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**THE NAMES AND TITLES OF ALL THE ROUNDTABLE PANELISTS ARE CORRECT.**

**THANK YOU – FAIRGRADE**

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***FCPS Roundtable on Grading Policies  
Monday, August 25, 2008 1:00pm  
Jackson Middle School***

**Barbara Hunter, FCPS Ass’t Superintendent - Communications and Community Outreach:**

I want to thank our special guests –our moderator and panelists who are all participating today. You all are taking time out of your busy schedules and we are pretty grateful for that.

Today’s Roundtable is really a natural outgrowth of a research study currently being conducted by Fairfax County Public Schools and FAIRGRADE. Since Fairfax County Public Schools is committed to community outreach – and this is a particular project that seems to have a lot of interest in our community – has been wanting to hold a Roundtable discussion this afternoon that will really shed some light on different perspectives on this issue.

We had invited on our website some email questions and perhaps some of you have already sent those in. After the panel discussion of about 60 minutes we'll be taking some audience questions - none through our emails that we have already received but I think you all have note cards that you can use to jot some questions on that may occur to you. You hold them up and we have two, terrific students who I'm going to introduce in a minute who will come by and pick up your cards and they will be brought up here. And then we're going to review them and make sure there are no redundancies and then pass them on to our moderator who will then direct those to the panelists.

Our panelists today being experience from the admissions offices of George Mason University, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Virginia, the University of Maryland, Georgetown/Duke/George Washington University/the University of Michigan/CALTech/Stanford University/Emory University – now not all those people are sitting up here – but actually the four people who are sitting up here have experience at all those colleges and universities so we assure you this is going to be a great, enriched discussion on the topic.

I'm going to take a moment now to introduce some folks in the audience. We have four of our Fairfax County School Board Members, Kathy Smith who is our vice-chair and from the Sully district, Tessie Wilson from the Braddock district, Ilyrong Moon - At-Large district – there he is and Janie Strauss is in the audience – there's Janie – great – great, from the Dranesville District.

I also want to acknowledge Superintendent Jack Dale is with us today. Leadership team members (inaudible) Elk, Assistant Cluster Superintendent, Cecy Krill, Linda Burke, Leslie Butz, Betsy Goodman and Peter Noonan. Thank you so much.

We also have in attendance the Superintendent of the Fairfax City Public Schools Ann Monday - thanks Ann for being here and one of your board members I believe, Joanie Scarnson. (sp?) Thank you so much for being here.

Finally, in the audience, we also have some interested folks from other colleges who came to be part of this discussion – to listen in and ask questions themselves. Tabby Patton from Christopher Newport University, James Penax with Roanoke College, Linda Daily from Virginia Tech and Rodney Hall from Virginia Commonwealth University.

Thank you so much for being here. We have one addition to our panel that you don't see on your program who I just want to briefly acknowledge. We have one of our former Fairfax graduates from McLean HS and a current freshman at Fordham University – Nicolai Fedak.

**At the end of this videotape session, copies of the videotape will be available on DVD and be available in all FCPS high schools. So if you would like to check one out and get a copy, feel free.**

I just want to acknowledge the two Luther Jackson Middle School students that are helping us out. I'm sorry one is a seventh grader and one is an eighth grader and I know that is a big thing to make that mistake. Brandon Kerdel (sp?), there he is in the back –and (inaudible) seventh grader who will be helping collect your note cards. Thank you.

Ok, thank you so much for your patience. I'm going to turn it over to Greg Toppo, who is the education reporter for USA Today – our moderator for the panel – and he will interview our panelists.

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

Welcome to this forum on grading policies. I'm Greg Toppo, as Barbara said. I cover K-12 education for USA Today – just up the road as a matter of fact – here in McLean. As you can probably tell, this is not a picture of me in your program.

