

Portsmouth School Department

Grade Scale Committee

Final Report

4/9/19

Committee Members

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Introduction

This Committee was formed to study the current Portsmouth High School (PHS) grade scale and to make a recommendation as to whether staying with the current grade scale or altering it would be to the benefit of all PHS students in terms of maintaining rigorous standards of learning, promoting post-secondary success and addressing the needs of the community. The primary concerns raised regarding the current 7-point grading scale relate to the college admissions process and scholarship access, as well as a perception of increased stress amongst our student body. The assumption underlying these concerns is that our current grading scale puts students at a disadvantage for college acceptance and academic merit scholarships when compared to students from a school with a 10-point grade scale. In addition, there has also been concern raised in relationship to students' difficulty passing classes due to the cut off for a failing grade being at 70. The Committee's task was to 1) create a discovery process as to the impact the 7-point scale has on college acceptances; gather staff feedback on 10-point vs. 7-point scales; and assess current grade distribution and understand the context of the 7-point scale at PHS; 2) Create a summary report of the findings. Additionally, the Committee gained feedback on grade scales from other New Hampshire High schools.

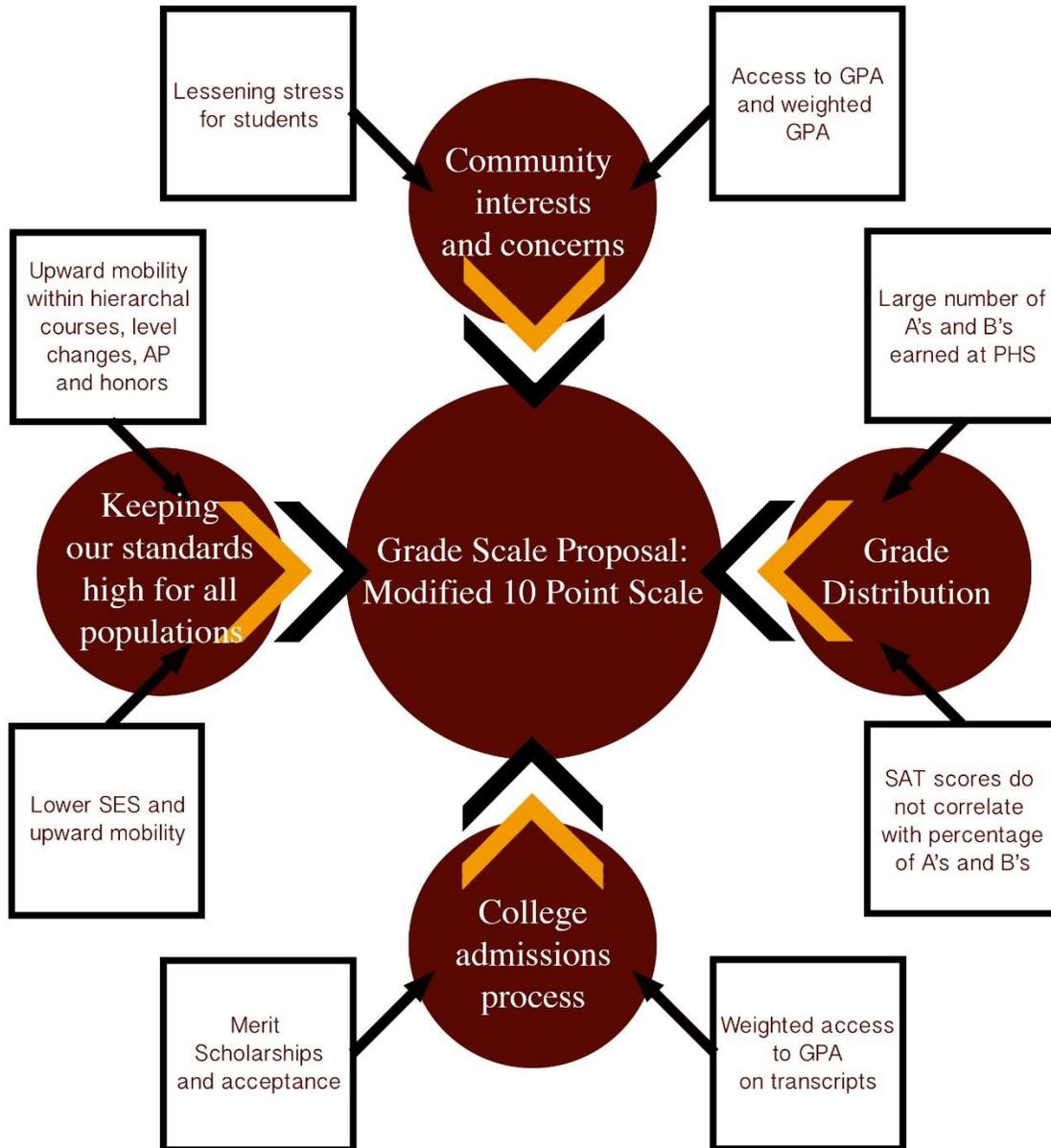
The Process

The Committee met from November 2018 to March 2019. In order to address the stated issues brought to us by the Board and community, the Committee designed two surveys- one to be distributed to colleges and universities and another survey to be distributed to staff (see appendix). The Committee also surveyed other New Hampshire high schools and studied data on the correlations between student grades and GPAs at PHS. This data, as well as SAT data, was compared to data from other New Hampshire high schools.

Throughout the process, the Committee continually made reference to our underserved populations and recognized the importance of keeping the bar held high in order to promote postsecondary success. The desire to keep these students on a positive trajectory of upward mobility within the PHS curriculum was a main concern. It was recognized that students in our lower range of the grade scale need to be able to pass significant tests such as the Acuplacer, SAT and ACT in order to become upwardly mobile citizens in our community, and in addition they need to be upwardly mobile within our academic community, in order to gain a transcript worthy of college admission. In other words, this specific demographic of students need to maintain a certain base of knowledge in order to succeed at the next level of learning whether it be at PHS or in our town, state, or country. This is in alignment with Portsmouth School Board's Equity Policy.

The following is a representation of the factors the Committee considered:

Portsmouth High School Grade Scale Committee Factors and Considerations



