



Texas Association of School Boards

## Adopting A Uniform Grade Point Average (GPA) Calculation for Texas Public Schools: Challenges and Outstanding Issues

Adopting a GPA methodology is a controversial activity for local school boards. School boards carefully deliberate such issues as: which courses to include; whether to give equal additional weight to dual credit, pre-Advanced Placement (AP), pre-International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, AP and IB courses; how to weight the grades for courses transferred from out-of-state or private schools; whether to adopt a 4.0 scale; and, what numerical values to assign to transferred letter grades (i.e., will an A+ equate to a 95, 98 or 100).

The GPA methodology ultimately adopted by a school board reflects the values of the local community. For example, in some communities, marching band counts towards the GPA and in others, it does not. Some school boards believe that AP/IB courses are more rigorous than dual credit course; others do not. The GPA methodology also reflects the courses the community considers to most accurately portray the knowledge and skills a student has gained in high school.

### Legislative Action

For several sessions, legislators have tried to pass bills requiring the commissioner of education to adopt a uniform GPA methodology for all Texas public schools. Some legislators were motivated by a desire to trump the decisions of their local school board; others wanted to make it easier for colleges to compare applicants' GPAs.

In 2005, the legislature created Texas Education Code §28.0252 (a), *authorizing, but not requiring*, the commissioner of education to adopt a standard GPA calculation for Texas public schools. The commissioner of education investigated that possibility during 2006, but ultimately chose not to adopt a uniform GPA methodology.

In 2007, the legislature passed House Bill 3851, the asserted purpose of which was to create a uniform GPA methodology for university admissions counselors to use to compare the GPAs of freshman applicants. However, HB 3851 amended two sections of the Texas Education Code, §28.0252(b) and §51.807, and in so doing caused great confusion.

Section **28.0252 (b)** clarifies that *if* the commissioner of education adopts a uniform GPA for public schools and if The Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) adopts a conflicting uniform GPA (as authorized by §51.807), then school districts must use THECB's GPA calculation for purposes of determining a student's eligibility for university admission.

Section **51.807** states in pertinent part:

To ensure a uniform standard for [public university] admissions under this subchapter, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board shall adopt rules establishing a standard method for computing a student's high school grade point average.

The method established under this subsection must be based on a four-point scale, and assign additional weight for each honors course, advanced placement course, international baccalaureate course, or dual credit course completed by the student as the board considers appropriate, taking into consideration the academic rigor of each course completed by the student; and may result in a student having a grade point average higher than 4.0 on a four-point scale as a result of the assignment of additional weight for one or more courses completed by the student...." [emphasis added]

The standard method established for computing a student's high school grade point average applies to ... a student applying as a first-time freshman for [university] admission beginning with the admissions for the 2009 fall semester.

### **Issue 1: Do school districts have to use THECB's uniform GPA?**

Because the commissioner of education had not adopted a uniform GPA calculation as authorized under TEC §28.0252 (a), it was unclear whether school districts were required to use THECB's uniform GPA pursuant to TEC §28.0252 (b). THECB sought an Attorney General (AG) Opinion to determine (1) whether school districts were required to use THECB's uniform GPA methodology, and (2) if so, whether districts had to use the uniform GPA calculation for determining class rank starting with the 2008-09 high school senior class (i.e., those students who will be applying for university admission as first-time freshmen to begin college in the fall of 2009-10).

In May 2008, the AG ruled that school districts do have to use the uniform GPA calculation developed by THECB to determine class rank for the purpose of college admissions.

## Issue 2: When does the new rule apply?

Although TEC § 51.807 seems to state that the uniform methodology applies beginning with students applying to college in fall 2009, the AG ruled that because the legislature did not intend for THECB's uniform GPA calculation to apply retroactively, schools must only start using THECB's GPA methodology starting with students in ninth grade in the 2009-10 school year.

