

About the attached letter:

- 1. This letter is produced without coordination with — or direction from — the Paly administration.**
- 2. 68 teachers signed this letter.**
- 3. Only tenured faculty members were approached (There are roughly 100 tenured teachers at Paly.)**
- 4. Not all teachers were approached, so there may still be more out there who agree with the sentiments expressed here.**

Proposal to report weighted GPAs threatens to undermine years of progress addressing student well-being in the PAUSD

Dear trustees of the Palo Alto Board of Education,

Please pause in your rush to make a decision about placing weighted grades on district transcripts. We oppose the idea in general, but we particularly oppose the idea of making the switch within the current application cycle, as you are now considering.

We believe switching to weighted grades will generate a host of unintended consequences that we have been working hard for years to mitigate. This threatens to reverse the good progress we have made in the following ways:

- 1. Harm the health and welfare of our students.** Weighting grades would undermine PAUSD's stated goals for Wellness & Safety and Personal Development & Support - in particular Goals B2 & B3 focusing on "safe & positive school environments...through improved procedures" and "improving counseling supports to prepare all students for social-emotional success". Furthermore, it would contradict both high schools' attempt to align with the work and research coming out of the Stanford Graduate School of Education's Challenge Success initiative — whose stated vision says "the overemphasis on grades, test scores, and rote answers has stressed out some kids and marginalized many more. We all want our kids to do well in school and to master certain skills and concepts, but our largely singular focus on academic achievement has resulted in a lack of attention to other components of a successful life." A decision to weight grades would contribute to an atmosphere of peer competition that is unhealthy and anathema to the district and school's commitment to student well-being. After all we have done to move away from a culture blamed in part for what is now an internationally recognized reputation for putting students at risk, this single decision could carry us backward in many ways, ignoring repeated warnings from administrators, guidance and college counselors, education researchers, and mental health professionals.
- 2. Elevate AP culture at the expense of electives** (include theater, art, photography, journalism and others). At a time when district policy seems focused on searching for and promoting alternatives to AP culture, we are deeply concerned about the creation of a powerful incentive for students to take more honors and AP classes at the expense of electives. The problem is easy to see if you consider the following: If a student with a 4.2 GPA takes a non-weighted class, his/her GPA can *only* go down, even if that student gets an A+ in the class. If you push forward with a decision to weight grades, what action, if any, will the Board take to address the threat weighted grades represent to our electives programs, many of which provide students the opportunity to branch out in exploring their interests without the added academic pressures an advanced or honors course might create.

3. **Disadvantage students from families of limited means** by increasing pressure for students and their families to pay for online or off-campus honors and AP programs to boost their GPAs (and creating challenges for the district in determining which off-campus programs are worthy of weighting). In a district already facing significant disparities between students who can and cannot pay for tutors, special programs, college counseling and testing support companies, a move to weighted grades pushes us away from the district goal of providing Equity and Access for all our students.
4. **Enable ranking of students.** The district eradicated decile rankings in 2012 for reasons that deserve to be revisited before considering bringing rankings back. (With a move to weighted grades, it is not unlikely those grades could eventually become a tool for de facto or officially endorsed rankings.) In 2012, the district argued that — in a district where a student who scored within the 25th percentile in-district on the SAT would score in the 75th percentile statewide — stacking PAUSD students up against students from other districts using rankings would help the top 10 to 20 percent of PAUSD students but hurt the remaining 80 to 90 percent. This rationale still holds solidly today. It is greatly concerning if the majority of voices heard on this matter are coming from the 10-20% that might benefit and not the 80-90% that might suffer. Furthermore, discussion must be had about the unintended consequence of moving back towards a system — explicit or otherwise — of reported rankings., revealing and inflating the unnecessary distinction between those students who've loaded their transcripts with weighted courses and those equally successful students who have opted for a less-weighted course load most fitting to them?
5. **Lead to pressure to revive the abandoned practice of naming a “valedictorian” and “salutatorian”** — and all the competitive pressures that come with these designations. These titles are natural outgrowths of weighted grades — after all, once the district weights grades, the top GPAs will be clear. Further discussion needs to be had about whether we want to return to highlighting and rewarding these differences between our students and the consequences thereof.
6. **Confuse a limited scholarship application problem with an admissions application problem.** Universities say students face no admissions penalty for schools that submit unweighted grades; the only reported concerns — and data is scant about their extent — is in scholarship offices. Surely there must be a way to deal with these challenges separately, without sweeping away a long-standing and treasured set of values that support a more level and healthy playing field when it comes to how students demonstrate their achievement.
7. **Increase confusion for students during the application process.** If both weighted and unweighted GPAs were placed on transcripts, students would have to differentiate between (1) their unweighted GPA, (2) their weighted GPA for application purposes at a UC/CSU, and (3) their weighted GPA for application purposes for non-UC/CSU schools. In addition, many if not most colleges and universities do their own custom formulas for computing GPAs. Regardless, the mere presence of the weighted GPA on the transcript will make it the de facto

