

Virginia Grading Scales

Summary:

The Salem City School Administration is aware that recent changes to the grading scales in Roanoke City and most recently Roanoke County, where both Divisions approved a 10 point scale, have generated some questions about the Salem City Schools' Grade Scale. Salem currently uses the following grade scale; 94-100=A, 87-93=B, 79-86=C and 70-78=D. In most cases this is referred to as a 6 point scale due to the range associated with earning an "A". This is the most commonly used grade scaled in the Commonwealth, where 47 (36%) school divisions use this configuration. The second most popular grade scale is a 7 point scale where numeric grades between 93 and 100 are awarded an "A". Thirty-nine school divisions (30%) use this scale. Twenty-seven school divisions (21%) use a 10 point scale where numeric grades between 90 and 100 receive an "A". Of the remaining divisions, nine divisions (7%) use a 5 point scale, seven divisions (5%) use an 8 point scale, and one division uses a 9 point scale. Collectively, 79% of Virginia school divisions use a scale more rigorous than the ten point scale.

Keep in mind that the grade scale is not the only factor that affects the GPA. While Virginia mandates that schools add weight (A=5 GPA points) to advanced courses such International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement Classes, local divisions can apply weight to additional courses as they deem appropriate, such as dual enrolled classes and honors classes. Therefore, even if all Virginia Schools were to adopt a specific grade scale, grading discrepancies would still exist.

Advocates of the 10 point scale argue that students on more rigorous scales are disadvantaged when applying to selective colleges due to the potential for lower GPAs. Admissions counselors from across the Commonwealth have weighed in on this topic, consistently emphasizing that a school division's grade scale has no impact on the number of students admitted each fall. Counselors are quick to point out that admissions decisions are based on a number of qualities that are closely scrutinized including but not limited to; college entrance exams (SAT & ACT), rigorous course work, AP/IB scores, grades, GPA, activities, special talents, the quality of the application, and most importantly, the historical performance of previous graduates from individual high schools.

In addition, admissions counselors point to the fact that variances in grade scales is not limited to Virginia. Only five states reportedly have a mandated grade scale. Even in these states discrepancies exist due to inconsistencies in the weight applied to each course. Therefore, counselors go to great lengths to become familiar with the school division they serve and the products that they produce. Otherwise, it would be nearly impossible to evaluate and compare applicants.

The following information was collected from colleagues who have investigated the potential impact of grade scales on college entrance. This is a collection of comments from college admissions counselors directly responsible for evaluating prospective students from the Roanoke Valley.

What the Colleges Say

This is a list of the colleges that our students most often attend. This list is based on attendance rates collected by the National Student Clearinghouse for Salem High School graduates from 2003-2010. Below the list are comments provided by admissions representatives who serve our region. Specifically, they were asked how they adjust for the different grading scales they see on applications, and to comment on the prospect of changing to a 10 point scale.

Virginia Western

Virginia Tech

Roanoke College

James Madison University

Radford University

University of Virginia

Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Tech: Mildred Johnson, Director of Admissions

Mrs. Johnson indicated that she had been on many panels regarding this issue, and that it was a waste of time to even talk about a school division changing their scale. She stated emphatically that Virginia Tech and the admissions representatives that she works with are aware of the differing grading scales in school systems and factor that into the admissions process. Their admissions process is not a “fill in the blank” rubric where they put in numbers and come out with a product. They evaluate each application at least 3 times. They are aware of the different grading scales, weights, quality of courses, and historical success of students who come from different schools in different school divisions. All of these factors are taken into consideration.

Roanoke College: James Pennix, Director of Admissions

Roanoke College knows the schools that we draw from. We know the profiles of the schools and we know the success rates of the students we have selected in the past. Profiles are the best things for helping us understand a school system we are not familiar with....that doesn't apply to the Roanoke Valley, because we know those schools intimately. One of the things that is very telling about a school is what percentage of seniors go to 4-year schools...that can range from 20% to 80%. It tells a lot about the quality of students in a school. In general, we trust the schools to teach and the results are consistent from each school.

