Grade inflation

When I saw the letter sitting on the kitchen table I knew exactly what it was. The envelope of faded gold contained within it the most important document (in my mind) that Perkiomen Valley High School could give to a Sophomore Student. The document contained within was the acceptance letter to the Perkiomen Valley National Honors Society. At the time it seemed like an astoundingly impressive honors. Students applying needed an impossibly high 3.75 GPA and a plethora of extra circulars resulting in only five to seven people per class of about four hundred students getting in. I was one of the sophomores who made it and it was a big honor for me. I stuck with the NHS over the course of my High School career and eventually became its president. I watched the National Honors Society grow bigger and each year. Instead of five to seven per class admitted, it was fifteen, then thirty. The “honor” that my society once held, evaporated into what I call a resume stamp. Membership was no longer a challenge to achieve. Even though I was the president, I did not get any say in stopping the influx of new, less qualified students because all of that responsibility as delegated to the “Adult Advisors”. When I voiced my concern to the advisors, they told me there was nothing that they could do. They said they were being pressured by administrators and parents to accept more students because it makes students look better to have NHS on their college resume. They were falling into grade inflation.

Inflation, in economics, is the phenomenon of currency devaluation. A dollar today is worth a less than the dollars in the past because there are more dollars today in circulation as a central bank prints them. In the 1920s having a twenty dollar bill would be like having two
hundred dollars today. The whole idea is that your hard earned money becomes less impressive
overtime. The same thing, unfortunately, happens in grades.

In my Junior year of High School the grading system had radically changed. Whereas a
4.3 (Straight 100 percents in all AP classes) was the absolute max GPA my Freshman and
Sophomore year, the max GPA in my Junior and Senior year became 5.0. Also, A pluses were
doled out to students with a 97 percent or higher (rather than the traditional 100%) and the A and
A- range was brought down to 90 instead of a 94. Suddenly, that 3.75 engraved on older
students transcripts were just not that impressive, since the average GPA jumped .28 in one year
(That would be considered hyperinflation in economics). GPA inflation had made the old grades
seem far less valuable than the grads earned more recently even though the old grades took just
as much if not more effort.

The inflationary menace is not confined to my High School, Perkiomen valley. Rather,
grade inflation has been the trend in United States High Schools and colleges ever since the
1960. Both High Schools and Colleges have steadily been inflating their grades, handing out
more and As and pushing the GPA limit up. GPAs have collectively increased .02 points per year
and it appears that there is nothing slowing down the inflating process. The grades keep getting
higher and higher.
The graphs really do a good job pointing out just how much the grading system has changed over the years. The constant and steady increase has changed the meaning of a “good grade”. The letter grade “C” used to mean average, but now it means almost certain failure and “B”s today are more of a sign of mediocrity rather than the achievement they once meant. The entire system has twisted itself to be so different from what it was before, but there are people who support the inflation.

Proponents of GPA inflation contend that it is a net positive on society for a number of reasons. They claim that it boosts the self esteem of the students, that it leads to better college placements or job placements, or that the entire inflationary process is just happening because people are getting smarter.

One of the core problems in school is students not having enough self esteem to succeed and some view grade inflation as a remedy. If students see more A grades, then they will be willing to try harder because they believe that they will succeed, is the mantra of the grade inflationist. While this may be true that students are more willing to succeed academically, it does not change their ability to succeed academically. Grade inflation leads students to pursue colleges and careers that do not actually match what they, as individuals, can handle. The process draws those students away from places, like skilled technical schools, where they are more likely to succeed than a traditional college. In fact, only around 50% of students attempting to go to college will come out with a degree in 6 years. Many of those students could have saved time and money going to trade schools which would have put them in a better position even if they had to suffer hurt high school feeling.
In the field of economics inflation is used by countries to drive exports. If a country devalues its currency, the exports look more attractive to buyers. In education if GPA goes up the school looks better and can export more students to colleges or careers. Perkiomen Valley is a great example of how grade inflation drives students to false success. In my grade only a single student I know was offered the opportunity to attend an Ivy league school, but out of the class below mine, there were ten or eleven Ivy offers. Both classes had ridiculously qualified students, but one got over 1000% more Ivy League offers. Why? Well, the students of my grade still had half of our grades on the transcript using the old system (the one where it was harder to get a good GPA), but the younger students have the easier to achieve GPAs. Inflation drove exports of students when there was no significant shift in quality of the educational institution that is Perkiomen Valley. This is all great for a time, but what happens when other schools start inflating to export more than PV? PV’s student placement must decline until they are forced to go through another round of inflation. Grade inflation, like currency inflation, creates a race to the bottom in terms of vales of grades which arbitrarily harms some students while helping others.

The final reason people believe that grades are inflating is that people are generally getting smarter. Both the SATs and the ACTs report that the average student scores slightly higher on the exams each year, but it is not as big of a jump. The ACTs say their scores have risen less than a percent in the last 10 years while GPA has spiked 12% with the SATs echoing the same results. The disconnect between GPA and achievement scores on tests has become so great that the college board says that grade point average is no longer an effective predictor on
how they will score on standardized tests. In essence, people are not getting smarter, but their grades say they are.

The solution to this problem is complex. If a single school declares that it will start grade deflation, making As harder to achieve, it will suffer. The whole “exports” concept will kill them. Princeton University tried to enact grade deflation, but it has hurt their students because on job interviews Princeton grads appear worse, grade wise, than, say, Yale grads who put in less effort to get a better grade. No, the solution cannot come from an individual school. It must come from a united network that drives grades back down where they should be, and it should adjust the transcripts of those with inflated grades.

The hardest part is establishing a system that would work from school to school. A true curve of 80% in each class would drive the grades back to manageable levels, but then AP students would be weighted against other AP students rather than the academically weaker average. A national organization could mandate standardize testing to all students and that could be the only thing counted for a grade, but such a system would kill the creativity and a classroom experience for the students. More standardized testing would also lend itself to “teaching to the test” (a different issue entirely). I personally favor a distributive approach based on course intensity levels. Each school should be allotted a certain number of A’s, B’s C’s, D’s and F’s relative to the number of students going to the school. Each individual school could forge their own way of diving out their pre-allotted letter grades in a manner that works for them. That way we can have both flexible classes and non inflated grades. The schools could enable true curves if that works best for them, or it could give the AP students, curves that center around a higher
grade. The issues of grade inflation and flexibility are solved with the approach, but there could be the issue of different challenge level across public schools. I would assert that, in theory, should not be a problem. A high school diploma from a public school should be the same from school to school because in the United States people are supposed to be afforded the same opportunities. In practice, I understand there are differences, but I could not imagine a bright student wanting to go to a less rigorous public school because they know it would be easier to get one of the preallotted grades. I could imagine some parents getting upset that not all of their kids can get A’s, but the fact that A’s would become scarce would be a reason to implement the allotment strategy nationwide. Not everyone needs a cushion from grade inflation.

The grade inflation has gotten worse in my school since the rising admission of National Honor Students. Just the other day I was talking to a student currently enrolled in Perkiomen Valley. He was asking me about what GPA I needed to get into Schreyer and I told him, but instead of being impressed, he laughed. He told me that my GPA would put me in the bottom half of the graduating class, and he was serious because he had a GPA slightly higher than mine and he was in that predicament. I graduated top 5% and he will graduate bottom 50% with roughly the same grades. That is grade inflation.
Works Cited


