

Research Notes

Office of Research and Development

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High School Grading Policies

INTRODUCTION

High school grades are the most frequently used predictors in college and university admission decisions. As such, educators and policymakers are extremely interested in the consistency of grading standards and policies across secondary schools.

There has always been some concern over the comparability of grades (Adelman, 1983; Camara, 1994), and with increased competition among a growing proportion of youth planning to enter four-year colleges, these concerns have only increased. For example, much has been written about the overall increases in average high school grades (“grade inflation”) and the general stability of standardized test scores over the past decade or more (Hardy, 1997). Since 1987, the population of students taking the SAT® with self-reported high school grade-point averages (GPAs) of A+ through A- has grown from 28 to 37 percent in 1997, a record high, while their SAT scores have fallen an average of 13 points on verbal and 1 point on math. The average self-reported high school GPA for all students completing the SAT has increased from 3.07 to 3.22 on a four point scale (A = 4) over this period of time (Camara, 1997). Similar results reported by ACT were cited as empirical evidence that grade inflation is occurring, with the largest proportional increases at the upper end of the grade distribution (Ziomek and Svec, 1995).

Substantial variation has been found in the grading standards of not only high school courses, but also college courses across subject areas. Average grades have consistently been in the following order of highest to lowest grades:

Arts and Music > Social Studies and History > English > Foreign Languages > Natural Sciences > Mathematics

For example, the average self-reported GPA for college bound seniors in 1996 was 3.22, with

average grades of: 3.70 in arts and music; 3.28 in social studies and history; 3.20 in English; 3.16 in foreign languages; 3.14 in natural sciences, and 3.02 in mathematics (Camara, 1997). Each year, overall high school grades and grades in each subject area have both increased.

Much of the variation among grades and across subjects, classrooms, and teachers concerns the components used to grade student work. Research has found that the most able students are often graded solely on achievement and less able students are graded on both achievement and effort (Stiggins, Frisbie, and Griswold, 1989). In grades 10-12, approximately one-third of school districts report including student effort in grade determinations, attendance, and student growth: to a lesser extent behavior and attitude are also factors considered by a substantial proportion of secondary teachers (Brookhart, 1994; Feldman, Kropf, and Alibrandi, 1996; Robinson and Craver, 1989).

Nationwide surveys of school-grading policies conducted by the Educational Research Service have noted that 90 and 80 percent of school districts used letter or numeric grades in 1977 and 1988, respectively. In 1988, 28 percent of schools used percentages in grading and about one-third of the schools used pass/fail or credit/no credit options for some course grades (Robinson and Craver, 1989).

Findings from a College Board Survey of Secondary Schools

To obtain information on current high school grading policies, additional questions were included on the College Board’s High School Profile in 1997. This biannual survey was sent to all secondary schools (grades 10, 11, and/or 12) that have students who take the SAT I[®]—a total of 29,462 schools in 1997. Periodically, additional



questions on topics of interest are included in this biannual survey.

A total of 15,854 schools completed Part II of the survey (a response rate of 53.8 percent), which included the additional questions on grading policies.² Part II of the survey is in the appendix. A 20 percent random sample of responses was selected and keyed into a data base for analysis. The surveys, which are sent to the director of guidance at each school, requested information on the school's grading systems for regular, honors, and Advanced Placement (AP[®]) Program[®] courses; lowest grade for which credit is given; policies regarding grades of A+; calculation of GPA; percent of students at each grade level; calculation of class rank; teacher flexibility in assigning grades; and other related questions on grades. Responses from 3,171 secondary schools were used for all subsequent analyses.

Results of this survey provide insight into a number of grading policies across high schools. First, a large majority of schools use a traditional grading system of A-F or numeric grades (91 percent) use the same grading system for all academic courses (92.2 percent), report GPA (90.1 percent), and calculate a high school class rank (81.3 percent). However, even with the high agreement on these general grading practices a substantial number and proportion of schools (between 8 and 19 percent) do vary from the majority on one or more of these standard grading issues, which raises a number of concerns regarding the comparability of grading practices, and the comparability of grades, across schools and districts. For example, nearly 19 percent of schools do not calculate a class rank. The lack of comparable trend data across academic years precludes any insights into emerging trends concerning these practices.

Approximately 8 percent of schools report using a nontraditional grading system and only 1 percent of schools do not assign grades. There is al-

most an even split in the use of grades of A+ among responding schools and policies concerning the exclusion of some courses in computing GPA.