Roanoke College recalculates each student's GPA. We take the weight out of AP, IB, dual enrolled, and Governor's School classes. We examine each application in the context of the school represented. You would be surprised. Some out of state schools have 12 or 15 point scales and much more weighting than Virginia schools do. We have to be able to deal with these and not be unfair to our Virginia applicants.

It really doesn't matter to us what the grading scale is. We have experience with dealing with various grading scales and make that work for us just like all other colleges do. I sat on discussion boards three times in Fairfax County when they were considering this issue of changing their scale. I argued against it because I did not think it was necessary. We trust the teachers. An “A” is an “A”.

JMU: Shawn Mooney, Director of Admissions

For us, it doesn't matter what the grading scale is, because we tailor our admissions process to our knowledge and historical experience with the schools and school system. For instance, we have one person (me, in fact) who handles Southwest Virginia, and I am very, very familiar with the products of your schools. I know how a candidate compares to past candidates from the region.

As far as the impact of changing the grading scale, I think there might be a slight impact for the first graduating class, but after that, what we see is that teachers, students return to the same pattern or percentage of A's and B's, just like you didn't change it. Students tend to adjust and teachers adjust and an A tends to revert to the expectation that has always been there.

If your system is looking for a different outcome for your students, that is not going to happen. The competition will be the same, and the number of slots available will not increase.

Radford: Stephanie Nelson, Assistant Director of Admissions

We look at the student in the light of what each high school has sent us in the past and compare their performance to the credentials of the applicant. We have admissions counselors who are experts in specific areas of the state. We know the high schools. We know the grading scales.

University of Virginia: Greg Roberts, Dean of Admissions

Changing a grading scale will not make a "lick of difference" in our review and acceptance process. There is somewhat of hysteria out there about this subject and it is totally unwarranted. It has caused unnecessary stress on parents and students who are applying to colleges. The process for acceptance is not a formula, but a holistic approach that includes many components. We are aware of schools and the differences they present, including scale and weighting. Just because the GPA is higher does not make the student more qualified. He pointed out that there are a number of students who have a 3.2 GPA that are much more qualified than other students who have GPAs over a 4.0 at other schools, "we know that because of what we know about the schools involved and the courses taken." He said he was not a proponent of changing grading scales, though he had traveled around the state, especially in Northern Virginia with this topic. He said that typically, when a school division starts to talk about this subject, it comes from outside the system, and not from the educators who understand how admissions work. Changing the grading scale will not result in more students being accepted to University of Virginia.

Virginia Commonwealth University: Sybil Halloran, Director of Admissions

First, let me say that we review each individual application by hand, and we had 16,000 applications this past year. We do look at the grading scales from each school system and we are very, very familiar with school systems in Virginia. If a school says a student is an "A" student, we believe that is an "A" performance in that division. We do not have

mass data on 6-point scales vs 10-point scales and who has gotten in, but I refer back to my previous statement. An “A” is an “A”, and if the system changes the numbers for an “A” I suspect that it normalizes in a very short while and the percentages of “A’s” does not change in a system. That does not give any advantage more than they have right now. I am not a strong proponent of changing the grading scale. I don’t think it accomplishes what parents might think it does. It is important to know that even as we know the school systems, we also know our other schools in the Commonwealth. We know what each of us expects and generally accepts, just as experienced guidance counselors know because of observations over time. Colleges tend to be very consistent in what they expect and accept.

Example

At Fairfax's Thomas Jefferson School for Science and Technology, only 16 out of 432 seniors in 2007 graduated with all A's. However, Thomas Jefferson High produced 158 National Merit Semifinalists and had the highest average SAT score in the country. It is highly unlikely that the lack of students with a 4.0 GPA impacted their college acceptance rate which was 99%. Below is a list of the top ten colleges attended by Thomas Jefferson High School graduates from the class of 2009.

University of Virginia 244
College of William and Mary 207
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University 161
Carnegie Mellon University 62
George Mason University 45
Cornell University 40
Duke University 39
Virginia Commonwealth University 33
Washington University in St. Louis 32
James Madison University 28

Policy Reference:

IKFA – Grade Reporting
IKFD – Grade Point Average and Class Rank