I want to introduce the panel very quickly from my right to my left and then we'll get right down to it. Pat Murphy from Fairfax County Public Schools, Nicolai Fedak – 2008 graduate of McLean High School, from the University of Maryland Sharon Gundy, a parent Catherine Potter - your kids are at? (Catherine Potter responds "Woodson"), there is my cue that everyone needs to turn their mic on. Woodson. From George Mason, Andrew Flagel, to my left from (Johns) Hopkins – John Latting, to his left Troy Ketch who is a teacher at South County secondary. To his left, UVA Greg Roberts. We've got a counselor, Susan Wexford from West Springfield, and finally Megan McLaughlin from FAIRGRADE.

- AUDIENCE APPLAUSE--

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

This is a big panel. You guys don't do anything halfway here. We have not one, not two, not three, but four admissions people. We're going to get to that in a second. I just wanted to say one quick thing. You know I live in Howard County MD and I was thinking about this as I was preparing for this forum. I asked my daughter – I have a daughter who is 16 and she is a junior in high school and I asked her what she thought about this – I explained to her what 94-100 versus the 90-100 system and she, she heard what you guys do here and she thought you guys were crazy. – audience applause -- She said, " All my As would be Bs and all my Bs would be Cs. I would never get into a college." - audience applause – And I said, "Think about it for a second. 94-100, if you had that

grading system, wouldn't you work harder? And she said, "Absolutely." So in my own kitchen ... (inaudible) let's get to the issue.

I want to get right to some questions. We're going to start with folks from the Admissions offices. I'm going to start with John to my left from Hopkins. Um, cause I think you tell me but I think folks here they want to know – the first thing they want to know is how worried should we be? Um so when you talk about grades, high school grades - are they more important are they less important, are they equally important than SAT and ACT scores. Let's start with that. Maybe once you give me a quick answer we'll go back and forth. We'll want to hear from all four of them. Check your mic.

**John Latting – Johns Hopkins University:**

I think it's on. Good afternoon everybody. Um, so this question about what it has to do with what's on the transcript and what those most important factors are. I'll actually start with **something that hasn't been mentioned and I think it's the most important thing as we evaluate high school transcript and that is the rigor of the courses that are there. Grades, I would say would be next and less important factor and then third would be ACT or SAT scores.** And then of course there is lots of other material in the application and we always take the time to review that. But to give you a real short answer, that is what I would say.

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

Talk for just a second about rigor. How do you calculate it and what the heck is it?

**John Latting – Johns Hopkins University:**

We have admissions officers assigned by geography so we will have somebody in this case reading the state of Virginia for Johns Hopkins University and we try to have – thankfully we have had stability over the years that people who have really developed an expertise at the individual school level and they are over time really to understand what is offered at the high school but we have systematically a way for every single person who applies – **we assign a rating that has to do with the rigor of the coursework that the student has taken. There is a ceiling on that that you hit pretty readily though. We don't want to provide incentives for students to take 35 AP classes while they are in high school, but if I can put a number on it – if you are in high school that has a very robust AP curriculum, you can take six AP classes from freshman to senior year in high school, you could get our maximum rigor rating.** We think that is a good college – a very rigorous preparation certainly for Johns Hopkins but I would say for anywhere. We don't formally give any extra bonus – any extra incentive to beyond that.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Greg? Greg? It's Megan over here. I just wanted to add something there because I was an admissions officer at Georgetown and also with Duke and what John is pointing out too I think is an important distinction that needs to be made. When you look at Fairfax's grading policies, **the issue you have is that it is not just about rigor it is about the grading scale that is factored in.** For example, a student from Montgomery County can take five APs their senior year and so could a student from Fairfax County . If those two students both earned 93s in those courses, that student from Montgomery County would have five As, the student from Fairfax County would have five Bs.

**In the Admissions process what I remember from my rating of applicants is not just the rigor but you also want to get points based on the letter grades earned. So you've got two kids that both took equal rigor but two kids their letter grades, one will be lower and appear less competitive and it does hurt the admissions process.** And I think that's where the concern becomes is that grading scales do impact those admissions review processes .

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

I'm glad you brought that up because I want to get Andrew (Flagel-GMU) to respond too. Five As versus five Bs. - does that make a difference?

