

Schools Moving to Curb Wrangling Over Rankings

By Sara Rimer

March 9, 2003

Rhoda Kanet says her daughter, Sharisse, deserves to be valedictorian of Hull High School. Peter Frazier says his daughter, Joanna, has earned that honor.

In hopes of prevailing, Ms. Kanet recently sued the school committee over the matter -- even though she happens to be a member.

At a recent committee meeting, Ms. Kanet, a lawyer and private SAT coach whose daughter was not included in her class rankings because she enrolled in college before graduating, and Mr. Frazier, an insurance broker, faced off yet again. "This issue, for me and my daughter, is not only about who is and who isn't valued," Ms. Kanet began.

Mr. Frazier objected on the grounds that Ms. Kanet was getting needlessly personal. "She shouldn't have the mike," he called out from the audience. "Take it away."

The battle over who will be valedictorian has taken an extreme turn here in this tight-knit community of civil servants and professionals, 45 minutes south of Boston. But experts say fights over high school class rankings are becoming more common as the competitiveness and anxiety over admission to top colleges grow ever more intense.

School officials say the quest for the valedictorian title has become so fierce that some students are more focused on their grade-point averages than on what they might be learning. In some cases, they are choosing courses because, in the

calibrations at play in the rankings, one course could give them an edge in the contest of a tenth of a point, or even a hundredth or a thousandth. Conversely, in schools where courses may not be weighted, some students select less challenging classes to score easy A's.

To end the wrangling over rank, an increasing number of school districts are eliminating the top two slots altogether. This year, for the first time, Geneva High School, in northern Illinois, will not have a valedictorian or salutatorian, instead honoring the top 5 percent of students.

"This is clearly a trend that started in the private schools and skipped to the public schools," said Christopher Hooker-Haring, the dean of admissions at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa.

Often, Mr. Hooker-Haring said, high school officials are responding to pressure from parents. "We're increasingly living in a Lake Wobegon society where everyone's child is above average, and everyone wants their child to be significantly above average," he said. "They want the school to enable that by designating more than one student valedictorian -- or eliminating class rank so no one's at the bottom."

He added, "Now, rather than being able to take a valedictorian designation at face value, it might be shared by 15 students."

In Geneva, the school board did away with the top rankings amid concerns that students were opting for advanced placement classes that carry the maximum points rather than, say, art, which they might be interested in, but which is not weighted and would not bolster their grade-point average. "You're 17, and you can't take time out for a ceramics course you're interested in," said Jane Gazdziak, the superintendent of curriculum. "They'll say, 'My mom or dad won't let me, it won't get me into college.'"

The Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner says the obsession with rankings is a sign of the middle- and upper-middle-class urban myth: "That life is a race, that the funnel narrows quickly, and that if you don't get into Harvard or Stanford, you

won't have any life chances."

"The lust for the highest grades becomes an end in itself, rather than an accurate index of intellectual curiosity or deep understanding or original thought," Professor Gardner said.

In Riverside County, Calif., 90 miles east of Los Angeles, there has been talk in the Hemet school district about modifying the way valedictorian and salutatorian are selected at the two high schools. Tom DeSantis, the president of the school board, said that under the current system the more affluent students have an unfair advantage. "The kids who can afford it go to prestigious universities and take summer courses to spike their grade point," he said.

"The strategy begins in the eighth grade for many of them," Mr. DeSantis added. "It leaves me wondering whether the program recognizes the most successful student or the most successful strategist."

At Memphis High School in Michigan, 50 miles north of Detroit, Brian Deletka, a senior, is the salutatorian. In January he filed suit against the school district, claiming that one of his A's should rightfully have been an A plus, which would have made him valedictorian.

"I think it makes a difference if you're valedictorian," Mr. Deletka said. Salutatorian, he said, "is kind of like if you got to the Super Bowl, but you came in second."

Contrary to what many students and parents believe, being first or second does not guarantee admission to a top college. Of 19,609 applicants to Harvard last year, 2,889 were valedictorians, according to Harvard's director of admissions, Marlyn McGrath Lewis. Harvard chose about 20 percent of those valedictorians, and about 600 of them are in this year's class of 1,650 freshmen.

"To get in, you have to present some real distinction in the applicant pool," Ms. McGrath Lewis said, and being a valedictorian in itself "is not likely to represent distinction." Many high schools, she said, are moving toward categorizing students according to which tenth or quarter of the class they are in.

For all the striving to be valedictorian, the experts say, it does not guarantee spectacular success in life, any more than it guarantees admission to a top college.

Karen D. Arnold, a professor of higher education at Boston College, is the author of "Lives of Promise: What Becomes of High School Valedictorians?" (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995). She has spent more than 15 years studying 81 valedictorians who graduated in 1981 from high schools across Illinois and went on to colleges ranging from Kankakee Community College to Harvard.

"They know how to do school," Professor Arnold said. "They are not the group to look for for creative breakthroughs in entrepreneurialism or for becoming notable leaders in a particular area."

One valedictorian hopeful, Sharisse Kanet, enrolled this fall as a freshman at Wesleyan University after racing through Hull High School's handful of advanced placement classes. "I wasn't trying to be valedictorian," said Sharisse, 17, who wants to be a math teacher. "I was just trying to get into a really good school."

She says she left for college with assurances from Hull counselors that she could still graduate with her class this spring and be included in the rankings. She and her mother say their lawsuit is about holding school officials to their promises. But school officials say they made no promises about class rank.

Sharisse and her mother say they would be happy if she could be co-valedictorian with Joanna Frazier.

School officials are expected to adopt a policy requiring that the valedictorian and salutatorian attend six semesters of high school, including the two of senior year. Joanna, who has been ranked No. 2, would then become valedictorian.

"Being valedictorian definitely gives you the extra boost," said Joanna, who has applied to Dartmouth College and the Rhode Island School of Design.

When it comes to class rank, more than academic recognition is at stake at Hull. The University of Massachusetts offers generous scholarships to state colleges to the top two students in every public and private high school.

Nicole Struzziery is third in the class. She is looking to move up to the No. 2 slot. "That extra number would make a difference," said Nicole, who is hoping to go to Cornell.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section 1, Page 20 of the National edition with the headline: Schools Moving to Curb Wrangling Over Rankings