This report is intended to give an overview of the findings and general recommendations from the Committee to inform decisions to be made regarding the grading scale. The Committee recognizes that PHS teachers are currently engaged in discussions regarding grading practices and possible changes to reflect greater consistency within courses. As those discussions progress and any changes in grading practice are decided, it would seem an opportune time to calibrate those practices to the proposed grading scale. The Committee understands that those are important and often complicated conversations, and as a result, some adjustments in practice will take time to implement. The good news is that there is much to celebrate when it comes to student success at PHS and their preparation for post-secondary success as well.

Higher Ed Survey

Our higher ed survey aimed to collect information from a large cross-section of colleges and universities in order to gain a comprehensive picture of how they view the grade scale as a factor in college admissions and to gain access to their beliefs on grade scale translation. We also garnered feedback as to if and how it is a factor in admissions and potential scholarships. The survey was sent to a wide variety of schools across the country and we had 59 responses.

In response to a question of what evidence is most important when determining college admissions from schools with different grading scales, the following themes emerged:

- The strength of curriculum
- The completion of the most rigorous courses
- Other student involvement
- The majority recalculated GPAs to a 4.0 scale
- Students compared to the context of their school
- The school profile is important

We asked how familiar schools were with PHS and 38% were very familiar, 52% were somewhat familiar and 10% were not familiar. Those who responded they were familiar also commented on the strong reputation of PHS, citing also the strength of program, rigor, student engagement, and athletics.

We asked how they take into account the 7-point scale with + and -. All respondents said they either recalculate GPAs to a 4.0 scale or they don't compare students across schools only within a school. When asked if the 7-point scale put PHS students at a disadvantage for admissions, 5% responded they thought they were, 82% responded that it was a non-factor, and 12% responded it depended on other factors such as the student, coursework, etc. When asked if the scale affected the ability to get merit scholarships, 7% responded it did, 83% responded it

was a non-factor, and 10% responded that either they did not offer merit scholarships or only if other comparative data such as class rank is not available.

When asked how long the admissions office spends with the application the general theme was 15-20 minutes each, with some outliers as low as 5 minutes and as high as 40 minutes.

It is important to note that all respondents answered the survey questions without any additional data on the context of PHS grade distributions. As well, all respondents who said they were not familiar with PHS commented that the scale was a non-factor in admissions or scholarships.