**Andrew Flagel, GMU**

Yea – we'd rather see As. – AUDIENCE LAUGHTER AND APPLAUSE -- So good afternoon. I actually - my title would lead one to believe that I am only here essentially only representing George Mason University, but like many of you I am also a Fairfax parent and newly a PTA President for Bonnie Bray (sp?) elementary school - audience applause - so yea, my son will graduate from Fairfax schools in 2020, so in Fairfax we started him in (inaudible words) last week – audience laughter – but **let's talk a little bit about the reality of the context and how we do this and you know Megan is absolutely right – the grades matter, of course they matter. We're going to look at students and we're going to evaluate their grades and the courses they took –trends in grades – did they go or down up is better.** We're going to get an idea of the courses they took. We're going to look particularly at the academic courses - all of that - to get an idea of what kind of student are we looking at. But we also tend to read as uh – we also tend to read as my colleague said, we tend to read by geography and by high school. So that we have a really good idea of what the grading scales are as we're evaluating the individual students. Now one of the things that you have to bear in mind is – Megan raised the issue of how do grading scales work? One of the questions that is going to come back and forth and that we're not really going to have an answer to without getting a lot more data is whether you shift the grading scale, do you shift the grades that are awarded? I know the belief. Our assumption is if you change the grading scale

– make the grading scale harder – then there are fewer As and Bs. One question is that reality. **And if we opened up the grading scale, would the teachers award more As and Bs or would they award roughly the same number but shift how they are awarding points?** What we can tell you is how we look at students from very competitive school districts like Fairfax County. **What I can tell you in checking with my colleagues throughout the state – in discussion with my colleagues throughout the country and having evaluated Fairfax students from other places in the country, is that Fairfax County students do extraordinarily well and that we generally add credit to the students applying from the school district because we know how competitive the students from here are.**

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Um, I would like to respond to that. Again with my work at Georgetown and Duke that actually was not the case. At Duke University when we reviewed, were evaluating and rating these applicants, they weren't getting extra points because the Fairfax kids were on a six-point scale. They simply rated those kids based on the letter grades they earned and the courses they took. At Georgetown, more specifically, you apply to the specific program of study, so that you are not evaluated simply just within your high school or geographic region. You will be reviewed by that admissions committee against other students applying to the School of Foreign Service, or the School of Business and there are going to be students coming from Montgomery County, Wellesley high school in Massachusetts, Princeton high school in New Jersey, and those kids are on a 10-point scale. And so when their 93s are going to be an A on their transcripts, our kids are competing in the admissions process with fewer As.

One other thing – when Fairfax County and when FAIRGRADE started looking at the grade distributions, **I think it is important to point out that our current grade distributions in Fairfax County are quite depressed. And I think the admissions officers would be surprised to know that fewer than one percent of Fairfax County graduates graduate with straight As.** Fewer than one percent for a county with this type of reputation, I think that those are the things, with all due respect Andrew that we do need to look at. You're right – hard statistics are important but I think that's what helps educate the different school officials and it helps educate the community.

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

Let's go to Sharon from the University of Maryland. Do you get personal service here from Fairfax? I know Maryland is not exactly another part of the country but do they know about Fairfax? Do they compensate for that somehow?

**Sharon Gundy, University of Maryland:**

Because of our proximity to Fairfax County, I think we are very familiar with the academic rigor and the types of students that are produced from within the county. **I do think though that there is a danger that the farther away you get from the state of Virginia the less likely it is that people are going to be familiar with the caliber of the students** - AUDIENCE APPLAUSE-- even though we at the University of Maryland are very familiar with the caliber of students and when we're reviewing students for admission, we know the kinds of students that we are getting. We know if we are getting a B student that is going to be a very good student. That's not to say, however, that we discount the fact that it's a B student. We, **we don't' automatically assign an additional weight because it's a student from Fairfax County. But when we're doing our objective review, we know that and we consider that. But we don't' automatically add additional weight because it's a student coming from Fairfax County.**

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

If you don't add weight, how do rate the rigor?

