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Valedictorian or Null-dictorian?

Imagine waking up one day and knowing you are about to be assigned a number – a number that could dictate your whole future. While this might sound like something out of a dystopian novel, this is real-life for most high-school students. Through ranking students based on GPA – or essentially their grades – schools hope to foster academic competition. However, rankings can fluctuate very easily and the smallest drop in grades can lead to dramatic changes in standing. Due to this, many high-school students worry about becoming valedictorian and this is a trait many high-profile colleges have come to look for. This has led to a commonly held belief that rankings, specifically achieving the highest ones, are the most important part of an education. However, while rankings might increase competition, it is important to consider their effect on academic performance overall. High-school rankings harm academic performance by promoting anxiety and decreasing true learning. While rankings might be essential for the college admissions process, rankings should not be a factor in admissions.

Some argue that the competition in school caused by rankings increases a student's motivation to do better in school, but this motivation can lead to a decline in mental health. They claim that "it encourages [students] to try their best in school and work diligently to get a higher-class rank" (Ruckman). Be that as it may, this competitive environment and constant pressure to do better can have a negative impact on the mental health of students. Is earning a higher class-

rank really worth having a decline in mental health? The answer should be a resounding no. But, with the competition that comes with ranks, this is inevitable. The competition that is supposed to encourage students to do better also “makes students who work really hard feel really bad about themselves because despite trying their best, they are not number one” (Guery). Students should not have to feel less important or not as worthy simply because they cannot be number one. Everyone is different. Some students are academically orientated, some are musically inclined, some are athletic, and some are artistic. However, rankings only take into account academic skill, while disregarding all other talents. This comparison can lead to the student feeling bad about themselves if they are not academically inclined, no matter how talented they may be in other aspects. This issue is only worsened in competitive schools, where it has been found that “depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and stress are common” (Lee). All these mental health issues – which are prevalent in students – could be reduced, simply through getting rid of ranks. On top of that, declining mental health in students can worsen their academic performance. Due to lower self-esteem, they lose motivation to try in school and start giving up, which can then prevent them from learning valuable information. The competition caused by ranks may encourage students to do better, but at the cost of their mental health and well-being.

Many consider rankings to represent real life, but the pressure of achieving a high rank actually decreases true academic gain. They argue that rankings represent the competition in real life as “when students enter the workplace, they will be assessed in one way or another, whether they like it or not” (Gardner). While it is true that students will be assessed in real life, the only way that students will be ready for this assessment is if they actually learn in school. However, rankings decrease actual learning in school, which does not prepare them for real life. One high-school student says, “[Rankings create] an environment where the only value [students] see in

higher level classes is to boost their GPA” (Lee). Due to the creation of this environment, students choose to take classes weighted higher simply with the goal of getting a good grade in that class. The purpose of school is not to give students grades but teach them valuable information. By leading students to take classes only for grades, school is underpreparing them for the assessments they will face in real life. On top of that, a high-school student finds that “this then lowers students’ creative freedom to choose classes they are interested in for fear that the unweighted class will lower their GPA” (Lee). Due to having minimal interest in the classes they end up taking, they are not motivated to even try to learn the skills or participate in the class. This environment decreases the student’s true knowledge gain – knowledge that could be useful for the assessments they will face later in life. The creation of this environment in schools is very counterproductive, especially since the purpose of schools is to teach students, and this is all due to the pressure created by rankings to achieve a high GPA.

Rankings are known for their widespread use in college admissions, but they are not the best measure of a student’s academic success. In fact, the whole reason behind why class ranks were created was that “[they allow] college admissions officers to evaluate how students performed in relation to their classmates” (ctd. in Ruckman). The main issue with this idea is that rankings do not represent the student at all. Comparing them to other classmates does not give colleges a true sense of the student at all. There are so many other factors that colleges could consider. Even colleges are starting to realize that “[they] already have so much information about a given student with GPA, their transcript, extracurriculars, and recommendations that class rank is becoming less important in admissions decisions” (Guery). Rankings do not factor in other things, such as extracurriculars and solely rely on academic performance; however, even here, they only consider this performance in relation to other students in the school, not overall.

This makes class rank highly dependable on the school they go to, to the point where even “college and university admission officers recognize the striking differences in student populations at different high schools and the tremendous variation in the way high schools compute class rank” (Guskey). The fact that class rank does not even represent a student’s academic performance shows the extent to which it is a bad factor for colleges to consider. Rankings neither consider any other aspect of a student’s life nor consider a student’s actual academic success. They are not a measure of anything except a student’s academic achievements in comparison to other students at the same school. Something that does not even represent a student should not be used for college applications.

While the system of rankings was originally created to benefit students, it has ended up hurting students in more ways than one. Not only have rankings led to an improper representation of students when applying to colleges, they have also prevented students from learning and led to a decline in their mental health. Rankings are relevant in current society, but truly provide no benefit for the actual education system. Do we truly want a number – a number that does not even represent our students – to determine their future?

Works Cited

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