



VIRGINIA BOARD OF EDUCATION

AGENDA ITEM

Agenda Item: J

Date: July 21, 2022

Title: First Review of Request from Albemarle County Public Schools to Waive 8VAC20-160-50 Regarding the Weighting of AP and IB Courses on Secondary School Transcripts

Presenter: Dr. Leslie Sale, Director, Office of Policy

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Purpose of Presentation:

Action required by state or federal law or regulation.

Executive Summary

Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS) is requesting that the Virginia Board of Education (Board) approve the extension of an existing waiver of the requirement to weight credits for Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, as set out by [8VAC20-160-50](#) of the *Regulations Governing Secondary School Transcripts*. ACPS contends that the requirement to weight AP and IB credits has resulted in students taking these courses to inflate grade point averages rather than seeking course selections aligned with their interests and college and/or career goals. Additionally, this waiver supports the vision, mission, and values established in ACPS' [Learning for All](#) strategic plan which identifies as its first goal the facilitation of learning experiences grounded in high expectations, networks of care, and student curiosity to ensure academic and personal development for all students.

The Board is authorized to grant such a waiver pursuant to § [22.1-253.13:3 H](#) of the Code of Virginia, upon request from a local school board, to waive regulatory requirements for a period of five years. The Board approved ACPS' original waiver request at its January 22, 2018 business meeting. Without an extension, this waiver is set to expire this school year.

Since ACPS' original request, the Board has [approved comprehensive revisions to the Regulations Governing Secondary School Transcripts](#) which gives local school boards the

discretion to determine whether advanced-level courses will be weighted. While this regulatory action would provide ACPS with the flexibility it is requesting, because this regulatory action is still pending in executive branch review, ACPS is proactively pursuing their extension to avoid any lapse in waiver provisions.

This request supports several of the goals identified in the Board of Education’s Comprehensive Plan that are intended to ensure the successful implementation of the Profile of a Virginia Graduate. Specifically, the Plan guides the Board to “[e]nsure rigorous standards to promote college, career, and civic readiness” and to “[r]eview and identify best practices, and promising approaches that would benefit local school divisions.”

Action Requested:

Action will be requested at a future meeting. Specify anticipated date below:
September 15, 2022

Superintendent’s Recommendation

The Superintendent of Public Instruction recommends the Board of Education receive for first review the ACPS request to waive 8VAC20-160-50 related to the weighting of AP and IB courses on secondary transcripts. This recommendation is only to receive the item for discussion because the request comports with the Board’s proposed updates to the *Regulations Governing Secondary School Transcripts*. It should be noted that the Superintendent of Public Instruction has misgivings about recommending this item for approval at an upcoming meeting.

Previous Review or Action:

Previous review or action. Specify date and action taken below:

Date: January 22, 2018

Action: The Board of Education received a presentation from the superintendent and staff of ACPS on the original waiver request. The Board waived first review and approved the request from ACPS’ request to waive 8VAC20-160-50 related to the requirement to weight AP and IB courses.

Background Information and Statutory Authority:

ACPS is seeking an extension of an existing waiver to the provision in [8VAC20-160-50](#) in the *Regulations Governing Secondary School Transcripts* that states:

Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses shall be weighted. Local school boards shall determine which other courses/programs are to receive weighted credits, the amount of weight such courses shall receive, and how those weighted credits will be used in the determination of grade point averages in the school or school division.

ACPS has provided additional details and justification for their request in the attached letter (Attachment A). In the letter, ACPS cites the observation that the requirement to weight AP and IB credits has resulted in students taking these courses to inflate grade point averages rather than seeking course selections aligned with their interests and college and/or career goals. Additionally, this waiver supports ACPS' [Learning for All](#) strategic plan which identifies as its first goal the facilitation of learning experiences grounded in high expectations, networks of care, and student curiosity to ensure academic and personal development for all students.

Section [22.1-253.13:3 H](#) of the *Code* authorizes the Board, upon request from a local school board, to waive regulatory requirements for a period of five years:

H...Waivers of regulatory requirements may be granted by the Board of Education based on submission of a request from the division superintendent and chairman of the local school board. The Board of Education may grant, for a period up to five years, a waiver of regulatory requirements that are not (i) mandated by state or federal law or (ii) designed to promote health or safety. The school board shall provide in its waiver request a description of how the releases from state regulations are designed to increase the quality of instruction and improve the achievement of students in the affected school or schools. ...

ACPS' request does not conflict with federal law nor does it impact the health and safety of its school community.