**Sharon Gundy, University of Maryland:**

We do a holistic c full file review. Our process is a little different than the process at Hopkins where you are assigned rankings or weightings because of academic rigor. We do an individual review so we're looking at the review – looking at individual students - **we'll look to see how many honors classes and advanced placement classes were available to the student, how many then did they choose to take and then what was the individual grade that was earned in that individual class.**

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

I want to go to Greg from UVA. Can I ask you a slightly different question? One of the solutions that has been suggested is forgetting the letters – just give the kid a number and let the college interpret it. Um, talk a little bit about that. Is that something that UVA looks at? Do you look at letter grades? Would just a number be helpful for kids from Fairfax?

**Greg Roberts – UVA:**

Essentially we look at what an A is. I could care less if it is 90-100 or 94-100. **We are looking at you within the context of your school** and the argument that students applying or counselors – admissions officers, excuse me, that are looking at candidates from farther away, **each of your files will have a profile – an academic profile - that tells us the grading scale. Typically the guidance counselors will tell us a little bit about the student about his or her performance within that larger, undergraduate class. I think it is very important to note that at many schools, most I would argue – this is not a formula. It's not an equation. It's not a graph. It's not a chart. It's not a grid. It's a holistic**

**review. We're looking at everything within your file and we're looking at it multiple times.** I find it very useful is we'll momentarily add a weight to this, that and the other. We're looking at you as a committee. At UVA for example, we don't even read students by school. We're looking at one student at one time in a vacuum trying to make a decision on that student. **If it comes – sure, if it was a numeric grade and you had a chart that said ok this student had a 93 - has a 94-100 scale, well yea that is a high B – almost an A. If the student had an 88 – that is a more modest B in that respect– but we are still trying to get an understanding of what that grade means within that school and within that class, so that is very important. It is not typically a formula that spits out an answer.**

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

I want to switch a little bit. I want to talk to a parent and to a student. We have both on the panel. Um, let's start with our student – who speaking of charts and graphs and grids, he's brought one and he's going to tell us about it. You're at Fordham and it wasn't pretty.

**Nikolai Fedak – FCPS 2008 Graduate, McLean High School**

I'm going to Fordham in the fall. I'm proud of where I'm going but the grades I got, the FAIRGRADE scale verses the FCPS scale I think that could have affected the amount of academic aid I could have received.

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

You crunched some numbers. Tell us a little bit about that.

**Nikolai Fedak – FCPS 2008 Graduate, McLean High School**

**Yea - I took a total of 12 AP classes throughout high school and (inaudible) honors classes and the difference between my FCPS GPA and my Montgomery County GPA – if I was from Montgomery County - was 0.7 with my GPA in Fairfax County being a 3.4 and my Montgomery County GPA being a 4.1.**

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

Can you say that again?

**Nikolai Fedak – FCPS 2008 Graduate, McLean High School**

3.4 to a 4.1. I think that is pretty significant. And because that is the difference between (valedictorian and valetorian?) because in Fairfax County anything more than a 4.1 and better is valedictorian, from my understanding. **I think that is a big deal and it could have affected my admissions decision at several schools and my academic aid as well.**

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

Let's hear from a mom. Catherine you have two sons. One is at the Naval Academy and one is at Fairfax County Schools now. What is your experience?

**Catherine Potter, FCPS Parent**

**My experience has been once you leave the mid-Atlantic area, Fairfax County Public Schools are not necessarily well known, number one. And number two, even if they are, they will not be reconfiguring the grades to take into account the fact that we are on a 94 -100 grading system.** I first learned of this issue actually at the University of Notre Dame where in their information session **they said point blank, to those of you that are not on a 90-100 grading scale, we will not be reconfiguring your grades.** We have over 18,000 applications for 1900 students enrolled in our freshman class and we do not have that ability to do that reconfiguration fairly or correctly. That was the first time I heard of it. The second time I heard of it was when we visited UCLA, which is one of the finer University of California schools. **In that case, UCLA receives over 50,000 applications – 50,000. They do reconfigure grades. They would take Fairfax County Public School grades and reduce them. Why? They say right in the application. We do not recognize pluses and minuses. If you look at the number of Fairfax County Public Schools –I’m sorry – public students – that have received admission into the UC system, you will see extraordinarily low numbers and that is precisely why.**

Ask the Thomas Jefferson children and they will tell you we have kids that are getting into MIT and that cannot get into Berkeley for that very reason. They will not recognize pluses and minuses. **The other thing, I’m sorry, if I could just say (inaudible), I have my prop – NOTE: CATHERINE POTTER HOLDS UP KAPLAN BOOK OF SCHOLARSHIPS– This is where Fairfax County Public Schools Grading System hurts our children. – AUDIENCE APPLAUSE --**

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

It’s the Kaplan Book of Scholarships.

