

March 7, 2017

Dear DCPS, Board of Education, and City Officials,

We are parents and students from School Without Walls (“SWW”) who believe that the DCPS class ranking system as applied at SWW is severely unfair and must be revised immediately.

As you know, 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 SWW class consists of three different categories of students, each having had different academic opportunities resulting in different maximum GPAs. Put simply, there is no level playing field that justifies ranking these students in the same pool.

As detailed below, on February 1, 2017, the SWW LSAT unanimously voted to implement a temporary fix whereby transcripts would contain an addendum with an alternative rank for each student in a pool of only similarly situated students. Despite endorsing this proposal at the LSAT meeting, the SWW administration now refuses to implement it, relying on a DCPS policy it says bars them from altering official DCPS GPA’s. **For the reasons explained herein, we request that DCPS do two things:** (1) immediately authorize and instruct SWW to provide the transcript addendum with an alternative rank that the LSAT unanimously voted for (as described further below) so that the students’ transcripts going out the door daily, upon request, can reflect a ***fairly computed*** class rank among similarly situated students; and (2) quickly propose a solution or solution(s) to the broader issue of how to permanently ensure that if SWW students are ranked, they will be ranked fairly in pools of similarly situated students.

We thank you in advance for your time and prompt attention to this situation.

DCPS Ranking System as Applied at SWW

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 continue there through graduation. 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.¹ 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.² The effect of this is that **all** of the GWECP student's grades calculated in their official DCPS GPAs junior and senior year 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 (Transfer students). 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.³ This category of students comprises a varying

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ 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.

percentage of a graduating class; currently Transfers comprise approximately 19% of the junior class.⁴

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 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 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.**

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.

While this problem is new because the GWECP students were only given grade bumps beginning in 2015, the impact on ranking was anticipated and disregarded. Emails among the DCPS SWW grade bump 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." Yet, this problem was disregarded.

Effect of The Unfair Ranking System

This inequitable ranking system has real and measurable adverse impacts on students and their ranks (see the attached FAQ). Not surprisingly, most of the students

⁴ By our count, there are 29 students in the junior class who transferred into SWW during the sophomore and junior year. This amounts to almost 19% of the 153 students in the junior class.

in the top 10% and 25% of each class are Transfer or GWECP students.⁵ Of utmost importance 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%).⁶ **So the fact that certain students have an advantage in the ranking system because of grade bumps for courses that most of the student body does not have access to, results in students literally and unfairly being “bumped out” of important scholarship rank thresholds.**

Moreover, the unfair system pressures 4-Year students who want to be at the top of the class or assured a scholarship to forego their high school experience and enter the GWECP or take more AP classes than they might normally take in an effort to close the gap between their maximum GPA and the maximum GPAs of the Transfer and GWECP students. **The blatant unfairness is known amongst the students and has created a divisive environment on top of the competitive environment that accompanies even a fairly applied ranking system.**

DCPS and SWW Administration Response

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 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 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 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

⁵ We have requested official information on the disparate impact of this ranking system but the administration has not provided it.

⁶ **Notably, most of these scholarships provide that if a school does not rank students, then the class rank requirement is waived. By ranking students at all, DCPS is requiring our students to clear an additional hurdle that other school system students can just walk around. It adds another quantitative factor into the judging criteria for our students which arguably dilutes their qualitative assessment.**

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 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 DCPS 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 other 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.⁷ Mr. Trogisch explained that an alternative rank would violate a DCPS policy stating that individual schools cannot alter GPAs. Despite requests, no copy of this policy has been provided, and despite an online search of available DCPS administrative policies, no such policy has been found. In any event, the policy as Mr. Trogisch described does not bar the proposed addendum which would not re-calculate or alter any official DCPS GPA, but would merely provide an alternative rank based on the official DCPS-calculated GPAs of similarly situated students.