## Issue 3: Which courses will "count" in the Uniform GPA Calculation?

In early September 2008, THECB proposed a standard method for computing a student's high school GPA. Under the proposed rules, "*academic courses* included in Chapters 110-114" of the 19 Texas Administrative Code (TAC) "regardless of when the course was taken" would count towards the uniform GPA. [emphasis added]

THECB intended the reference to 19 TAC Chapters 110-114 to mean that only academic courses for which the State Board of Education has established Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) would count towards the high school GPA, since academic courses are the best predictors of a student's likely success in college. However, the reference to 19 TAC Chapters 110-114 has raised several issues, namely:

- Many of the courses required for high school graduation under the Recommended High School Program (RHSP) or Advanced/Distinguished High School Program are not contained in 19 TAC Chapters 110-114. For example, the TEKS for Fine Arts courses are contained in 19 TAC *Chapter 117*. Students are required to earn one fine arts credit to graduate from high school under the RHSP, but under the proposed GPA rules, it is unclear whether their grade(s) in fine arts course(s) would count towards their high school GPA.
- Chapters 110-114 include both academic and non-academic courses and make no delineation between the two. Furthermore, the term "academic" is not defined in any Texas statute or rule, so it is unclear which of the courses listed in Chapters 110-114 would count in the GPA.
- Career and Technology courses are not contained within 19 TAC Chapter 110-114; yet, the State Board of Education has said that five CTE courses fulfill the advanced math and science credits for graduation on the RHSP. Consequently, it is unclear whether grades in any CTE courses would count toward the uniform GPA.

**Solution:** The Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) has recommended that all courses required for high school graduation under the RHSP be included in the uniform GPA calculation. The RHSP is a known quantity with which school district officials and parents are familiar. Using a clear set of courses will help prevent school districts and universities from interpreting the GPA rules differently, which would undermine the intent of the uniform system.

#### **Issue 4: Which courses will receive additional “weight” in the Uniform GPA Calculation?**

The rules proposed by THECB would provide additional “weight” in calculating the GPA for dual credit, AP and IB courses, but would not award additional weight for “honors” courses. The term “honors” is no longer defined in state law; however, many school districts use that term to designate more rigorous courses (other than AP or IB courses) that get additional weight in their GPA calculation. Thus, the term honors typically includes “pre-AP” or “pre-IB” courses. THECB’s rationale is that local school boards have the authority to designate courses as “pre-AP” or “pre-IB,” and there is no regulatory oversight or curricular standards to ensure uniformity. As a result, the rigor of those courses varies significantly among districts.

Most school districts currently provide additional weight in the GPA calculation for pre-AP and pre-IB courses for two reasons: (1) to acknowledge that these courses are more rigorous than regular courses, and (2) to incentivize students to pursue the more rigorous high school curriculum. Without additional weight in the GPA calculation, it is inevitable that students will choose to take less rigorous courses in order to achieve a higher GPA, rather than risk getting a lower grade in the more rigorous pre-AP or pre-IB course. As a result, students will graduate from high school less academically prepared to enter college or the workforce.

Furthermore, school district officials believe that the Texas Education Agency (TEA), rather than THECB should regulate the rigor of courses taught in public schools. And, the education community believes that THECB’s argument against weighting pre-AP and pre-IB courses could be applied to dual credit courses as well, yet the GPA rules propose to provide additional weight for dual credit courses.

**Solution:** The proposed GPA rules should provide additional weight for pre-AP and pre-IB courses.

#### **Conclusion**

The proposed uniform GPA rules have sparked a lively debate over the content of the uniform GPA methodology. But underlying the debate over content are important policy considerations: Should the high school GPA primarily be a predictor of college success? Or, should it more broadly measure what a student has learned in high school? And, what messages does the GPA methodology send to students about the relative value of high school courses?

The public education community believes that the rules proposed by THECB do not include sufficient courses either to predict a student’s success in college or to portray accurately a student’s learning in high school. They also assert that the proposed GPA methodology will incentivize students to take less rigorous courses in high school, thus undermining the state’s goal of graduating high school students who are academically prepared to succeed in college or the workforce.