

# **Mountain Brook Schools Class Rank and GPA Study 2014-2015**

During the 2014-2015 school year, a committee met to research two issues facing Mountain Brook students as they apply for college admission and selective scholarship programs:

- What is the purpose and influence of class rank on a student's college admission application and scholarship competitiveness?
- Does the method used by Mountain Brook Schools to determine a student's GPA benefit the student and maintain the academic integrity of the school system?

## **Members of the Committee**

Richard Barlow, Superintendent  
Vince Bolus, Student  
Sophie Brint, Student  
Missy Brooks, Director of Curriculum  
and Instruction  
Donald Clayton, MBJH Principal  
Laura Cope, Parent  
Taylor Davis, Parent  
Elizabeth Dunn, Board Member  
Amanda Hood, MBHS Principal  
Kathryn Keating, Parent

Sharon Lyerly, MBJH Counselor  
Fred Major, MBHS Teacher  
Jane Major, MBHS Teacher  
Margaret Marshall, Parent  
Larry McCain, MBJH Teacher  
Jane Menendez, Board President  
Cory Morris, Parent and Administrative  
Assistant  
Nathan Pitner, Brookwood Forest Principal  
Karen Svetlay, College Advisor  
Donna Williamson, Director of Technology

The committee was divided into two groups. One group researched class rank and the other discussed how Mountain Brook Schools determines a student's GPA and other options that might be considered. The groups met collectively to gain an understanding of the issues at hand and then individually to research and discuss their assigned topics. All student information shared with the committee was redacted so it could not be associated with individual students.

## **Class Rank Sub-Committee**

### **Process**

The class rank research committee met on four occasions to research the impact of class rank on the review of a student's college application and scholarship opportunities by college admission officers. At Mountain Brook High School, class rank is determined by the 100-point weighted GPA and does not appear on a student's transcript. Many colleges ask for this information as part of the Secondary School Report completed by the College Advisor. The committee reviewed recent research from the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), the College Board, Princeton Review, Highland Park Class Rank Team Report, and a survey of college admission officers at the top colleges attended by graduates of Mountain Brook High School.

The committee reviewed current research and data, looked at current MBHS data relative to our graduating classes, reviewed college applications and school profiles, and interviewed college admission officers regarding the use of class rank and its influence. The committee also participated in a mock admissions review with admissions officers using MBHS transcripts with and without class rank.

### **Findings**

Current research demonstrates the declining influence of class rank as a critical component of the college admission process. Only 26% of high schools continue to report exact class rank. (By "exact rank" we mean a specific numerical ranking, such as "113<sup>th</sup> in the class" or "113 out of 325 graduates.") Of these 26%, the majority of schools are in southeastern states. When college data are reported through media sources such as *US News & World Report*, selectivity is determined by three components. One component consists of the number of students who rank in the top 10% of the class, which disadvantages any applicant to highly selective colleges who is not in the top 10% of his or her high school graduating class. The other two factors are the college's acceptance rate and reported test scores of admitted students. Schools across the country comparable to Mountain Brook have moved away from exact rank. The committee was unable to locate any positive research that supported exact rank as the preferred method for ranking among high school and college admission officers.