School Staff Survey

We surveyed the PHS staff on the grade scale and received 66 responses. When asked what separates proficient student work from exemplary student work, common themes were:

- Work that goes above and beyond expectations
- Work characterized by high levels of inquiry and curiosity
- Work with unique insight and attention to detail
- Exceeding what is taught
- Creative thinking

All but 4 respondents said they are currently using the 7-point scale. Two teachers in Science, one SPED teacher and one World Language teacher responded they use a 10-point scale. Interestingly, when looking at grade distributions of teachers, these teachers had the same or fewer A's and B's as a percentage of overall grades.

When asked if a switch to a 10-point scale would prompt a change in grading practices that would change the grade students get for the same work, responses were varied. A majority said they would adjust their practices so that there would be little change in actual letter grades based on the new numeric scale.

Common themes in the comments from the teacher survey include:

- Student stress and motivation is generally independent from the grading scale. That is to say regardless of the scale those conditions will remain the same.
- Question of the motivation behind the proposed change
- The current scale does not help or hurt students as they get the grades they earn
- Changing the scale will only affect the perception of rigor
- Roughly 20-30% of comments advocate for a change to 10 points
- Some concern with lowering standards

Other NH High Schools

We looked at the grading scales used at other NH High Schools and the vast majority of schools use either a 10-point scale or a competency model. Some had recently shifted away from a 7-point scale and themes in the reasons for the switch focused primarily on consistency with other schools. The greater shift in NH seems to be towards a competency-based system of grading.

As one administrator from a school that recently changed put it:

“We had been debating our grade scale several times over the years, going back to the 1990's. The original scale was designed to be challenging, and to set our standards apart from other schools (no "minuses," higher numerical grade requirements to earn a B+, etc.). Because it had been part of the fabric of STA for so long, we (including myself) resisted making the change...in part because the transition period -- during which students' transcripts would have two different grade scales -- might be confusing, and in part because colleges already have a process for interpreting a school's particular grading system. However, we finally agreed to the change for the sake of consistency...”

Our Grading Data

It is difficult to compare the grading practices in one school to another, but as we researched available data on grades (GPA) and SAT scores we found no evidence the PHS students receive lower grades and thus have lower GPA's compared to comparable schools using a 10-point scale.

As a point of context, in 2017-2018 47% of all grades given to PHS students were A's, 34% B's, and 1% F's. Therefore A's and B's combined made up 81% of all grades.

At Portsmouth High School, 54% of every grade given in our hardest Level 5 classes are “A's” and another 40% are “B's” with a 7-Point Scale. While these percentages do go down as you look at lower levels, it is nonetheless hard to make the case that the 7-point scale is having a restricting effect on the distribution of A's and B's.

Looking at the entirety of Portsmouth High School, a full 45% of every grade earned across all 5 levels of classes and all grades was an “A”. The next grade, a “B”, is given out 34% of the time, for a combined 79% of every grade in Portsmouth being an “A” or “B”.

As these letter grades get converted into Grade Point Averages (GPAs), we sought to compare the GPA distributions of PHS students with other NH schools using a 10-point scale. In every

school we were able to compare, PHS students had a higher overall GPA while also having lower SAT scores.

Conclusions

“It’s not the scale, it’s how hard you grade.” The more information the Committee considered, the less the scale seemed to matter to student success. In addition, the more information the Committee considered, the more apparent it became that the more critical conversations are those happening among teachers about their grading practices.

While the concern over college admissions and merit scholarships were at the forefront of our inquiry, there is little real evidence the current grading scale is an advantage or a disadvantage. In fact, given our findings about PHS grading and comparable schools, one could probably make a case that it is highly variable depending on the context. If in general PHS students earn higher GPAs then it is conceivable the 7-point scale could be an advantage in institutions that perceive the 7-point scale more rigorous and give some consideration to that. That is to say the 7-point scale does not seem to restrict the number of A’s and B’s received by PHS students, but at the same time, the number of A’s and B’s earned varies considerably teacher by teacher so the same assumptions do not hold across all classrooms. It is impossible to play out every individual scenario of teacher and admissions office so our findings are inconclusive on that issue.

