



# Lexington High School

251 Waltham Street ♦ Lexington, Massachusetts 02421

Michael P. Jones, Ph.D.  
*Principal*

781- 861-2320, ext. 1000  
email: [mjones@sch.ci.lexington.ma.us](mailto:mjones@sch.ci.lexington.ma.us)  
fax: 781-861-2440

To : Paul Ash, Ph.D.  
From : Michael P. Jones, Ph.D.  
Re : Recommendation on Weighted GPA

December 11, 2006

Twenty months have passed since I recommended to the School Committee that we phase out the Weighted Grade Point Average (WGPA) at Lexington High School. During those twenty months, the entire Lexington High School community has been engaged in a major effort to create a new vision for the future of the High School.

The joint parent-teacher-student Mission Committee led the school community in redrafting the school mission statement, which subsequently was approved by the faculty, the School Council, and the School Committee. The High School has begun an intense self assessment as part of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges ten-year accreditation cycle. Within these initiatives, assessment of student performance has been a subject of continued investigation, both through the faculty committee that was charged with further study of the WGPA and through a program of professional workshops and meetings that have been part of an initiative to transform the way Lexington High School coordinates instruction, integrates curriculum, and assesses student performance.

As a result, we have learned a great deal to add to the knowledge base of two prior years studying the WGPA issue. I have approached my recommendations in light of these new developments and the larger perspective we now have on student assessment.

This memorandum is divided into two sections. The first section presents my recommendations on the Report from the Faculty Committee Studying Lexington High School's Use of the Weighted GPA, dated June 15, 2006. The second section provides the reasons for my recommendations.

- 1. The committee supports the faculty vote to eliminate the use of the weighted grade point as a means of communicating student achievement at Lexington High School.*

**My recommendation is to phase out the use of the weighted grade point average as a means of communicating student achievement at Lexington High School over a two year period beginning this year with the Class of 2009 and 2010. This means, effective this year, the practice of reporting WGPA will no longer apply to the Class**

of 2009 and subsequent classes. The reporting of WGPA on official transcripts will continue for the classes of 2007 and 2008, consistent with current practice, until the students in these classes graduate from Lexington High School. (Note: At present, the WGPA is not recorded on report cards for the Classes of '09 and '10 but is available on request only.)

2. *The committee recommends that each course at Lexington High School should be labeled "college prep" on the student transcript to assist admissions counselors.*

**I recommend that the Lexington High School transcript include a sentence to the effect that "All courses at Lexington High School, regardless of level, are college preparatory courses." Such revision on the school profile already has been made this year.**

**I further recommend that the guidance department and administration continue to review the High School report card, transcript, and profile to determine whether any further changes may more accurately and advantageously present the academic records of our students. Finally, I recommend a new and concerted effort be made to ensure that the means of student assessment and certain aggregate data gathered for assessment be shared publicly through school-wide documents and publications, public forums, and school committee meetings; and that the High School establish a goal of developing a standards-based curriculum in all disciplines.**

3. *The committee recommends the student transcript include the median grade earned by students in all sections of a course irrespective of the individual teacher. This will assist college admissions counselors in determining the validity of an individual grade.*

**I do not endorse this recommendation, because there are bound to be some differences in grade distribution profiles among teachers in the same course, even within the context of a standards based curriculum.**

### **Discussion and Rationale:**

Since the parent-teacher-administrator Graduation Requirements Committee recommended in October of 2003 that Lexington High School eliminate the weighted grade point average, the High School has learned much about developing a fair, equitable, and informative system of assessment. The Graduation Committee's statement on WGPA came under the title, "Recommendation to establish a more equitable grading system." Indeed, "a more equitable grading system" should be the standard against which decisions on assessment should be made.

At first glance, the weighted GPA may seem to assign a greater value to the achievements of students taking more challenging courses, and thus this practice may appear to be perfectly compatible with the goals of an institution valuing academic excellence. The

truth of the matter, however, is that the system of numerical enhancements in the grades of certain courses at Lexington High School is often arbitrary; it does not reflect any scientific system of assessment or reporting; and it is applied in vastly unsystematic ways across the curriculum of Lexington High School. For example, concert choir is weighted on the honors level, and a student may take honors concert choir for three successive years. Drama, on the other hand, does not offer an honors option, no matter how talented are the students who take drama. Spanish and French are offered at the honors level; Latin is not. A student may take policy debate for three years in a row and receive honors credit three times for essentially the same course; while the student who is taking AP chemistry receives honors credit only once. Seniors taking mathematics will take a leveled course; seniors taking English will not. Before I address the question of whether these inequities are “fixable,” some background on WPGA is necessary.

