



Dear Key Communicators:

On October 23, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board will take action on the proposed rules that will establish and enact the Uniform Grade Point Average (UGPA) legislation. This is a very contentious issue that will have a significant impact on our students who are currently enrolled in the eighth grade and all future high school students. I have provided information to you regarding this matter, but I need to share additional information.

The two documents that are attached are an article written by Dr. Raymund Paredes, Commissioner of Higher Education, and a response that I have written to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

I urge you to contact your legislators regarding the proposed rules, regardless of whether you support or oppose them as they are written. I firmly believe that the legislator did not intend for the UGPA to negatively impact our students, as these rules will do, and I also believe that the rules have a very good chance of being approved on October 23. After you read both documents, I believe that you will reach an informed opinion. If not, please contact Dr. Cheryl Salyards at [cheryl.salyards@cfisd.net](mailto:cheryl.salyards@cfisd.net) or me at [david.anthony@cfisd.net](mailto:david.anthony@cfisd.net).

David Anthony

## High GPAs without rigor are meaningless

Guest column by Raymund A. Paredes, Ph.D.

Commissioner of Higher Education

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

In the 2007 legislative session, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) was charged with developing a method of calculating the grade point averages of Texas high school students for use in admission decisions at state universities. Recently, editorial staff at an area newspaper took exception to my early conclusions on the matter. One of their readers later wrote in and accused me of “dumbing down” Texas education and wondered out loud if I was “completely nuts.”

The source of this agitation is my expressed concern about the practice in some Texas high schools of giving extra grade-point credit to certain courses labeled “pre-Advanced Placement.” There are no statewide standards for such courses and they vary widely in quality and rigor. Selective universities around the country almost never give weighted credit to pre-AP courses and, in a recent meeting of admission directors and officers from Texas public universities hosted by THECB staff, the consensus was against bonus points for pre-AP courses. This was mostly because of the absence of consistent standards but also because the admissions officers felt that receiving bonus points for actual AP courses, which will be weighted and are standardized, should be incentive enough to take pre-AP. Rigor in pre-AP courses is a genuine concern. I recently received a letter from a pre-AP English teacher who argued passionately for the extra effort of her students who were required to read two novels over the summer and thus far in the academic year had “annotated” the two novels. However, research shows that children must read steadily over the summer—typically, five books or more—simply to maintain prior reading levels. As a university English professor for 30 years, I can say that, whatever the merits of annotation, we prefer that students come to our beginning classes with ample experience in writing sustained, thoughtful and lucid essays.

The argument for extra credit for pre-AP that was expressed in the editorial and echoed by some critics is that without this incentive, students will not take rigorous courses but simply inflate their GPAs by taking, as one teacher put it, the “regular, easy” courses. This strikes me as an argument that misses the larger issue: what we need to do in Texas is not create artificial incentives for students to take rigorous courses but establish rigor across the entire high school curriculum. The evidence for this strategy is overwhelming. ACT, which tests over 70,000 Texas students every year, concludes that only 20 percent of Texas high school graduates are college-ready. THECB data show that 50 percent of entering Texas college students require remedial education and a just-released report by a coalition of Texas business leaders and education reformers calls for much higher levels of rigor in our schools. A recent national report by the Strong American Schools organization carries the title “Diploma to Nowhere” and warns that American high schools “profoundly fail” to prepare students for post-secondary work. The report further notes that nearly 80 percent of college students who required remediation had a B average or higher in high school. Let me be clear: if Texans want our state to be nationally and globally competitive and if we wish to assure a high quality of life for future generations, we must not give our children a choice between rigorous courses and “easy” ones. All courses

should be rigorous and we should give bonuses to students only for doing well in courses of demonstrable exceptional rigor such as actual AP courses. This is not “dumbing down” but the opposite.

The College Board, which administers the AP program, takes the sensible position that its pre-AP instructional practices and content should be imbedded in all courses prior to AP and warns that designating only certain courses as “pre-AP” can lead to “tracking,” a practice through which only a minority of students are exposed to rigorous courses and the rest, often poor, often students of color, are left to languish in courses that lead to nowhere. This is at odds with every fundamental principle of American democracy.

The newspaper editorial was correct in its assertion that many parents (and students, for that matter) are more concerned about high GPAs than they are about the quality of education and the preparation it provides for life beyond high school. Parents and students need to understand that high GPAs without rigor are meaningless. Just think of all those B students in college remediation courses.

At an October 22 meeting of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, I will make a final recommendation regarding the calculation of high school GPA for admission to Texas universities. As a result of recent meetings with educators, parents and other interested parties, my colleagues and I have already adjusted some preliminary recommendations; for example, we have sharpened language to assure that the critical role of the arts is considered in the GPA calculation. Over the next several weeks, we will consider further adjustments, all with one goal in mind: how to calculate GPA in a manner that promotes excellence and rigor for all Texas youngsters.

**Raymund A. Paredes, Ph.D.**

Commissioner of Higher Education  
Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

October 13, 2008

Trustees  
Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board  
P. O. Box 12788  
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Dear Board Members:

Please review my response to Commissioner Paredes' Op-Ed, "High GPAs without rigor are meaningless," that was provided to the members of the Advisory Board for their use.