Because the Board is only authorized to approve such waivers for a five-year period, ACPS' current waiver is set to expire in January 2023. This request would extend its waiver for an additional 5 years through January 2028. However, the need for the waiver may expire prior to the end of the 5 year extension. Since ACPS' original request, the Board has [approved comprehensive revisions to the Regulations Governing Secondary School Transcripts](#) which gives school boards the discretion to determine whether advanced-level courses will be weighted. The new regulatory language will read as follows:

Advanced-level courses may be weighted. Local school boards shall determine which other courses/programs are to receive weighted credits, the amount of weight such courses shall receive, and how those weighted credits will be used in the determination of grade point averages in the school or school division. Local school boards shall consider equitable access to advanced-level courses when determining weighting.

While this regulatory action would provide ACPS with the flexibility it is requesting, because the regulatory action is still pending in executive branch review, ACPS is proactively pursuing their extension to avoid any lapse in waiver provisions.

Timetable for Further Review/Action:

It is anticipated that this item will return to the Board for final review on September 15, 2022.

Impact on Fiscal and Human Resources:

This waiver will be implemented by Albemarle County Public Schools and therefore, will have no impact on fiscal or human resources at the state level.



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Date: May 6, 2022
From: Albemarle County Public Schools
To: Daniel A. Gecker, President of the Virginia Board of Education
Subject: Renewal of waiver from 8VAC20-160-50. Weight of Advanced-Level Courses

We are writing on behalf of the Albemarle County School Board to make the following request:

1. Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS) seeks a renewal to the waiver granted in January 2018 from administering the following Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) regulation:

8VAC20-160-50. Weight of Advanced-Level Courses.

Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses shall be weighted. Local school boards shall determine which other courses/programs are to receive weighted credits, the amount of weight such courses shall receive, and how those weighted credits will be used in the determination of grade point averages in the school or school division.

Rationale

In January, 2018, the Board of Education granted Albemarle County Public Schools a five year waiver to 8VAC20-160-50.

At that time, ACPS was developing plans to reimagine the high school experience for our students, a program we called *High School 2022*. *High School 2022* was intended to begin a shift in programming for our students to align student experiences with the [Profile of a Virginia Graduate](#). In creating the *Profile*, the Board of Education determined that a life-ready Virginia graduate must:

- Achieve and apply appropriate academic and technical knowledge (content knowledge);
- Demonstrate productive workplace skills, qualities, and behaviors (workplace skills);
- Build connections and value interactions with others as a responsible and responsive citizen (community engagement and civic responsibility); and
- Align knowledge, skills and personal interests with career opportunities (career exploration)

Albemarle County Public School identified the practice of weighting grades as a significant barrier to meeting the goals outlined in the *Profile*. The weight we add to honors and college level courses is a distinct disincentive for students when choosing courses because it causes an unweighted elective to lower their overall GPA even if they receive an "A" for the elective. Study halls have no impact on a student's GPA calculation, and students have learned that they will have a higher GPA if they take a study hall instead of an unweighted elective course. An example can be seen in the student comparison below:

Student "A"			Student "B"		
	Grade	GPA Points		Grade	GPA Points
AP English	A	5	AP English	A	5
Spanish IV (unweighted)	A	4	Spanish IV (unweighted)	A	4
AP Chemistry	A	5	AP Chemistry	A	5
Honors Math Analysis	A	5	Honors Math Analysis	A	5
AP History	A	5	AP History	A	5
AP microeconomics	A	5	AP microeconomics	A	5
AP Psychology	A	5	AP Psychology	A	5
Study Hall	---	---	Art I (unweighted)	A	4
	GPA	4.857		GPA	4.75

Students are more inclined to take a study hall that is unweighted instead of a course based on a personal interest, or developing work-skills and a possible career path. This statement is supported by data from parent surveys and focus group meetings with students that we collected during a program evaluation of our AP and Dual-Enrollment courses. Many students choose to take only weighted classes or study halls to boost their grade point averages. They avoid electives- even those they are interested in taking. They continue to do this in spite of the fact that we no longer report class rank on student transcripts. Students self-report that removing weight from Advanced Placement classes will reduce stress levels and competition among peers.

Internally, we planned to eliminate weighting of all honors level courses; however, without a waiver from the VDOE, we could not do so for our AP offerings. That would have placed a greater premium on these classes for competitive students; hence, we preferred to eliminate all weighting at once.

We planned to measure the impact of this programmatic change toward improving the quality of instruction and achievement of students by looking at enrollment trends in each and every course we offer in our high school program. As the elimination of weighted grades took effect, we planned to analyze enrollment patterns and plan for next steps in fostering a high school model in which students are guided by their personal interests.