Teachers generally have a great deal of flexibility in assigning grades (84.6 percent), with general grading policies and stricter policies set by 6.6 and 3.5 percent of schools, respectively. While about one-fourth of the schools report considering major curriculum changes during the next one to three years, only 7 percent of the schools are considering changes to their grading systems.

DISCUSSION

These results are generally consistent with previous research conducted across a number of studies. Perhaps most striking is the large proportion (85 percent) of schools reporting that teachers have substantial flexibility to determine grading standards. However, there does appear to be a slight decline in the proportion of schools using letter and numeric grades, from results reported by Robinson and Craver (1989).

Traditional grading systems employing letter or numeric grades remain popular and only 7 percent of schools are considering major changes to their grading policies in the next three years. There is a substantial amount of variability at both ends of the grading systems, with large differences both in whether schools report grades of A+ and the lowest grade given students. In addition, about 18 percent of schools within the same district report differences in their grading systems. Over 18 percent of secondary schools no longer compute a class rank and 9 percent of schools report not computing an overall GPA. This survey, along with previous surveys and research examining grading practices, indicates that it continues to be difficult to evaluate students' grades without a context for the components used by individual teachers in grading or the school policies concerning specific aspects of the grading system.

¹ One or more students must also indicate the secondary school's Attending Institution (AI) code on their SAT registration form. This includes public, private, charter, home school associations, and some junior colleges.

² A total of 17,588 schools completed the basic High School Profile survey (60 percent) and 15,856 of these schools completed Part II of the survey, which was a separate attachment.

Table 1 Grading Systems Used by Secondary Schools

Item	Description	<i>n</i> ¹	% ²
1	What grading system is used by your school?	3,113	—
	School uses an A-F or numeric grading system	2,833	91.0
	School uses another type of grading system	248	8.0
	School does not assign grades in courses	32	1.0
2	Is the same grading system used for all academic courses?	3,068	—
	Yes	2,828	92.2
	No	226	7.4
	Don't know	14	.5
3	Do all high schools in the district use the same grading system?	1,976	—
	Yes	1,452	73.5
	No	370	18.7
	Don't know	154	7.8
4	What is the lowest grade for which credit is given in your school?	2,997	—
	C	93	3.1
	C-	146	4.9
	D+	9	.3
	D	912	30.4
	D-	1,574	52.5
	Other grade	263	8.8
5	What is your school's policy regarding grades of A+?	2,822	—
	A+ grades are not used	1,677	59.4
	A+ grades are used in all or nearly all courses	1,099	38.9
	A+ grades are used only in accelerated honors, AP, or other college-level course work	46	1.6
6	Does your school calculate GPA?	3,114	—
	Yes	2,806	90.1
	No	308	9.9
6a	If yes to item 6, when does your school calculate GPA (check all that apply)?	N/A ³	—
	end of 9th grade	1,984	62.6
	end of 10th grade	1,928	60.8
	end of 11th grade	2,277	71.8
	end of 12th grade	2,103	66.3
7	Are any courses excluded in calculating GPA?	2,779	—
	Yes	1,196	43.0
	No	1,583	57.0
8	Does your school offer accelerated, honors, AP, or other college-level courses?	2,879	—
	Yes	2,171	75.4
	No	708	24.6
10	Does your school calculate class rank?	3,072	—
	Yes	2,496	81.3
	No	576	18.8
11	How much flexibility do teachers in your school have in assigning grades?	2,941	—
	Teachers may award any distribution of grades they desire depending on student performance (e.g., mostly A or mostly C)	2,487	84.6
	Teachers are asked to follow general guidelines concerning the distribution of grades awarded in a class (e.g., about 1/5 A, about 1/5 B, etc.)	193	6.6
	Teachers must follow strict guidelines concerning the distribution of grades awarded in a class (e.g., 10% A, 20% B, etc.)	103	3.5
	Other	158	5.4
12	Is your school considering changing the grading system within the next 1 to 3 years?	3,059	—
	Yes	214	7.0
	No	2,845	93.0
13	Is your school considering a major curriculum change in the next 1 to 3 years?	2,971	—
	Yes	673	22.7
	No	2,298	77.3

¹ The sample size for each questionnaire item differs because schools did not complete all items. The *n* in italics represents the number of schools responding to each item from the total population of 3,171 schools used in the total analyses.

² Valid cases and percentage does not include missing data.

³ Because respondents were not asked to indicate yes or no, percentages were computed by dividing the number of schools checking the grade into the total number of responding schools. Percentages are likely to be higher than indicated for this item because we were unable to distinguish between schools not responding to this item (i.e., missing data) and those that truly do not compute a GPA in the given year.

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