Request for Action

By this letter, we request that DCPS do two things:

1. Immediately authorize and instruct SWW to provide the transcript addendum with an alternative rank that the LSAT unanimously voted for so that the students’

⁷ Mr. Trogisch did propose an addendum but it was wholly insufficient for the reasons explained on the attached FAQ.

transcripts going out the door daily, upon request, can reflect a class rank among similarly situated students;⁸ and

2. Propose a solution or solution(s) to the broader issue of how to permanently ensure that if SWW students are ranked, they will be ranked fairly in pools of similarly situated students.⁹ See the attached FAQ for more details on these issues, and discussion of possible permanent solutions, including eliminating ranking of all DCPS students or SWW students in particular.¹⁰

In conclusion, **it is fundamentally unfair for DCPS to rank together three categories of students with different academic opportunities that result in different maximum GPAs. The issue is that simple.** An easy, although not perfect or permanent, common sense fix was proposed and unanimously endorsed by the LSAT and administrators that would ease the unfairness, and give everyone reasonable breathing room to discuss and agree on a permanent solution.

We know that this is a limited issue that may affect only one school¹¹ and that there are very pressing budgetary and other issues requiring your attention. However, the SWW students and parents have been trying to resolve these issues since September (when the transfer grade bump issue surfaced) and often SWW officials' response to our concerns is that that they are dealing with more important issues that require their attention. **This is a simple issue of fundamental fairness and, not to diminish the other issues you deal with, it should not continually be pushed to the bottom of the pile.**

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

⁸ A related issue that requires immediate attention 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.

⁹ While the LSAT voted to form a subcommittee on this issue, the undersigned parents and students no longer have faith that such a process would be able to quickly and effectively address the issues. It appears any measure ultimately approved by the LSAT would likely be disregarded by SWW administrators because they believe these issues lie within DCPS jurisdiction. In particular, the best solution may very well be to eliminate class ranks altogether, which is clearly something that only DCPS can do. Please see attached FAQ for more information on this approach.

¹⁰ A search of the DCPS website found no policy or rule authorizing or requiring that DCPS rank its students. Can you please provide us with a copy of the policy that authorizes and requires DCPS to rank its students? In addition, there is ample evidence that ranking students hurts their chances for college admissions and scholarships. See the attached FAQ and sources cited therein including http://www.philly.com/philly/education/20161030_More_top_high_schools_drop_out_of_class-rank_system.html

¹¹ In addition to being the only DCPS high school to offer the GWECP, the impact of Transfer students at SWW is arguably greater than at other DCPS schools due to its relatively small class size of approximately 150 students.

does not value fairness or their achievements in a rigorous academic setting.

This issue, and particularly the administration's disregard of a petition signed by 300 students and a unanimous LSAT proposal, has caused much fervor in the community. Students are all talking about it and 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.

Please advise us within the next week as to DCPS's response to this request by email to DoTheRightThingDCPS@gmail.com If it would be helpful, we would be happy to meet and discuss these issues in person with you, provided that a meeting can be swiftly scheduled. **Transcripts with unfairly calculated class ranks go out the door daily and time is of the essence.**

Attachments:

FAQ on Unfair SWW Ranking System
LSAT Minutes
Addendum of Scholarships with Rank Requirements
Excel of Maximum GPAs

Sincerely, the Undersigned SWW Students and Parents

Heidi Bachman	Julian Berengaut	Max Berengaut '19
Susan Creane	Henry Docter	Hannah Docter-Loeb '18
David Diggs	Marcio Duffles	Jake Duffles '19
Tracey Weisler Duffles	David Eischenbaum	Isaac Eichenbaum '17
Debra Eichenbaum	Lois Frankel	Nico Frank '19
David Frederickson	Zoe Frederickson '18	Sophia Galligan-Diggs '18
William Horne	Charlie Horne '19	Renee Hovanec '18
Valerie Jablow	David A. Jones	Montana Lee '18
Lori Murphy Lee	Garrett Lee	Elizabeth Loeb
Keith Mestrich	Aaron Mahr '18	Charlotte Mestrich '18
Rebecca McCoyer	Steve O'Sullivan	Samantha O'Sullivan '18
Lorie Peacock	Walter Peacock	Eliska Peacock '20
Ethan Rosenthal '18	Sarah Staudenraus	Randolph Staudenraus
Regan Staudenraus '18	Wendy Togneri	Alex Togneri-Jones '19
Nerissa Tunnessen '18	Walt Tunnessen	Ruthann Uithol
Melody R. Webb	Tilney Wickersham	Alok Yadav
Eliza Zizka, '18	Gary Zizka	Mary Kay Zuravleff
Aviva Zyskind		