of available DCPS administrative policies, and also cannot find this policy. In any event, the policy as described by Mr. Trogisch does not bar the proposed addendum which would not re-calculate or alter any official DCPS GPAs, but would merely provide an alternative rank based on the official DCPS-calculated GPAs of similarly situated students.

Mr. Trogisch did propose an addendum that described the categories of students being ranked together, but failed to provide an alternative rank. It also did not reflect the ranking system's disparate impact, for instance, by disclosing the number of GWCEP or Transfer students in the top 10% or 25% of each class. Nor did it explain that each category of students have a different maximum GPA potential. Without these critical facts, the proposed addendum completely lacks the context to be useful.

Mr. Trogisch also explained that rectifying the inequity is not necessary because "Colleges know our students' reputation before seeing our students' transcripts and ranking and the top performers **tend to** get into their first choice and in many cases with financial help. The junior class counselors has [sic] set records in the amount of scholarships and awards her students have received" (emphasis added). This view simply does not address the fairness issues. Moreover, the fact that "top performers" "tend" to get into their first choice colleges, "in many cases" with financial help, does not really give comfort to those students who are not "top performers" (and as indicated above most of the "top performers" according to the ranking system are not 4-Year students.) It is also contrary to DCPS's decision to provide class rank information which implies that it believes rank *is* important.

On March 7, 2017, a group of parents and students wrote directly to the Chancellor and other DCPS and City officials requesting that they instruct SWW to implement the LSAT temporary fix and that they quickly study the issue and propose solution(s) to the unfairly applied ranking system at SWW.

### **What are the Possible Permanent Solutions to this Issue?**

We have thought of the following solutions to this issue (and welcome any other proposals).

## 1. Eliminate Class Rank Altogether.

The easiest solution is for DCPS to eliminate class rank. In fact, a search of the DCPS website found no policy or rule authorizing or requiring that DCPS rank its students. There are a lot of reasons to eliminate class rank unrelated to the fact class rank would be difficult to be fairly implemented at SWW.<sup>12</sup> Most private schools do not rank, and many public schools have also abandoned class rank. The College Board reports that more than half of high schools no longer report class rank.<sup>13</sup> Neither Montgomery County nor Fairfax County or Thomas Jefferson High School rank students. Area private schools such as NCS, Sidwell, GDS, Burke, and Field do not rank students (some do not even calculate GPAs).

Ranking is a particularly acute problem for magnet schools, where the majority of students are high achieving (difficult to draw a line on the top 10-15% when the GPA difference might be in the hundredth of a percent of a grade.) According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling in Alexandria, Virginia, schools that opt not to rank tend to have a large population of students bound for four-year colleges.<sup>14</sup> Private schools and those with fewer than 500 students are also less likely to rank. For example, at the University of Pennsylvania, only 33 to 36 percent of students applying come with a rank on their transcripts.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, ranking may actually hurt DCPS students' chances in college admissions.<sup>16</sup> One article notes that ranking actually undercuts students who are from the best schools, gives an advantage to students with higher rankings from less-demanding schools, and that schools that dropped ranking have seen an increase in admissions at higher ranking colleges.<sup>17</sup> The more highly selective colleges accept larger numbers of students from non-reporting schools (not surprising if colleges use 5 or 10% class rank as a filter to cut down on the number of applications they need to consider in detail.) Colleges also use class rank as an indicator of their own selectivity and competitiveness (e.g., US News & World Report College Rankings) and therefore are more unlikely to accept students who are not in the top part of the class.

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<sup>12</sup> As the Washington Post has noted, the main argument against abolishing class rank is a handful of parents/students lose bragging rights. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/12/13/the-case-for-abolishing-class-rank/?utm\\_term=.3fdc6db12df8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/12/13/the-case-for-abolishing-class-rank/?utm_term=.3fdc6db12df8)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.Collegeboard/guidance/applications/rank>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/01/education/college-prep-trouble-in-the-ranks.html>

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.philly.com/philly/education/20161030\\_More\\_top\\_high\\_schools\\_drop\\_out\\_of\\_class\\_rank\\_system.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/education/20161030_More_top_high_schools_drop_out_of_class_rank_system.html)

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.philly.com/philly/education/20161030\\_More\\_top\\_high\\_schools\\_drop\\_out\\_of\\_class\\_rank\\_system.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/education/20161030_More_top_high_schools_drop_out_of_class_rank_system.html)

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/01/education/college-prep-trouble-in-the-ranks.html>

Eliminating ranking would not hurt DCPS students because so many schools do not rank. College and scholarship applications generally state that rank is a decision point only if a school provides it; if a school does not rank students, then the class rank requirement is waived. So by ranking students, DCPS is requiring our students to clear an additional hurdle that other school system students bypass. It also adds another quantitative factor into the judging criteria for our students diluting their qualitative assessment.

Finally, ranking facilitates quantitative rather than qualitative assessments of students. Rank in general, and at SWW in particular where 4-Year students are at a disadvantage, encourages students to load up on AP classes to try to correct the numerical imbalance. Ranking students also fosters a toxic competitive atmosphere where students compete rather than collaborate. Grades already stress out our students and compounding them with rank just exacerbates the stress and prevents students from enjoying the learning experience. If DCPS is set on continuing to rank its students, it needs to do so fairly, that is rank students *vis a vis* only those students with equal opportunities.

It is important to note that eliminating class ranks does not completely resolve the fairness issues because SWW still reports the highest student GPA on the common college application (and perhaps to other places) and, because of the three categories of students have different GPA potential, it will need to report the highest GPA *in each category* so that students are not unfairly compared with students in other categories. This issue also applies to both proposed solutions listed below.

## 2. SWW Separately Rank Different Categories of Students.

Another possible solution - if DCPS insists on retaining class ranks - is for SWW to have different ranking pools for each category of students: *i.e.*, the main student body – 4 Year students, Transfer students, and GWECF students. This would be more difficult to implement but would eliminate the current unfairness. If ranking is continued, this option makes sense particularly for the GWECF program students since this is a separate program in which its students generally do not take any SWW classes in their junior and senior year.

## 3. SWW or DCPS Could Rank Students Based on Unweighted Grades.

DCPS could rank students or just SWW students based only on their unweighted grades. This would mean that the maximum GPA for all students, for ranking purposes would be 4.0. Any student with over a 4.0 would be tied for number 1 in his or her class. While this would eliminate the unfairness highlighted in the current system, it is unfair in a different way because it would cast AP classes as equal to non-AP classes when the rigor is unquestionably not equal. It might also discourage students from taking AP classes altogether since their GPA and rank would be better if they take easier classes and get all A's than if they take AP classes and get anything less than an A.