In January, 2018, the Board waived second review and approved our waiver for a five year period.

Current Rationale

Impact of pandemic and a new strategic plan

With the waiver approved, ACPS began to plan our implementation process. Under our current system of weighting grades, students' first opportunity to receive weighted high school credit came in their seventh grade year. Not wanting to change GPA calculations for students who had already received a weighted high school credit, we looked to implement this change with our students who were in sixth grade during the 2018-2019 school year (the graduating class of 2025).

As with many things, the start of the pandemic in March of 2020 and the move to virtual and blended learning for the 2020-2021 school year had a significant impact on our planning for this shift. We decided that this shift needed to be delayed by one academic year and we now plan to implement this change with the graduating class of 2026. The class of 2026, our rising ninth grade class, did not receive any weighted grades for the honors level high school courses they took during middle school.

The pandemic served to further highlight the importance of a balanced academic experience for all students in ACPS. One of the most significant impacts that we have seen at the state, local and national level is the negative impact of COVID on student mental health. The need to reduce academic and other stressors for our students is imperative.

During the height of the pandemic in the 2020-2021 school year, ACPS undertook the creation of a new strategic plan. Working with nearly 200 community stakeholders over the course of the school year, our new plan *Learning for All* was developed and adopted by our School Board and began implementation this year.

Learning for All balances the need for high expectations for all students with the need to support student mental health and well being. This focus can be seen in a number of places throughout our plan. The plan identifies our four key values as a school division, one of which is "Wellness:"

- Wellness - We will support the physical and emotional health of our students and staff

In addition to our core values statement, the emphasis on students well being can be seen in our goals and objectives and success measures:

- GOAL 1: THRIVING STUDENTS: ACPS will facilitate learning experiences grounded in high expectations, networks of care, and student curiosity to ensure academic and social-emotional development for all students while eliminating opportunity, access, and achievement gaps.

- GOAL 1, OBJECTIVE 2: ACPS will develop structures that support students' academic mental health for both proactive and intervention purposes We will ensure that academic time demands placed on students allow them adequate time to pursue their personal interests, including enrichment activities, lifelong learning, and career goals
 - OBJECTIVE 2 SUCCESS MEASURES:
 - Monitoring and reporting of the number of mental health referrals from school counseling offices and school nurses
 - Reduction in the number of high school students enrolling in study hall reported by school
 - Yearly increase in the number of credits awarded via alternative path to credit reported by school
- GOAL 2: AFFIRMING AND EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES: ACPS commits to developing a culturally-responsive environment that will respect and champion the diversity of life experiences of all stakeholders and supports the physical and mental health of our students, staff, and families so they are actively empowered to engage in our school community.
- GOAL 2; OBJECTIVE 2: ACPS commits to supporting the physical and mental health of students, staff, and families
 - OBJECTIVE 2 SUCCESS MEASURES:
 - Nationally-normed survey tool, such as Gallup or Panorama, to monitor climate survey data
 - Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) identification at or below national norms
 - Increase in partnerships with organizations providing family support services

As previously mentioned in this request, the weight we add to honors and college level courses is a distinct disincentive for students when choosing courses. Students are more inclined to take a study hall that is unweighted instead of a course based on developing work-skills and a possible career path. This statement is supported by data from parent surveys and focus group meetings with students. Many students choose to take only weighted classes or study halls to boost their grade point averages. They avoid electives- even those they are interested in taking. They continue to do this in spite of the fact that we no longer report class rank on student transcripts. Students self-report that removing weight from Advanced Placement classes will reduce stress levels and competition among peers.

CURRENT STATE

The renewal of this waiver is a key factor in our ability to meet the goals outlined in *Learning for All*. Our current cohort of eighth grade students (class of 2026) has not received weight for high school honors courses that students completed in middle school beginning in their seventh grade year. As they begin their time in our high schools next year, their opportunities

to take both AP and IB classes will begin. Without the continuation of the waiver, we will have an unbalanced weighting system in place which will place an even higher premium on AP/IB classes and continue to encourage students to take a study hall in lieu of an unweighted elective in order to achieve the highest possible GPA.

For these reasons, we respectfully request that the Board approve this waiver for another five year period.

Sincerely,



Graham Paige
School Board Chair



Matthew S. Haas, Ed.D.
Division Superintendent

cc: Members of the Virginia Board of Education
Jillian Balow, Superintendent of Public Instruction
Leslie Sale, Director of Policy