

Academic Recognition and Latin Honors

In a proficiency-based learning system, meeting or exceeding standards defines success, and every student should be given the same opportunity to achieve proficiency and excel academically.

For this reason, the Great Schools Partnership recommends that schools use systems of academic recognition that are based on consistently applied standards, such as Latin honors (*Summa Cum Laude*, *Magna Cum Laude*, and *Cum Laude*), rather than relative measures of performance and peer comparisons, such as traditional systems of class ranking.

Widely used by colleges and universities, in addition to a growing number of high schools throughout the country, Latin honors not only have a long and storied academic tradition, but the system is familiar and understandable to parents, college admissions officers, and prospective employers.

Our rationale for advocating Latin honors is described below. Also see our district policy on Latin honors.

For additional reading on this topic, we recommend “Class Rank Weighs Down True Learning,” by Thomas R. Guskey (*Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2014, vol. 95, no. 6, pages 15–19).

The Advantages of Latin Honors

- 1. Latin honors recognize the academic accomplishments of more students.** Instead of honoring only a handful of students whose performance may be based on relatively small differences in GPA, Latin honors recognize all students whose performance exceeded high academic standards.
- 2. Latin honors represent a much broader spectrum of academic accomplishment.** The three levels of Latin honors—*Summa Cum Laude*, *Magna Cum Laude*, and *Cum Laude*—can be adapted by schools to reflect their distinct academic standards, while also giving more students the opportunity to work hard and earn recognition for their achievements.
- 3. Latin honors are more fundamentally equitable.** When academic recognition is based on relative measures and student-to-student comparisons, rather than the same consistent standards, one student’s success is another student’s failure, and vice versa. And when “success” and “failure” are defined by fractionally small differences in GPA, the fundamental fairness of the system is called into question.
- 4. Colleges, universities, and the general public are familiar with Latin honors.** Instead of devising a new system of academic recognition that may be unfamiliar or confusing, schools can use Latin honors, which provide an established, understandable system with a long and storied academic tradition.



The Disadvantages of Class Rank

1. **Class ranking only recognizes a comparatively small number of students**—the valedictorian, salutatorian, and top-performing percentiles—whose performance has been measured against other students, rather than the same consistently applied learning standards.
2. **In some cases, fractional differences in GPA often determine class rank.** For example, a mere thousandth of a point difference in GPA may determine which student becomes the valedictorian or which students fall within the top tenth percentile. Such vanishingly small differences in academic performance can render class-ranking comparisons essentially meaningless, including graduating classes with ten or twenty-five “valedictorians” who all achieved numerically perfect academic records.
3. **Students may decline to take educationally valuable courses or pursue personal interests** because certain courses may be considered too challenging (therefore presenting a greater likelihood of a lower grade) or because they present a mathematical disadvantage when it comes to calculating GPA and class rank (such as non-weighted arts courses, for example, in schools that use weighted-grade systems).
4. **Students may narrowly fixate on numerical indicators of academic performance and minuscule scoring discrepancies** that might adversely affect their GPA. Consequently, they may also experience greater anxiety, academic pressure, or feelings of failure, rather than enjoying learning, challenging themselves academically, accepting and overcoming failures, or focusing on the larger purpose and benefits of education.