

MVCCA EDUC 2009-1

In Support of Option 4 Changes to High School Grade Policies

WHEREAS in response to questions raised by parents, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) conducted an investigation ("Investigation") of current high school grading policies both as to grade point scales and weighting of advanced course grades in order to determine if FCPS policies unfairly disadvantaged Fairfax County students in seeking college admission, or in selection for college honors programs or merit-based scholarships, and, if so, to provide options for addressing any imbalance; and

WHEREAS the Investigation resulted in a Report, submitted to FCPS Superintendent Dr. Jack Dale in December 2008 ("Report") and thereafter Dr. Dale released his Recommendation as a School Board Agenda Item for the January 8, 2009, Regular meeting ("Dale's Recommendation") for action by the School Board; and

WHEREAS the Report found that:

- (1) the FCPS grading scale is more restrictive than the 10-point scale most commonly used in the United States (example: requiring 94 for a grade of "A" as opposed to 90) and results in a lower distribution of Grade Point Averages ("GPA") in both the upper and lower ends of the achievement spectrum compared to other school divisions;
- (2) the FCPS policy on awarding weight points to advanced classes such as AP and IB (.5) is more restrictive than that more commonly in use (1.0) and results in lower GPAs for students taking such classes compared to other jurisdictions;
- (3) while many factors are used in college admission procedures as well as in honors program and merit scholarship decisions, GPA is a very important factor and FCPS students are probably negatively impacted in honors and scholarship decisions although study limitations did not allow definitive evaluation of admission procedure impacts;
- (4) there is no data-driven consensus on whether stricter grading policies encourage higher achievement but weighted scales for challenging classes do encourage participation; and

WHEREAS the Report provided four options: (1) No Change; (2) Change weights only to .5 for Honors and 1.0 for AP/IB; (3) Change scale only to 10-point, and (4) change both weights and scale; and

WHEREAS Dale's Recommendation proposed adoption of Option 2 (increasing weights for advanced classes only) which, while it would assist and encourage students taking high level courses, would address neither the overall GPA issue for core classes nor the disadvantaged position of middle ground students; and

WHEREAS comprehensive and longitudinal studies relied on in the Report have also concluded that four factors are primarily used in college admissions decisions (in order): grades in college preparatory courses, strength of the curriculum, standardized test scores, and high school GPA, and that even small disparities in GPA may determine college acceptance or rejection; and

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WHEREAS, the ever-increasing college applicant pool is out-pacing available seats, and thus both increasing competition for admission and forcing colleges to rely more heavily on mathematical cut scores and less on individual evaluation, at a time when rising higher education costs have also fueled concern nationwide about the effects of grading policies on college admissions, receipt of merit-based scholarships, and placement into honors programs; and

WHEREAS, most divisions, inside and outside Virginia, already use a 10-point grading scale, of those States seeking to make state-wide policy most have chosen the 10-point scale, and both the federal government and The College Board report high school GPA using a 10-point grading scale in the absence of information from schools for data gathering and program purposes, so that the FCPS policy is rapidly becoming outdated and thus subject to misinterpretation particularly by out-of-state colleges; and

WHEREAS Fairfax County citizens have an interest not only in assuring that high standards are maintained but also in assuring that students are not placed at competitive disadvantage in seeking admission to college, to honors programs or in receiving scholarships; and

WHEREAS over 8000 citizens have signed a petition effectively requesting adoption of Option 4, which would eliminate competitive disadvantage and bring FCPS policies in line with current nationwide trends,

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED based on all of the above that the Mount Vernon Council of Citizens' Associations urges the Fairfax County School Board to adopt Option 4 and establish a 10-point scale for high school grades, add a .5 weight for honors classes, increase the weight for AP/IB courses to 1.0, and make any other alterations needed to bring policies in line with other school divisions in order to reduce competitive disadvantage for Fairfax County students while maintaining high academic standards.