At the same time, there may be good reasons to consider grade scale changes. Our data suggests a need to further the teacher conversations around grading practices. Our staff survey identified an interest on the part of many teachers for greater consistency in grading. As the work of recalibrating grading practices moves forward it may be advantageous to consider a change in the scale at the same time.

In addition, the only movement in schools that we were able to find was away from the 7-point scale. As that scale is becoming more and more the exception, it becomes more important to justify its place at PHS. We know from our findings that moving to a 10-point scale does not necessarily mean students will automatically earn higher grades. In fact, it would be fair to suggest that given our data and the ongoing discussions about grading practices, that there would likely be the same distribution of grades and any shift in that distribution would be more likely a factor of changes in practices to establish greater consistency. Further, important themes emerged in our conversations with teachers about maintaining high standards and supporting students who may struggle.

Recommendations

Considering our findings and conclusions, the Committee offers the following grade scale proposal:

Course Letter Grade	Percentage Grade	4.0 Scale
A+	97-100	4.33
A	93-96	4.0
A-	90-92	3.7
B+	87-89	3.3
B	83-86	3.0
B-	80-82	2.7
C+	77-79	2.3
C	73-76	2.0
C-	70-72	1.7
AF (academic failure)	<70	0

This proposal considers a 10-point range for A's, B's, and C's while also maintaining a high standard for passing. It was stated by staff multiple times that keeping a high bar for passing with strong supports is critical to supporting our most vulnerable learners.

Considering the perspectives of many and suggestions to be as transparent as possible with GPA calculations, it is recommended that both the weighted and unweighted GPA be displayed on the transcript. It is also recommended that students have greater access to their GPA calculations. These were important considerations brought up by the students who have been instrumental in our conversations on the Committee and in the Student Senate.

Appendix

Higher Ed Survey

Portsmouth High School in Portsmouth, NH has a committee to look at the current 7-point grading scale and consider the pros and cons of the current scale to make any recommendations for changes. This brief survey will help us understand the impact, if any, of the grading scale on the admission of our students to colleges and universities. We appreciate your willingness to fill it out.

1. What evidence is most important to you when determining the admission of students from a variety of high schools with different grading systems and academic programs?

2. How familiar are you with the admission of students from Portsmouth High School, Portsmouth, NH?

Very familiar with the school

Somewhat familiar with the school

Not familiar with the school

3. If familiar with us, what is the reputation of Portsmouth High School at your institution?

4. PHS currently assigns letter grades with + and - based on a 7-point scale. In your admission process, would you take that into consideration when comparing a PHS student with a student from a school with a 10-point scale? If so, how specifically would you do that?

5. Do you recalculate GPA and, if so, what scale do you use? How specifically does your institution account for differences between students with a 7-point grade scale vs a 10-point scale?

6. In general, do you think students from a school with a 7-point scale have an easier or harder time gaining admission?

I think they have are at an advantage

I think they are at a disadvantage

I think it is a non-factor

Other (please specify)

7. In general, do you think students from a school with a 7-point scale have an easier or harder time gaining merit scholarships?

I think they have are at an advantage

I think they are at a disadvantage

I think it is a non-factor

Other (please specify)

8. How much time, on average, do you devote to reading each application in your initial evaluation? Do you think this limits your ability to know the context of the applicant's school well?

9. If you would be willing to have a brief follow up conversation with a member of our committee, please provide your email and/or phone number.

Copy of Teacher Grade Scale Survey

The Grade Scale Committee is looking to gather as much data as possible to make an informed recommendation on the decision to keep or change the current grade scale. Please respond to this brief survey by December 11th.

1. In your eyes, in general what separates proficient student work from exemplary student work?

2. Do you currently grade on the existing 7-point grade scale when assigning letter grades? If not, what do you use and why?

3. If we were to change from the 7-point scale to a 10-point scale, which of the following would best represent the impact to you and your students?

I would adjust the numerical weight of things so essentially students doing the same work would get the same letter grades as they currently get.

I would change little and simply draw the line for letter grades to the new scale. More students would likely see their letter grade change as a result.

Other. It depends on other factors such as course level, etc. (please describe)

4. In your experience, how do you think the 7-point scale impacts student motivation?

5. Which department are you in?

6. Is there anything else you would like this committee to consider in making their recommendations?