**Catherine Potter, FCPS Parent:**

Open this book and you will see criteria that generally speaking requires a minimum GPA. **Capitol One – a minimum requirement of 3.5. This is a national scholarship that our schools should be competitive with.** But when we were trying to get a scholarship with Capitol One and you are being in contention with Montgomery County schools, with the (inaudible) of Chicago, with all of the other wonderful schools in our nation, **I am guaranteeing you that the Fairfax County Public School kid are not getting the scholarships.** Finally, I personally saw this with my son. My son was able to get into many wonderful colleges although ironically he gets into the Naval Academy which is one of the toughest schools to get into, but he gets rejected by the University of Virginia, which shows how hard it is to get into our top schools here in Virginia from our area. But having said that, **what my son did not receive was the automatic, merit scholarships that are given by many out of state schools. Why? Because he did**

not meet the minimum GPA criteria. That is the bottom line. **The scholarships are objectively set. There is no looking holistic at the application. It's GPA and SAT – AUDIENCE APPLAUSE –**

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

And I will say this with Dr. Murphy on the opposite end of me, I really want to reassure parents that Dr. Murphy is doing an outstanding job of trying to look carefully at this issue. Dr. Dale very graciously recognizes the value of this to Fairfax County students. They want to see these grading policies work for our students. **FAIRGRADE is there to make sure we can work together on this to enable our grading policies to give our students the fair grades and the fair opportunities that they deserve.**

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

Before we go on, I don't want to put Greg on the spot here, but do you want to respond to the UVA comment – AUDIENCE LAUGHTER -

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

It's about how her son was accepted into the Naval Academy and not UVA and she's also an alum by the way.

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

We'll back up so you can (inaudible) AUDIENCE LAUGHTER

**Greg Roberts, UVA:**

Well this is school specific so I don't want to take too much time but it just shows the different types of reviews that take place. Again this is not – **I think one of the more difficult aspects of the type of review that takes place in those selective school is holistic review. I assure you that is the way it is taken and done at most schools.** (inaudible statement) That doesn't speak for those 3000 schools, granted, but what happens is that it allows us to take students that are going to be strong students, interesting students at our schools. We're not confined by SAT scores or GPAs or anything of the like. We can take students that we feel are going to build our class. But that said, **you are going to see differences in decisions. I can probably name cases where a student was denied by UVA and admitted to Harvard or admitted to UVA but denied at another school that most would consider less selective. So, the type of review that takes place causes a lot of anxiety, I realize. You can't look at a chart of your high school and so at Chantilly High School you have 30 offers, 10 wait-lists and the rest denied. It's not going to take place like that. You're going to see decisions splintered (?) all over the board at all of these schools, I'd argue.**

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Greg, could the four of them just raise their hand to this question - that the National Association of Admissions Counselors did a research study in 2006 and their findings were very specific. High school grades are the number one and most important factor with college admissions. Could the – I know there's ways to interpret high school grades but I just want you to raise your hand and say, Are high school grades the most important factor in college admissions as opposed to SAT and standardized testing? Was the NAAC finding correct or not?

**Andrew Flagel, George Mason University:**

Of course they are more important than standardized tests.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

But are they the most important factor in the admissions process? There's a lot of factors, but is it the most important of all the factors?

