

Valedictorian, you're retired
Why more schools are dumping class rank
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Quick: Do you remember your high school valedictorian?

Chances are, you actually do. You also may recall the long, rambling speech at graduation (As our class steps forth to make this a better world ...).

But in a growing number of suburban Chicago districts and private schools, valedictorians no longer exist. Don't buy salutatorian futures either. More schools here and nationwide are moving toward incognito student rankings or eliminating them altogether.

Evanston Township High School District 202 will decide this fall whether to join several neighboring districts that dumped class rank. St. Charles Community Unit District 303 is considering the change, too.

It's a good idea, and here's why: Schools with deep pools of high-performing students end up cheating kids out of a well-rounded education. How so?

The ranking system inherently promotes a culture of unnecessary competition in an environment that's already duly competitive and overly focused on test scores and grades. Not unlike Chinese badminton players, students focused on class rank sometimes throw their own game to preserve a high Grade Point Average. Instead of taking more challenging classes, they enroll in easy electives or mediocre levels of required courses to ensure themselves good GPAs. Or they avoid a non-weighted course, even if it interests them, because it won't boost their rank. They end up with a schedule based on an intricate calculus of their GPA — and they don't take calculus.

Yes, we're aware that some high schools apply ever more intricate grade-weighting formulas to discourage students from gaming their GPAs. The larger picture, though, has too much effort focused on the scoring and not enough focused on the learning. And the each student's capacity for learning, more than the capacity for scoring, is the attribute that admissions staffers at even semi-selective colleges want to ascertain.

New Trier Township High School stopped ranking students in 2008. The rankings no longer reflected genuine student achievement. Well-rounded seniors with virtually flawless academic records were falling 40th or 50th out of 1,000 students, negatively (and unfairly) affecting their prospects for acceptance during the college admissions process. The school found that eliminating class rank made that application process fairer by forcing university admissions officers to dig deeper into students' records.

And the best part? New Trier students don't really know where they rank. They know their own GPAs, but the school doesn't publish a formal list. Instead of having a valedictorian speak during graduation, any student can apply to be the keynote speaker.

Other schools take a hybrid approach. Homewood-Flossmoor High School District 233 no longer recognizes a valedictorian, but the school honors its top 10 students — although not in order of class rank — at graduation. Keeping some semblance of a "tops" group motivates students, guidance counselors at the school said.

Schools that have eliminated class rank and retired the valedictorian have enabled students to focus more on their educations instead of primarily sweating out their GPAs. It may not be the answer that works for every high school, but it's an option worth exploring and debating.

The noisiest negative feedback schools say they receive comes from parents. Apparently, that dream of seeing Muffy or Biff on stage as the class valedictorian, wearing the special sash and giving the commencement speech is harder to let go for mom and dad than it is for Muffy or Biff.

For the kids, it's a better deal.