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Recognition as valedictorian disappearing across the region

By [Daveen Rae Kurutz](#)

Published: Wednesday, May 29, 2013 9:00 p.m.

The days of having a “No. 1” in a senior class might be numbered.

Fewer school districts are recognizing a single student as valedictorian, and an increasing number are opting to not track class rank at all. College-admissions officials aren't that interested in the information, a national survey shows.

“Class rank used to be a lot more important than it is now,” said Melissa Clinedinst, assistant director of research for the National Association for College Admission Counseling. “It doesn't have much meaning, comparing one school to another.”

When the South Allegheny School District celebrates its graduation next week, it will be the final time a valedictorian is named. Earlier this year, officials decided the district would join a growing number that don't recognize the top student in its senior class.

Many schools in the region that are considered “high-achieving” — including Mt. Lebanon, North Allegheny, Fox Chapel Area, and Quaker Valley — haven't distinguished between students with the top grades for years. Walter Sieminski, the principal at North Allegheny Senior High School, said it would be problematic to figure out who is at the top of the class — the determination would come down to a ten-thousandth of a point.

Instead, the school recognizes the top 5 percent of students with honors.

Officials behave similarly at Quaker Valley, where all students who earn a 4.0 grade-point average or higher are recognized as distinguished graduates.

Meagan Roppo, a 2010 graduate of Quaker Valley High School, was a distinguished graduate.

An incoming senior at Allegheny College in Meadville, Roppo said she's glad her alma mater didn't choose just one student to be on top. Instead of focusing just on her class rank in college applications, she could talk about her other qualities and experiences.

Overall, Roppo said, it helped make her a more well-rounded student.

“It's not really necessary nor appropriate to glorify just one student,” said Roppo, 21, of Edgeworth. “(Not having a class rank) took off some of that competitiveness. Kids kill themselves over things in school.”

That competitive streak is one of the things that pushed North Hills Senior High School to eliminate class rank after the 2009-10 school year. Principal John Kreider said some students who were enrolled in Advanced Placement courses were submitting medical waivers to opt out of gym class. Others were receiving waivers to avoid taking music and other courses. It was all because earning anything less than an “A” in a non-weighted class can lower a teen's grade-point average.

“What we didn't want was students gaming the educational system to bolster their grade-point averages,” Kreider said. “It wasn't a whole lot but, nonetheless, it was a percentage of students (for whom) we wanted

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to make sure we provided with a broad education before they left North Hills High School.”

That's a common scenario across the county, Clinedinst said.

“In schools where students are all high-achieving and there's not a lot of difference between the ranks, administrators want to decrease course-taking decisions like that and the sense of competition between students,” Clinedinst said.

Continuing with a single valedictorian is a decision with which officials in the Franklin Regional School District are wrestling. In February, the school board considered a recommendation to instead recognize students with a 4.4 or higher grade-point average as “distinguished scholars.” That would have meant between eight and 12 students would be recognized as “No. 1,” officials said.

Board members weren't comfortable with the idea that a dozen students might have their class rank listed as “one” on their transcripts.

“One is one,” board Vice President Joe Seymour said. “It's not one through 12.”

Instead, when Franklin Regional students graduate next week, one valedictorian will be named. The board's policy committee is slated to revisit the policy during the next school year.

The quality of education is most important, surveys conducted by the National Association for College Admission Counseling show. In its most recent survey, conducted in 2011, only 19 percent of colleges placed a “considerable importance” on class rank, compared to 42 percent in 1993.

Instead, the colleges most closely consider teens' grades in college-prep courses, the strength of their high school curriculum, college-admissions test scores and a student's overall grades.

Part of the reason colleges aren't relying as heavily on class rank is because fewer high schools are reporting it, Clinedinst said.

But there still is value to being a valedictorian, said Michael Reilly, executive director of the Washington D.C.-based American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

“It's a strong indication of an academically talented student,” Reilly said. “I think the honor is losing some of its luster, though, as some high school change the definitions and give the title to multiple valedictorians from the same class.”

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