**Andrew Flagel, George Mason University:**

I don't want to raise my hand – AUDIENCE LAUGHTER - Ok , so what we do, is we have a lot of terms like rigor and holistic that keeps things as murky as we can possibly keep them, but the reality is that it's not – **what we're trying to say in several terms is that its not just a number. So the idea that it's just grades or it is a score is a misinterpretation of the process.** And the anxiety that you are all feeling and that we have all done a dandy job of extending dramatically in the last few years is because **we have created this impression that there is some sort of secret formula we can figure out and if you just knew that number, that would unlock the secrets and suddenly everybody would get into the school they want. But the reality is that everybody can't get into the school they want because we are going to turn some folks down.** Now that means that if the grading scale disadvantages, meaning the students are getting lower GPAs through the grading scale, then, believe me – **my kid is in the system. I want to see the grading scale changed. The question is it the grading scale that's doing that? Is that actually the case? I think there are reasonable discussions on both sides that I have heard from lots of folks on the issue. But it is not entirely clear that the grading scale causes different grades to happen. But if it is the case, I don't disagree that it creates a disadvantage to some extent for admissions **but I think you are correct Catherine (Potter – FCPS Mom), more significantly it does creates some disadvantages in some of the scholarship processes.** -- AUDIENCE APPLAUSE --.**

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

A couple of us want to respond.

**Shannon Gundy, University of Maryland:**

Megan if you were to rephrase your question to say is it high school transcript and all of the various pieces of information that can be gleaned from the high school transcript, then my answer would absolutely be yes, not just the grades but the level of courses that were taken-the trends in the grades, the number of courses that were available to a particular student within the specific environment - all of those factors that can be gleaned from the high school transcripts would absolutely make me change my decision to yes – that is the most important factor.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

But yes again, in terms of that letter grades – seeing students – if you saw a student, which is one of the questions we were wondering, if Fairfax County students – you know an applicant came to your school and you looked at their transcript and it was full of B pluses – great rigor but it’s full of B pluses – another kid applied and you have 92s, 93s, 91s, and no grading scale has been declared, do those students end up looking different in their achievement that you are seeing those 93 and 92 grades on there as opposed to the letter of the B plus.

**Shannon Gundy, University of Maryland:**

What we’re going to do is find out what those 92s and 93s mean. We’re going to pick up the phone and call the school if they haven’t given us the profile for that high school to find out what those mean and then we’re going to consider them in the same way that a high school does.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Right, but -

**Shannon Gundy, University of Maryland:**

So if the school considers it a B, we consider it a B. If the school says it is a C, then we consider that’s a C.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

So for example, in Hghland Park, Texas – one of the other nationally ranked public high schools, they use strictly numeric grades. When we did our research, we called those schools, they don’t have a set grading policy and many New York schools do the same thing. They say, you know what – here’s the numeric grade, you graduate with a numeric average, we do not define whether that 93 is an A or not. That’s for the colleges to decide if they want to but this is – we’ve gone strictly to a numeric grades. So what I know from my years as in college admissions is when that were the case if we wanted to go ahead and calculate a 4.0 GPA out of that transcript, that 90-100 would fall in the A range, the 80-89 would be in the B range and, in fact, the US Department of Education when it did its transcript study also defined those numeric grades on that letter grade scale

so I think that what we are trying to get at is numeric grades when they fall into that 90-100 can be perceived differently based upon the scale the school appropriates.

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

I'm going to let John get in here and then we're going to shift gears a little.

