

## MEMORANDUM

May 8, 2013

**TO:** The Honorable Chair and Members of The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida

**FROM:** Alberto M. Carvalho, Superintendent of Schools 

**SUBJECT: TRANSMITTAL OF INFORMATION CAPSULE: WEIGHTED HIGH SCHOOL GRADE POINT AVERAGES**

Attached please find a copy of the Information Capsule, *Weighted High School Grade Point Averages*. Most high schools across the U.S. use a weighting system to calculate students' grade point averages (GPAs). Instead of grading every course on the same 0-4 scale, these schools give extra weight to grades in honors, advanced, and accelerated courses. However, there is no consistency among high schools regarding which course grades are weighted and how much each grade is weighted. This Information Capsule summarizes the weighting systems used for the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program at Palm Beach, Broward, and Miami-Dade school districts. Advantages and disadvantages of weighted GPAs are also discussed.

Regardless of whether high schools provide colleges and universities with weighted or unweighted GPAs, about half of postsecondary institutions recalculate students' high school GPAs when making admission decisions. Examples of Florida State University System GPA calculation methods are provided in this report. The average high school GPAs of incoming freshmen at several Florida universities are also provided.

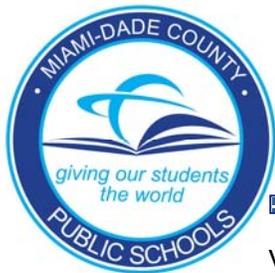
Most researchers recommend that high schools continue to calculate weighted GPAs. Studies suggest that in most cases weighted GPAs benefit students when they are applying for admission to both public and private universities.

If you need further information, please call Ms. Milagros R. Fornell, Chief Academic Officer, Office of Academics and Transformation, at 305 995-1451, or Ms. Gisela Feild, Administrative Director, Assessment, Research, and Data Analysis, at 305 995-2943.

AMC:mdr  
M973

Attachment

cc: School Board Attorney  
Superintendent's Cabinet  
Ms. Deborah Karcher  
Ms. Gisela Feild  
Dr. Aleksandr Shneyderman



# INFORMATION CAPSULE

## Research Services

Vol. 1209

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Christie Blazer, Supervisor

## WEIGHTED HIGH SCHOOL GRADE POINT AVERAGES

### At a Glance

Most high schools across the U.S. use a weighting system to calculate students' grade point averages (GPAs). Instead of grading every course on the same 0-4 scale, these schools give extra weight to grades in honors, advanced, and accelerated courses. However, there is no consistency among high schools regarding which course grades are weighted and how much each grade is weighted. This Information Capsule summarizes the weighting systems used for the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program and at Palm Beach, Broward, and Miami-Dade school districts. Advantages and disadvantages of weighted GPAs are also discussed.

Regardless of whether high schools provide colleges and universities with weighted or unweighted GPAs, about half of postsecondary institutions recalculate students' high school GPAs when making admission decisions. Examples of Florida State University System GPA calculation methods are provided in this report. The average high school GPAs of incoming freshmen at several Florida universities are also provided.

Most researchers recommend that high schools continue to calculate weighted GPAs. Studies suggest that in most cases weighted GPAs benefit students when they are applying for admission to both public and private universities.

The majority of high schools across the U.S. report using some form of weighting system to calculate students' grade point averages (GPAs). Instead of grading every course on the same 0-4 scale, these schools give extra weight to grades in honors, advanced, and accelerated courses.

There is no consistency among high schools regarding which course grades are weighted and how much each grade is weighted. A survey of a nationally representative sample of high school counselors found that 76% of respondents indicated that some form of weighted grading was in place at their school districts. School districts that reported weighing GPAs indicated that they only weighted 10-20% of courses, usually Advanced Placement and Honors courses. Ninety-two percent of counselors reported that weighted grades were applied to Advanced Placement courses and 75% reported that weighted grades were applied to Honors classes (Norton, 2008).

Most high schools calculate weighted grades in one of three ways:

- Courses are graded on a higher scale (A=5, B=4, C=3, D=2, and F=1);
- Bonus points are added to the standard grade, ranging from 0.5 to one full point; or
- The base numerical value of the grade is multiplied by a given amount, such as 1.2 or 1.5.

### Examples of Weighted GPAs

Examples of GPA weighting systems in Florida are provided below.

- **Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program.** To calculate the GPA that determines initial eligibility for a Florida Bright Futures Scholarship, Florida law requires the Department of Education to assign additional weights to grades earned in courses identified in the course code directory as Dual Enrollment, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE), Pre-IB, and Pre-AICE. The Florida Department of Education may also assign additional weights to courses it identifies as containing rigorous academic curriculum and performance standards. The additional weight assigned to any course may not exceed 0.5 per course (Florida Legislature, 2012).

The Florida Bright Futures Scholarship assigns a weight of 0.25 per semester or 0.50 per year to the following types of courses: Honors, AP, IB, AICE, Pre-IB, Pre-AICE, and Dual Enrollment (Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program, 2013).

