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Breaking the Chains of School Rankings

As of September 19th, 2023, “50% of middle school students reported feeling stressed over academics all the time, while 75% of high school students felt the same” (Zauderer). Lately, mental health has been a prominent topic in society. More people than ever, especially teenagers, have been overcome with anxiety and depression. But why? One significant factor contributing to stress in students is the hierarchical disposition of school rankings. Schools have a GPA (Grade Point Average)-based system, where all students are arranged on a scale and listed from highest to lowest, or in a student’s eyes, best to worst. It is a flawed system and one that should not be in place. Because all students are different, you cannot compare them solely based on academic achievements. In this way, rankings within schools should not exist to promote academic excellence and improvement, as they create unnecessary stress and competition among classmates. Furthermore, schools must encourage collaboration to develop abilities that will be useful outside of school, as students must be proficient in these skills to succeed in society.

The stress levels caused by rankings in students are rising, increasing the risk of students’ mental health declining. Because of this, schools need to focus on the health of their students. Fortunately, many others, as well as professionals, believe in eliminating rankings. For example, a strong opinion, “Students who desire to be ranked will take many AP and PreAP classes to get extra points, which entails a tremendous workload” (Kaginele). Students continuously want a better rank, but many don’t know their limits. They choose the most challenging classes to

increase their rank, forcing them to study and worry about every homework problem, quiz, and test. They set expectations of themselves that are usually unrealistic and fear making mistakes to have the highest score, striving for excellence to an unhealthy degree. Even worse, students base their value on their grades: “Many students’ grades are the ultimate determination of their self-worth. If they receive an A instead of a B, they believe they are a failure” (Ruffin). This way of thinking is detrimental to self-esteem and confidence. Schools must show how to change their mindset by helping students understand that a better, healthier person will spend time doing activities they enjoy outside of academics. Schools should integrate well-being by promoting activities supporting hobbies and extracurriculars, leading to well-rounded students overall.

If you are a student aiming for a top-tier college, you understand that school is a contest in which whoever has the highest grades wins. Especially when the prize is the title of Valedictorian, it can become a harsh competition. This system of ranking, one with titles such as Valedictorian and Salutatorian, is highly detrimental to students, as it fosters a degrading view of competition, which will most likely harm them in the future. “School can easily become an unhealthy competition where a student may want to see their peers do worse than them or fail” (Guery). Understanding that people need to uplift others to become their best is crucial. Students can get too caught up in the rivalry and step on others’ toes to bring themselves up. What is worse is that schools justify this behavior and even reward it with scholarships and opportunities. This justification removes the values and morality of students, creating an attitude of selfishness engrained in their belief system that doing so is fair. They must view other students not as enemies but as supporters.

America's education system has been a compelling topic of controversy for a long time. From an article published in 1997, there was a discussion on American education and public and

private goods. It was heavily insinuated that education was a private good, only used for a student's needs, labeled as the "social mobility" approach. Disagreeing with this method, the education system must avoid social mobility, as it is highly individualized and not suitable for students in the future. "The resulting structure...has proven over the years to be an ideal environment for fostering interpersonal competition and personal achievement" (Labaree). This quote explains that even 26 years ago, Americans still had the same discourse over how students should be taught as there is now. The current social mobility aspect teaches that students and families must use it to their advantage; however, the problem is that others must be disadvantaged. Rankings can be categorized as social mobility since a few students are heavily advantaged, and all others are incredibly disadvantaged. A change must be made if there are still the same problems there were almost thirty years ago.

Although compelling arguments have been made concerning the eradication of rankings, the reasoning favoring it is justifiable. According to one source, "Continuing class rankings allow students to see which percentile they are placed in the school. Additionally, it encourages them to try their best in school and work diligently to get a higher class rank." (Ruckman). Knowing where students stand academically and whether they need extra tutoring is useful. Many students use their rank to determine their place compared to others to ensure that they are not falling behind. Moreover, their rank can be a powerful motivator to increase their GPA, further increasing their proficiency in all subjects.

Ultimately, the adverse effects of rankings overpower the positive ones. Students can determine how well they do in class by having one-on-one discussions with their teacher while motivating them with personal progress. Schools are concerned with grades and how to produce young people who will succeed in society. Studies show that this can be done without ranking

them and promoting engagement: “Actively disengaged students are nine times more likely to say they get poor grades at school, twice as likely to say they missed a lot of school last year, and 7.2 times more likely to feel discouraged about the future than are engaged students.”

(Robinson). Schools should focus more on students’ growth and individual improvement through engagement rather than comparing them to others. To conclude, rankings should be abolished to promote healthier and more successful students.

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