**John Latting, Johns Hopkins University:**

I just wanted to point out that we've got a couple – to talk about grading policies is that it is a pretty broad category. [We've got – I'm just keeping notes here - three or four more specific issues that are floating around. One is what is the grade distribution. If you look at the transcript, what is the percentage of As, Bs, Cs in Fairfax County versus the rest of Virginia or the rest of the country?](#) I did some homework and I have some data on that and I can answer that question for you if you are interested. Another question that is up in the air is how do you translate a numerical average to a letter grade which is a slightly different question and the third one is what is the weighting system for honors and AP classes. Should it be 0.5 should it 1.0. If you are at Nutreer School in Illinois, its 1.67 is the bonus you get. You can graduate with a 5.3 GPA and there are lots of different ways of handling that. If you look at – if you are worried about the distribution of grades awarded to students – is it the grade point average, the overall average or the individual grades? And let me just say to me, I understand the sense of immediacy and the importance of the scholarship question and I agree a lot of those organizations look at overall GPA. If you were to ask me, you know John put your hand up or tell me what you think the most important question here this afternoon is, it's the weighting of AP grades and how you report overall GPA. [I would really, really be careful about trying to manipulate the distribution of As, Bs, Cs that you instruct teachers to give. I think that's really an issue of professional judgment. Let me just add one more thing to that. If you were to look at - now this is the Johns Hopkins applicant pool from 2008 – a little over 16,000 people and uh have over several hundred applicants from Fairfax County. Their average grade as we convert it – unweighted – just looking at As are worth 4.0, Bs are 3.0 – we do look at B pluses and minuses and so on - 3.61 was the mean GPA for everybody who applied. For the rest of our applicant pool, 3.63. Two hundredths of a point – less than the difference of going from an A to an A minus in one course throughout all of high school. I think – I have seen enough to argue I'm not persuaded teachers are awarding letter grades...](#)

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

I'm sorry John, I actually have the Fairfax County data in front of me for all 24 of our base high schools. I also have the data from 11 of nationally ranked high schools in the United States and [when we looked at the grade distributions of Fairfax County graduates this past year, against the same data of these 11 nationally ranked high schools, what we found is that Fairfax County students](#)

were graduating with 50 percent less of a GPA that is going to run in the A minus average or higher.

**John Latting, Johns Hopkins University:**

You are looking at the weighted GPA?

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

No this is all unweighted and that is what is so important about my data is that the data is about the actual letter grades that are being earned. For example, in Fairfax County its 3.75 kids have

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

Be quick because we want to get to (inaudible)

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Ok that's fine. **In Fairfax County, only 10 percent of our graduates last year earned a 3.75 or higher. In the comparable school districts, it was anywhere from 20 to 36 percent have an average A minus average or higher when they graduated from high school** so 10 percent countywide versus 20-36 percent in these other comparable school districts – and I'm happy to share this chart with you when we're done - that is the reality of our grade distributions. And finally, **if you actually look at the Fairfax County School profile, we do not provide any grade distributions so colleges can't take into account whether we grade more difficultly here in Fairfax or fewer As are awarded, but as I said, when only less than one percent earn straight As coming out of Fairfax County schools, and that's all unweighted, I think that points to a problem.** – AUDIENCE APPLAUSE --

**John Latting, Johns Hopkins University:**

I was looking through the FAIRGRADE website and I did – I think I saw that if you perhaps had that list of schools and I went in and looked at

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

That was a weighted chart that we did early in the spring before we had any data from county officials.

**John Latting, Johns Hopkins University:**

It is true there are regional differences and grade inflation and to join the ranks of say the West Coast where it doesn't surprise me if a third of the class – 25 percent - I don't question those numbers – I just don't – there's reason to be careful about doing that. I think there is another strategy to use which is to look carefully at the weighting that you are given. **A weighted GPA I think, by and large, is what scholarship organizations are going to look at. I'll tell you private colleges are not going to look at the weighted GPA. They are going to look at**

unweighted grades. They are going to discount the freshman year – really focus on junior year and

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

But John again you are saying that an A is still better than a B and our kids are earning what would be an A in Montgomery County, in Arlington County, in Albermarle County near Charlottesville. And in over 45 nationally ranked public high schools – only one uses a 6-point scale. The others - the majority in the United States are using a 10-point scale. Why would Fairfax County want to subject its students to a grading scale that is used by a minority of schools in the United States?