WPGA became popular a generation ago to create a class rank for college preparatory students that would be different from the one assigned to students destined to enter the work force after graduation. Students were categorized and sorted out, and students not taking the college preparatory track were not expected to achieve high academic standards or to be prepared to go to college. This dual system of ranking students usually served the purpose of ensuring that the valedictorian was a student headed to college, but every so often a conflict would emerge when a student taking predominantly “general” or “business track” courses would outrank the college preparatory student on the unweighted scale. Which one should be valedictorian? And for a long time, high schools using a dual system of class rank argued over whether music and art should have “honors” levels. Those were the days before multiple intelligence theories, but some notion did exist that schools should recognize different types of intelligence that the system of tracking ignored. No consensus was reached on that issue, and college admissions boards began making their own decisions on whether to assign a high school orchestra course the same status as advanced placement calculus. If that issue were not sticky enough, high schools differed over the precise metrics of grade enhancements and the numerical scale employed in the weighting. Each high school had its own scale, while college admissions boards simply recalculated WPGA’s using whatever metric they thought best.

In time, tracking was shown to be responsible for a host of inequities in public education and has since been banned in Massachusetts by legislation in an age, now, where high standards of achievement are expected among all students.

Under scrutiny, class rank itself began to draw criticism, not only for its schizophrenic dual system of weighting and non-weighting, but also for distinguishing students from one another on the basis of tenths, or even hundredths of a point, much to the disadvantage of students whose intelligence and special accomplishments were undervalued by the class rank metric. As many high schools began to eliminate class rank (Lexington did so twenty years ago), the *raison d’etre* of the WPGA disappeared, and WPGA remained only as a kind of anachronism superimposed upon the assessment systems of college preparatory high schools. In our research, eighty-six percent of the colleges surveyed by the LHS Guidance Department in 2004-2005 indicated no strong

preference for weighted or unweighted GPA's. To them, WGPA as a means of comparing students between two high schools is a useless number.

Furthermore, our faculty committee's report has indicated that the Lexington High School weighting system as a *predictor* of student performance—when students change levels of courses—has proven likewise to be useless. Our own data shows no correlation between level changes and course grades at Lexington High School. After students changed levels, they were all over the graph with their grades.

At this time, Lexington High School is developing a much more sophisticated, assessment system based on school-wide and departmental standards, measurable by common descriptive rubrics that define levels of performance in writing, reading, listening, speaking, critical thinking, reasoning, technological proficiency, contextual analysis, and aesthetics. Within the next two years, the High School will provide feedback to students based on these standards that will constitute a more accurate and “state of the art” reporting system, one that will be adapted to and incorporated into the courses within each discipline.

It is sometimes difficult to move past systems and structures that have lost relevance, utility, or meaning under present day circumstances. Weighted GPA is a vestigial part of a grading system held over from a society in which many fewer students advanced to college, and from an economy and a national work force that has changed dramatically over the past generation. Not only is it seriously flawed; it is inhospitable to any type of repair, because it assumes a level of reliability to which it cannot possibly lay claim.

Part of the mission of Lexington High School is to establish universally high standards and to support and to recognize excellence in academic achievement. In listening to students and parents over the past year, I have learned that in contemplating the elimination of the WGPA, many students would mourn the loss of one way in which they believe the High School honors academic excellence. Perhaps this is an area where we can do better. But the WGPA isn't the vehicle to accomplish this worthy goal.

The best case against weighted GPA is that it is an anachronism: it is useless to Lexington students, irrelevant to college admissions boards, and unrelated to the goals of education in the twenty-first century. The High School is moving beyond the inequities of sorting out students and tracking them and of establishing the flawed metrics of enhancing the value of some courses over that of others. We can acknowledge achievement more productively by generating clear academic transcripts, informative school profiles, school-wide academic expectations and rubrics, and a standards-based curriculum. And we should not hesitate to publicize and celebrate the achievements of our students.

This is truly a great high school. And we should do justice to our students by developing the kinds of assessments they deserve.