- **The School District of Palm Beach.** Palm Beach schools use a weighted system to calculate students' GPA. The standard grading scale is based on 4.0 (A), 3.0 (B), 2.0 (C), 1.0 (D), and 0.0 (F). Regular level courses are graded on the standard scale. Honors and Gifted courses are weighted at 1.125 times the standard scale. AP, IB, AICE, and Dual Enrollment courses are weighted at 1.50 times the standard scale (The School District of Palm Beach County, 2012).
- **Broward County Public Schools.** Broward schools use a bonus point system to weight advanced level course grades. The standard grading scale is based on 4.0 (A), 3.5 (B+), 3.0 (B), 2.5 (C+), 2.0 (C), 1.5 (D+), 1.0 (D), and 0.0 (F). Regular level courses are graded on the standard scale. Pre-IB, Pre-AICE, and Foreign Language course grades above the second year receive one additional point. AP, IB, AICE, and Dual Enrollment course grades receive two additional points. AP, IB, and AICE courses without the corresponding exam receive one additional point (Broward County Public Schools, 2011).
- **Miami-Dade County Public Schools.** Miami-Dade schools use a bonus point system to weight advanced level course grades. The standard grading scale is based on 4.0 (A), 3.0 (B), 2.0 (C), 1.0 (D), and 0.0 (F). Regular level courses are graded on the standard scale. Students enrolled in Honors courses receive one bonus point if they earn a grade of "A," "B," or "C" in the course. Students enrolled in AP, IB, AICE, and Dual Enrollment courses receive two bonus points if they earn an "A" or "B" in the course and one bonus point if they earn a "C" in the course (Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2013).

## **Advantages of Weighted GPAs**

Advocates of weighted GPAs believe that they should be used for the following reasons:

- Some high school courses are much harder than others. The grades students receive should be commensurate with the course's level of difficulty (Norton, 2008).
- Weighted grading systems encourage students to take more rigorous courses. Without weighted grades, students taking advanced level courses might have lower GPAs than comparable students who take less demanding, regular level courses (Norton, 2008; Sadler & Tai, 2007).
- Students enrolled in advanced level courses receive higher GPAs, which may give them an advantage in the college admissions process. Despite claims to the contrary from colleges and universities, studies suggest that both public and private postsecondary institutions admit more students with weighted grades on their transcripts than students with unweighted grades (Norton, 2008; Downs, 2000).

For example, Talley (cited in Norton, 2004) randomly surveyed private college admissions directors across the U.S. The directors were sent two surveys, four weeks apart. Close to 500 admissions directors responded to both surveys. The first survey asked about the institutions' admissions policies and philosophies. The second survey was composed of two student transcripts and a response card that requested the admissions director to choose one over the other in a hypothetical admission decision. The transcripts included identical coursework; however, one transcript was calculated using weighted GPAs for honors level courses and the other transcript was calculated using unweighted GPAs. Over three-quarters (76%) of admissions directors chose the student with the weighted GPA over the unweighted GPA. These results contradicted the results of the first survey in which 74% of the admissions directors indicated that institutional policy did not favor students with weighted GPAs. Talley's findings were replicated in a second study that surveyed 202 admissions directors, this time at public colleges and universities (Talley & Mohr, cited in Norton, 2004).

- Weighted grades increase the spread of high school GPAs to help colleges and universities make greater distinctions between students. Sadler and Tai (2007) reported that 18% of high school seniors had an "A" average in 1968 versus 47% in 2004.
- Studies have found that the weighted high school GPA is a better predictor of freshman college GPA for mathematics and science majors than the unweighted high school GPA (Sadler & Tai, 2007).

## **Disadvantages of Weighted GPAs**

Two difficulties associated with weighted GPAs have been cited in the literature:

- There is no standard practice for weighting GPAs at U.S. high schools. School districts use different standards to determine which courses are rigorous enough to warrant the application of weighted grades. Some school districts do not weight any course grades, other districts weight certain course grades, and some weight course grades only in students' senior year. This lack of uniformity leads to confusion in college and university

admissions offices across the country as they struggle with questions about fairness and high school GPA calculation (Montgomery Educational Consulting, 2009; Norton, 2004; Green, n.d.).

- Students attending smaller or lower-performing schools may have little or no access to advanced level courses. These students compete for admission to colleges and universities against students who have higher GPAs because of their advanced level course enrollment. Some educators believe, therefore, that weighted GPAs discriminate against students attending smaller and lower-performing schools (Downs, 2000; Green, n.d.).

### **Colleges and Universities Recalculate High School GPAs**

Colleges and universities consistently rate high school academic course grades as the most important factor in admission decisions. According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling's *State of College Admission 2012* report, 84% of colleges reported that grades in college preparatory courses were the top factor in admission decisions, followed by strength of curriculum (68%) and SAT/ACT scores (59%) (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2012).