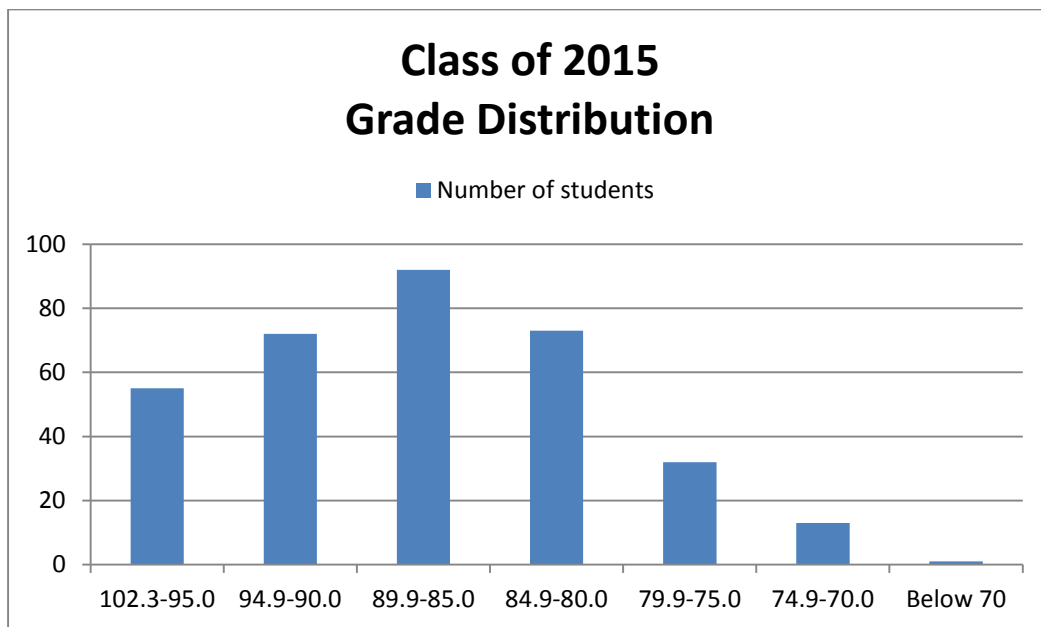
While reviewing specific data from MBHS that ranked students on the 100-point and 4-point scales, the committee examined two classes of GPA rankings. In the 2014 data, an MBHS student with an "A" average GPA could be ranked as high as 1st in the class to as low as 143rd out of 324. The data supported the committee's findings that, while exact class rank sorts students compared to local peers, it does not reflect a student's standings compared to those that he/she is competing with for college admission and scholarships nationally. Exact rank reflected our high-achieving students negatively because they are attending a high-performing school. When ACT, GPA, and rigor of coursework are all equal, a given Mountain Brook student may have a lower class rank because his or her peers are also high-performing.

The committee conducted interviews with admission officers from Vanderbilt, Wake Forest, and Washington and Lee. The committee also received input from American University, Auburn

University, Birmingham-Southern College, Brown University, Georgia Tech, Hendrix College, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Alabama, the University of South Carolina, Wofford College, and Yale University. Throughout the interviews, the admission officers emphasized the importance of reporting some type of comparison from the school district to assist them in developing a profile of our student body and their academic performance. In the absence of this data, admission officers are left to seek out that information, use their own judgment, or guess how the student performed relative to their high school peers. The admission officers emphasized the long-term importance of ranking in *some* way, but not necessarily using exact rankings. The committee also asked that the admission officers review transcripts without a class rank to share their thoughts about which candidates would be viewed positively for admissions. In this process, two of the three candidates reviewed, according to these admission officers, would have very likely been admitted. After revealing the class rank of the candidates, some of whom had a "lower" rank with high achievement, several admission officers noted that, had it been printed on the transcript, their rank would have negatively influenced their decision to review the student as a candidate for admission.

Research found that schools that continue to use some ranking system have moved away from exact rank to another comparison system. One option would be to provide a student's decile. Students in the top 10% of the class would be in the 1<sup>st</sup> decile, students in the 11-20% of the class would be in the 2<sup>nd</sup> decile, etc. This type of comparison provides colleges the needed information to accurately evaluate candidates while also providing them a larger picture of the school as a whole.

Another option would be to provide a grade distribution to colleges that shows how many students have GPAs between certain levels. An example follows.



Providing either a decile or grade distribution encourages admission officers to dig deeper into the rigor and achievement of the student instead of relying on a number representing where a student falls in relation to his or her peers.

The committee's research supported the continued use of some form of class comparison in an effort to support our students in the admission and scholarship process but also encouraged us to further investigate alternative forms of comparison that would better promote our students during the admission and scholarship stages of college admissions. An alternate comparison report would portray a more accurate picture of our students in the eyes of postsecondary institutions.

## GPA Reporting Sub-Committee

### Historical Information

While the type of GPA reported on Mountain Brook’s transcript has changed over the years, historically the 100-point, weighted academic GPA has been the primary GPA. Over time MBHS found that adding additional GPAs to the transcript gave students more opportunities for admission and/or scholarships at some universities. Colleges understand the rigor of Mountain Brook Schools’ curriculum and that Mountain Brook students are well-prepared for college-level work.

Four GPAs are currently reported on the MBHS transcript. Below is a summary of the progression of different types of GPAs formally included on the MBHS transcript.

