

April 6, 2023

Re: Statement on Valedictorian/Salutatorian Concerns

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I wanted to give you, as families, some background information on the Valedictorian and Salutatorian issue that garnered social media and media attention last week. Also, I wanted to inform you of our plans moving forward.

First, I want to be clear that no changes were made. As you all know, we have never had a graduation at Lockwood High School and are creating “traditions” as we go. Moving away from these titles was just one of the myriad of decisions, which were part of creating a high school academic program from the ground up. This information has been included in our Student Handbook for the entirety of these students’ high school experience and been discussed at the school’s Parental Advisory Committee meetings; we have never had a formal concern brought forward on the topic.

Schools nationwide are moving away from these specific honors. A generation ago most students would graduate having taken the vast majority of same classes as their peers, but in a modern high school this is no longer the case. Students now have much greater options for Advanced Placement classes, dual credit opportunities, career tracts, internships and many other choices. Grade point averages are no longer comparing “apples to apples,” which is one of the reasons we planned on moving towards the collegiate model of graduation honors. One of our priorities is to prepare kids for success at their next step; for high school students, their next step could be a career, the military, or higher education. We believed it also made sense to use the same honors system the university system and private colleges in the state use to honor their graduates. Additionally, scholarships are based off of class rank not this title.

I am unsure where the narrative about this decision being part of an effort to move away from competition came from. While the research on the topic does address this issue, in the context of students needing to be able to work efficiently in teams rather than just as individuals in order to be successful in most careers; our focus was more on wanting kids to explore the academic options available rather than just focusing on accumulating GPA points in pursuit of these titles. We want students to pursue their interests in Agriculture, Art, Business, Industrial Arts, and Music even though grades in these areas are not “weighted” and can actually lower their overall GPA even with an “A”; we want students to be willing to take on a tougher class and the learning that goes along with it even if there is a greater likelihood they might get a lower grade. **A high GPA should be the byproduct of a successful academic career not the primary focus.** One of our guiding statements as a district is: “Our students and their education is our top priority. Everything we do and every decision we make will be evaluated based on its impact on student learning.” It was within this context that our decision was made; we believed it was best for our students’ learning.

We do celebrate our students and their accomplishments regardless of the context: academics, artistic, athletic or co-curricular, and we will continue to do this. Prior to opening Lockwood High, we made it a priority to honor former students who earned top academic honors as they graduated from other area high schools. There was always a plan to celebrate our top academic students, we simply were not using these titles. As stated above, all our students have the opportunity to reach the pre-determined targets to receive Honors. Additionally, the student(s) with the highest GPA and our Senior Class President were slated to give valedictory (farewell) addresses at the ceremony. We also have a designated area where the student with the top GPA will be honored by having their photo and name placed permanently. I believe that our original plan was on par with or exceeded the "honors" which top academic students receive at other schools; we simply were not using the same terminology.

Obviously, as a district we did not do a good enough job of sharing this reasoning and our existing plans with our parents and students and for that we apologize. The last thing we want is to have this issue distract any further from the celebratory nature of our first high school graduation and the work these students have put in to achieve this milestone. Principal Klasna and I will make a recommendation to our trustees at next week's school board meeting to add an addendum to the High School Student Handbook which will set the process for selecting both Valedictorian(s) and Salutatorian(s). We will move forward with adding these specific honors in addition to what was already planned.

I apologize for any stress or confusion this issue has caused for our students or parents.

Please reach out to Mr. Klasna or me if you have any further questions,

Tobin Novasio  
Superintendent