Regardless of whether high schools provide colleges and universities with weighted or unweighted GPAs, about half of postsecondary institutions recalculate students' high school GPAs based on their own standards when making admission decisions; the other half use the reported high school GPA unchanged. The GPAs that are received from high schools are recalculated in order to equalize all applicants and to facilitate comparisons between high schools (Fairfax County Public Schools, 2009; Wolf, 2009; Sadler & Tai, 2007).

Among those institutions recalculating high school GPAs, almost two-thirds report using only grades from core courses (English, mathematics, social studies, science, and foreign languages) and over one-third report dropping the plus and minus from grades. Other colleges and universities add or remove the weight that high schools assigned to grades in advanced level courses. Some institutions consider grades earned in all academic courses but give significantly less weight to grades in areas such as music, art, health, technology, and physical education. All Advanced Placement grades are usually included in college and university GPA recalculations, even if the courses were not taken in the core subject areas (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2010; The Ivy Coach, 2009; Wolf, 2009).

Florida's state universities recalculate high school GPAs using a 0-4 scale. The scale is based on grades earned in high school academic core courses. Additional weights are assigned to certain grades in state-designated Honors, AP, IB, AICE, International Studies, Dual Enrollment, and other advanced courses (Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2013).

Examples of Florida State University System GPA calculation methods include:

- **Florida State University.** The Office of Admissions does not use the GPAs listed on students' high school transcripts or report cards and recalculates all GPAs. The university states that only academic subjects are used in the recalculation. Grades of C- or better in AP, IB, AICE, and Dual Enrollment receive one full bonus point; grades of C- or better in Honors, Pre-IB, and Pre-AICE receive one-half bonus point (Florida State University, 2013).

- **University of Florida.** All high school GPAs are recalculated. Only academic subjects - English, mathematics, sciences, social sciences, and foreign languages - are included in the recalculation. Additional weight is added to grades from Honors, AP, IB, AICE, and Dual Enrollment courses (University of Florida, 2013a).
- **University of Central Florida.** High school GPA is recalculated based on academic core courses, including English, mathematics, science, social studies, and foreign languages. The university uses a 0-4 grading scale and also awards additional points for any weighted courses within the academic core. AP, IB, AICE, and Dual Enrollment courses are given one additional point; Pre-AP, Pre-IB, Pre-AICE, and Honors courses are given an additional one-half point (University of Central Florida, 2013).

To qualify for entry into one of Florida's state universities, students must have a minimum 2.5 GPA in their high school core academic courses (Florida Department of Education, 2011). Examples of average high school GPAs of incoming freshmen at several Florida universities include 4.3 at University of Florida, 4.0 at Florida State University, 3.9 at University of Central Florida, and 4.2 at University of Miami.\* When colleges and universities display the average high school GPA of incoming freshmen, they tend to report the recalculated GPAs (University of Florida, 2013b; University of Miami, 2013; Florida State University, 2012; University of Central Florida, 2012).

\*All average high school GPAs are reported for Fall 2012, except University of Florida, which is reported for Fall 2011.

### **Researchers Recommend Weighted High School GPAs**

Most researchers recommend that high schools continue to calculate weighted GPAs. Studies suggest that in most cases weighted GPAs benefit students when they are applying for admission to both public and private universities (Fairfax County Public Schools, 2009; Norton, 2008; Sadler & Tai, 2007; Downs, 2000).

### **Summary**

The majority of U.S. high schools use some form of weighting system to calculate GPAs, but there is no consistency among high schools regarding which course grades are weighted and how much each grade is weighted. This paper summarized the weighting systems used to determine eligibility for the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program and at Palm Beach, Broward, and Miami-Dade school districts.

Advocates of weighted high school GPAs argue that they award students grades that are commensurate with advanced courses' higher levels of difficulty, encourage students to take more rigorous courses, and provide college applicants with an advantage over students whose transcripts contain unweighted grades. Opponents of weighted GPAs claim that the lack of a standard weighting system in all U.S. high schools makes it difficult for colleges and universities to accurately compare students. They also maintain that weighted GPAs discriminate against students attending small and lower-performing schools because these students tend to have less access to advanced level courses.

Regardless of whether high schools provide colleges and universities with weighted or unweighted GPAs, about half of postsecondary institutions recalculate students' high school

GPA based on their own standards when making admission decisions; the other half use the reported high school GPA unchanged. Florida State University, University of Florida, and University of Central Florida all recalculate students' high school GPAs. The three state universities recalculate GPAs using only academic courses and give additional weight to grades in Honors, AP, IB, AICE, and Dual Enrollment courses. The average high school GPAs of incoming freshmen at several Florida universities were also provided.

Most researchers recommend that high schools continue to calculate weighted GPAs. Studies suggest that in most cases weighted GPAs benefit students when they are applying for admission to both public and private universities.

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