standard by which many of our most vulnerable students will come to measure their worth in comparison to others.

Although **we believe** placing weighted GPAs on transcripts at any time is a **critically misinformed choice**, doing so *within this current application cycle* would be especially egregious because it would:

1. **Unfairly penalize and create stress for students** who for years have assumed they were competing in a non-weighted GPA environment. A current senior (and/or their family) could cry foul alleging: “I assumed I was competing in a non-weighted environment. I would have made different decisions about class choices had I known my transcript would be weighted.” The Board would similarly be penalizing current juniors, sophomores and even freshmen who already for years have been making decisions about class choices based on an assumption of unweighted grades. It raises concerns as to whether students and families would have any legal basis to challenge the district for changing the goalposts after the race has begun. The possibility again must be considered that the number of students negatively impacted by such a decision could far outweigh those who would benefit. If such a decision is to be made, it must be done with consideration of all current high school students and not just the current graduating class.
2. **Inadequately allow for the pursuit of compromise with scholarship programs** – such as those offered by the University of Oregon -- that require weighted GPAs on transcripts. While we understand that such schools (and we don't know how many there are) may not be interested in changing their policies in the middle of application/notification season, perhaps the discussion would be different were the conversation to take place in January or later. Perhaps we should be helping to lead the movement towards healthier admissions and scholarship practices rather than following the increasingly fewer schools that are still dragging behind.
3. **Create chaos in the application bureaucracy** where schools will have submitted approximately two-thirds (roughly 250 submissions at each high school) of this year's Common App and other applications – all of them with clear warnings about being permanent submissions. If each of those students applies to multiple schools – indeed many students apply to 10 or more -- the challenge of replacing transcripts to reflect newly enforced changes is not only daunting, but sends a confusing message to the colleges our students have already started applying to.

In sum, while we are sympathetic with student and family concerns about scholarship applications, we firmly oppose any move to weighted grades (and we do so particularly when we are in mid-cycle, as we are now). We believe such an action would move in stark opposition to the great progress our schools have been making in recent years to create safer, healthier, and more equitable school climates. We are proud of the work we've been doing — at Paly and at Gunn — and are deeply committed to ensuring future Palo Alto students are going to schools in a district whose policies clearly support their well-being and the systems and cultures required to do that.

As much as arguments for weighting exist, we DO NOT have to do what other districts do, and we believe the greater good for all has to prevail in this instance — if for no other reason than that the nation's eyes are looking to Palo Alto for how we are addressing the very serious mental health issues we've been facing. Is this the answer we want to give them?

We, the undersigned, urge you to consider the powerful impact your decision can make for current and future graduates — and in preserving the reputation of a school district working hard to serve the broader welfare of all its students.

Thank you for your consideration.

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OPEN LETTER TO PAUSD BOARD OF EDUCATION

OCT. 26, 2016

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