GPA(s) included on MBHS transcript	Formally Included	Purpose
100 point academic weighted GPA	1986	Emphasis on academic rigor
100 point academic weighted & 100 point unweighted GPA (all courses)	2007	To help students gain college admission to state schools
Either 4.0 weighted or 4.0 unweighted (all courses) GPA was added	2007	Whichever GPA would help (for admission and/or scholarships) was handwritten on transcripts to UA or AU. Computed by hand.
100 point weighted and unweighted 4 point weighted and unweighted	2012	Software system allowed MBHS to list all 4 GPAs.

The committee considered changes that had been made to the grading scale previously, because these changes also impacted GPA. As colleges became more selective around 2003 and 2004, admission to universities in Alabama became more competitive. State universities often rely solely on GPA and test scores to determine admission and/or scholarships. Mountain Brook Schools changed the grading scale beginning with the 2004-2005 school year, so that students would have more opportunities to gain admission to state universities. More GPAs were included on a student’s transcript to give the student more opportunity to be successful in the college admission and scholarship process. In 2011-2012, Mountain Brook Schools conducted a grading scale study after concerns arose that students were not being awarded scholarships in state due to Mountain Brook’s unique grading scale. Parents and students maintained that if Mountain Brook’s grading scale was similar to other area high schools, more students might receive scholarships to in-state universities. Note the history of Mountain Brook Schools’ grading scale below:

Prior to 2004-2005

92-100 = A

83-91 = B

74-82 = C

65-73 = D

Below 65 = F

Beginning with 2004-2005

92-100 = A

80-91 = B

70-79 = C

65-69 = D

Below 65 = F

Beginning with 2012-2013

90-100 = A

80-89 = B

70-79 = C

65-69 = D

Below 65 = F

## Process

The committee met three times. We reviewed how Mountain Brook calculates and reports GPAs as well as the methods employed by other schools similar to MBHS in Birmingham and across the country (Highland Park High School in Dallas and New Trier High School outside Chicago). There are many ways to calculate a GPA. Among the Birmingham area schools we considered, no two schools reported GPA the same way.

We met with college representatives from the six colleges who attended the College Admission Workshop (American University, Georgia Tech, Hendrix College, The University of South Carolina, Vanderbilt University, and Wofford College) and surveyed several others colleges and universities via email. There was no consistent answer in how a GPA should be reported or calculated. Some universities take the GPA directly from the transcript while others compute a GPA specific to their purposes. One university representative shared, “The transcript should reflect the school system’s definition of what it sees as the most accurate reflection of the student’s body of work.”

After listening to one student’s experience, the committee began to explore alternate ways of calculating a GPA that might benefit MBHS students. The main issue became whether MBHS should include all courses in the weighted GPA. The committee also discussed not listing a GPA on the transcript or only including an unweighted GPA for some students. The committee determined that information included on a transcript should be consistent to maintain the integrity of Mountain Brook Schools. While a student, applying to a university, might benefit from a different GPA calculation, his or her GPA might be adversely affected at another university.

The committee examined whether Mountain Brook Schools should include electives in the weighted GPA. Case studies of a cross-section of students were presented comparing a student’s current GPA with how that GPA would change if the weighted GPA included all courses. In looking at data from 2012-2014, it was determined that adding elective courses into a student’s GPA could potentially increase the GPAs of students in the middle of the class, but lower the GPAs of students in the top of the class.

Consider this example detailing how many students at MBHS have over a 4.0 GPA and how many students have between a 3.3 and 3.5 GPA. Many in-state universities require a student to have a 3.5 to receive a merit scholarship.

- In 2014, 55 students had over a 4.0 weighted GPA. 30 students had between a 3.3 & 3.5.
- In 2013, 77 students had over a 4.0 weighted GPA. 46 students had between a 3.3 & 3.5.
- In 2012, 45 students had over a 4.0 weighted GPA. 30 students had between a 3.3 & 3.5.

If we recalculated GPAs to include all courses plus weights, it could potentially benefit students with GPAs between a 3.3 and 3.5. If a student has over a 4.0 GPA, adding elective courses would lower the student’s GPA. For every student that could have an improved GPA, more students could have a lower GPA if we calculated all courses plus weights for Advanced and AP courses.

Currently MBHS has both weighted and unweighted courses. Some electives are weighted while others are not. Whether a course is weighted is based on academic rigor and determined by the high school administration when the course is introduced. The group considered a review of which courses are weighted, but noted that changing this could put less emphasis on academics. It would also decrease a student's GPA if that GPA is above a 4.0. In the discussion, the committee noted that weighting more electives would have a negative effect on those students with a GPA above a 4.0 and could dissuade students from taking those courses.