I read with interest the musings of Dr. Paredes attempting to justify a near meaningless action by the THECB in creating an artificial Uniform Grade Point Average (UGPA) for high school students in Texas. I say, "near meaningless" because I am still unsure of the purpose of this action. As long as the Top 10 Percent rule exists for Texas' high school graduates (automatic admission to state-supported Texas universities), a UGPA only impacts Texas students who are not within the top 10 percent of their graduating class; it does not affect students in private schools in Texas, nor does it affect students who seek admission into Texas' public universities from out-of-state. In school districts that currently offer many AP courses, the top ten percent of students will be virtually unaffected.

Several times in Dr. Paredes' thesis, he mentions the lack of statewide standards for advanced or pre-Advanced Placement (pre-AP) courses. He also indicates that "bonus" points or weighted grade points should only be available for Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB) or dual credit courses because of the consistency of the standards. That sounds reasonable, but it is not an accurate assessment of the state of affairs. There are standard syllabi for AP courses, approved by the College Board; however, the instruction that occurs in AP classes within a high school or among districts throughout the state may vary significantly. Although AP teachers are trained by the College Board and syllabi for the courses are approved, there is no guarantee that the instructional rigor in the courses is consistent or standardized. As a matter of fact, consistency is just as much a problem in AP courses as in on-level courses if end-of-course AP exams are not administered to all students enrolled and students must achieve specified scores on those exams. More than likely, this is the reason that universities only award course credit to students who have obtained a score of three or higher on AP exams. The inconsistency in rigor is also true for dual credit courses. The degree of rigor is dependent on the college, college system and school district involved. His argument may sound good, but so did the proposal for a UGPA. In reality, the rules don't increase college readiness for more students; in fact, the opposite will be true.

In addition, Dr. Paredes indicates that weighted grade points for AP courses "is incentive enough to take pre-AP" courses. He has been a college professor for 30 years, which may account for his perspective regarding the thinking of high school students. This limited foresight may be prevalent with university students, but few high school students

will be willing to risk damage to their GPAs in order to better prepare for AP courses. Under Dr. Paredes' plan, students would actually be rewarded for taking "easier" non-pre-AP courses (where the odds of a 95%-plus grade are higher) and then complete additional preparation for AP courses outside of the school day with private tutors or with the assistance of well-educated parents. These students would then be prepared for the higher-weighted AP courses without having to risk losing GPA points in pre-AP courses. The advantage afforded to students of a higher economic status would create the least level playing field. Many of our students want an incentive to take more rigorous courses, since earning top-10-percent status and a higher grade point average are of significant benefit. Why should students not be rewarded for taking courses that are far more rigorous? The legislature has recognized that high school students need to perform at a higher level and has provided funding in the Texas High School Allotment to develop practices and opportunities for students to increase their success. Taking away incentives for all students to enroll in more rigorous courses will set public education back years.

The proposed grading scale for awarding weighted grade points is certainly a major concern. Students who earn a grade between 90 and 94 in an AP course would not receive the equivalent grade points awarded for an "A" in the same course offered on a university campus. The scale provided by the THECB not only minimizes the importance of the letter grades established by the legislature, it awards grade points at a 60 percent level, which is an F in public schools—not college. The THECB proposal, which does not require approval by the State Board of Education or the Commissioner of Education, evidently does not acknowledge the grading scale established by the legislature in statute. The variance in range in weighted grade points within the letter grades indicate that all of our teachers are trained psychometricians whose tests meet all reliability and validity standards, thus justifying a grade-point differential of 0.1 point in the GPA for each one percent (1%) differential in the average. Not only is that not true in high school where teachers may have 10 to 15 graded assignments per grading period, it is not true in college courses where a student might have three to five grades per semester. While we typically grade assignments on a percent mastery scale, it is with full knowledge that the final credit will be awarded on a scale differentiated by increments of 10 percent. This proposed grading scale is more precise than the University of Texas' graduate course grading scale. Apparently Dr. Paredes has much higher expectations of our high school teachers' ability to assign grades than the abilities of graduate school instructors.

We are making improvements and the proposed action by the THECB will thwart our efforts; it will not cause our students and parents to change their perspectives. The pre-AP or advanced courses will not "track" students, as Dr. Paredes alleges any more than AP, IB, and dual credit courses create tracks. We encourage all of our students to take more rigorous courses and the opportunity exists for all students; it is a choice for them and for their parents.

Dr. Paredes quotes several statistics regarding the percentage of high school graduates who require "developmental" or remedial courses when they enter college. The first

piece of information that must be understood regarding placement in developmental courses is that the standards for that decision vary from college to college or at least from university system to university system. The standards fluctuate and there is little, if any, communication with school districts establishing the standards for placing a student in a full tuition, no credit course in college. The data for determining the percentage of students who are enrolled in developmental college courses might, if one were a conspiracy theorist, depend on space or revenues. Some of the data for developing the percentage of students requiring developmental courses come from community colleges, where the average age of the students is 23-25 years old. Many of the students have been out of high school for several years before they decide to enroll in college. One would be accurate in assuming that some of those students might need developmental courses. I would urge the THECB to “standardize” the requirements for placing students in developmental courses before using the data as if it were scientific.

Before the THECB takes formal action on the rules for implementing a Uniform Grade Point Average, I would urge all parents of students in grades eight or below to provide input to their legislators, since it appears that the THECB and Dr. Paredes have already made their decision. I do not believe that our legislators envisioned a rule that would have such a negative impact on our students in order to provide a benefit to college admissions officers. This proposed rule is not a gold standard as the THECB would have us believe. As a matter of fact, rather than a gold standard, it more closely resembles iron disulfide, more commonly known as fools’ gold.

Sincerely,

David Anthony, Ed.D  
Superintendent  
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