### **Conclusion of the Class Rank and GPA Reporting Committee**

- Class comparison is valuable to students, the high school, and college admission officers.
- How we choose to communicate class comparison should be done in an effort to represent our students in the best manner compared to the high achieving status of their high school peers.
- Many high schools across the country report GPAs differently, and colleges and universities have different ways of using that information. The colleges will determine what data suits their purposes.
- We are in the center of the spectrum in determining how GPAs are reported nationwide. Some schools use fewer courses to determine a GPA, while others are more inclusive.
- Mountain Brook High School includes several GPAs on the transcript to provide colleges the information they need to evaluate students.

### **Findings**

The committee's purpose aligns with one of the values of Mountain Brook Schools: to help students gain admission into the college of their choice. The committee weighed the goals of helping students in gaining admission to college and/or putting students in the best position to receive scholarships at specific universities. Scholarships are important, but scholarship opportunities also change frequently and are determined by a university's needs and goals. Our primary goal is to help students gain admission into the college of their choice.

There is no clear answer for all students collectively, because colleges and universities look at GPAs differently. Some are looking at GPAs for admission purposes only while others use GPA to award scholarships. It was determined that the way in which Mountain Brook Schools calculates and reports GPA benefits the highest number of students. We are in the center of the spectrum in determining how GPAs are reported nationwide. Some schools use fewer courses to determine GPA while others are more inclusive. If we change how we determine GPAs to include electives in the weighted GPA, we would adversely affect a significant amount of students.

Mountain Brook Schools should take care not to deter students from taking electives for fear those classes may lower their GPAs. Mountain Brook High School wants to encourage a student's passion supported by high academic rigor and preparation. Reporting both a weighted and

unweighted GPA communicates a complete picture of the student and what he or she may add to a college community.

Communication with parents, students, and all stakeholders is important. The Course Selection Guide, Career Prep B, and the Mountain Brook website all assist in providing information about how GPAs are calculated.

### **Recommendations**

Based on our study, the committee recommends removing exact class rank as part of the transcript and adopting a grade distribution as an alternate form of reporting class comparison.

The committee also determined that the way in which Mountain Brook Schools currently calculates and reports GPA benefits the highest number of students and recommends no change at this time.

### **Addendum**

A few questions were raised from the community that needed to be addressed further:

**1. Will removing class rank hurt students at the top of the class when applying to college?**

The committee's research and our experience helping students with the admission process for a number of years shows that the removal of class rank will help students at every level. We are aware of multiple situations in which Mountain Brook High School students at the top of their class have been negatively impacted by exact class rank in the admission process. Our experience was confirmed by college admission professionals through the committee's research. The highest GPA in the senior class will be reported, and all Honor Graduates will be recognized at graduation. With a new reporting system, it will remain clear to colleges which student is number one in the class. If the school reports to colleges that the top group of students had GPAs in the range of 104.2 through 104.9, it will be clear that the student with a 104.9 GPA is the number one student in the class.

**2. Will removing class rank impair motivation and competition among our students?**

In our discussions with students, we found there is a place for healthy competition among students. However, class rank is not the only means by which this can be measured. In addition, the school system provides many opportunities for the top-performing student to be recognized, including listing of honor graduates, listings of students' awards, recognition of National Merit Finalists and Semi-Finalists, and National Honor Society.

**3. How would MBHS name a valedictorian?**

Mountain Brook High Schools has never actually named a valedictorian. When Mountain Brook High School was founded, a group of faculty and staff met to discuss how to



acknowledge students at the top of the class. This initial group decided to acknowledge the top ten students in the class in lieu of naming a valedictorian or salutatorian. Graduation speakers were selected from this group. As the population of the high school increased in subsequent years, the administration decided to name the top 5% as Honor Graduates. To date, Mountain Brook High School honors the top 5% of students in the class at graduation. The group meets early in the second semester of senior year to select which students from the group would like to speak at graduation. Three speakers are determined by a vote of their peers. All Honor Graduates are seated and receive their diplomas in order of their weighted GPA on the 100-point scale. This process will not change with the removal of class rank. Mountain Brook will continue to honor students in the top of the class as Honor Graduates.