**Pat Murphy, FCPS Assistant Superintendent, Dept. of Accountability:**

(inaudible) ... Hi I'm Pat Murphy – how are you? -LAUGHTER – Let me give a little context because I think sometimes um we have these discussions and we have these belief systems and perhaps we need to have data play a part in this. I think it's also important to give some context to the discussion. Why do you think we have these folks up here today? Did we sort of pick them because they could drive in because they are close? No, there is a real purpose of why these folks are here. And I think one of the things FAIRGRADE has brought to the table that is important is if you look at this as a window, you are looking at public and private issues, both in and out of the state. There's also another overlay that's very important to this whole piece. And that is Admissions, Honor's Programs and then scholarships. And we've heard a little bit about those today. And I think it's important to give that context of how we're framing this discussion for this dialogue. Now within that, we have policies. There's two parts to policies. There's scales and weights. And we've talked about that. I'm already confused and I'm supposed to know about this stuff. But there's scales and weights. We have a six-point scale and we only assign a 0.5 weight to our AP and IB courses ok. Other districts give more weights. They give 1.0 to honors and some give 1.0 to AP and IB. But I think it's important that I give you that framework so now you can begin to see how we shape new systems and we drive those new systems with data. What we've undertaken is we decided we needed to look at all student transcripts. And all of you folks have talked about the holistic piece here. We've got students cast across the continuum of GPAs and as the student sitting next to me how he took double digit AP classes, and you have some students that don't take as many classes. So how does it affect them because remember folks, we have 168,000 students. We are a large school district. We are very different than perhaps what I call the one horse town where they have one high school, one middle school and one elementary school. We have to realize how is this going to impact all of our students and that is very critical in our decision making process here. I want to give you just a little bit of an insight and it supports some of the things Megan has said - and it is limited though and we still need to do some things uh in gathering additional data, which

by the way is very difficult to do because people don't want you to have this data. **So what it appears from some of the information that we have, which now I want to frame as limited is that it appears that FCPS GPAs both weighted and unweighted are slightly depressed. And also it appears comparing to some of these other groups that have 10-point scales, it appears that their scales may be slightly inflated. Ok, so we say hmmm there's a difference. So we've done a look at 19 transcripts of students from a 3.0 to over a 4.0 with their GPAs and what we are finding is that students who have taken a lot of AP courses and IB courses, the weights are influencing their GPA. Where students that are not taking those AP or IB courses and are not driving towards that type of curriculum, their influence is being driven by the scale.** So you've got two dynamics at play here that are very important. So what is the influence of those dynamics? Based on the 19 transcripts that we've looked at, now I will also tell you we are going to look at 1000, so we are going to look at those very comprehensively, the swing on the GPA is anywhere from a 0.3 to a 0.5. So, we need to say, is that reasonable? Is that something we need to look at? But I, I think you need to have data to inform you and prod your discussion. Now all of this is very preliminary. And I think it is important for our audience to get a context. We've heard a lot of these folks talk about rigor. You've heard a lot of these folks talk about the holistic rating. So when you look at this, are you dealing with exceptions, or outliers and what is the trend across the (inaudible) school district influencing data? I think that is important to keep in front of us. Because changes like this are going to be very important not only for all of us but also for the folks we are interacting with.

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

I want to get to the actual folks who work in the schools. (inaudible – We have a teacher from the classroom - ) Let's start with Troy. We've been wondering about this idea that uh you know 94-100 is an A. Do kids, do they “up their game” to get that A?

**Troy Ketch, FCPS Teacher – South County High School:**

Thank you. (inaudible) It seems strange that I am one of the last people to address the issue of grades. – AUDIENCE LAUGHTER – To me, the grades we are talking about when we hear this discussion we almost lose this definition of grades in this discussion of college admissions. And for me the grades are really a way of communicating with students – the young men and women who are in our classes that we are trying to help succeed in their school and then later on in life. **Does a 94 equal an A mark? On our current grading scale it does equal an A. I don't think though it inherently equals an A. I think we that have a grading scale that is set up that is set up so that it provides a certain amount of quality and a certain amount of objectivity but ultimately what we are looking at is a teacher's assessment of a student's accomplishments and how we relate that to a numeric quantity and how we relate that to a letter grade.**

If you change the scale, then the teacher certainly has to reevaluate how they are using the scale as we do each year anyway – more than each year. In fact, when we use formative assessments we're changing how we look at those grades on making the quarterly, monthly, weekly and sometimes even a daily basis. Uh so I would look at a change in the grading scale as a well uh as a (inaudible) of how I assess my students are going to then fall into that scale, how I change my program to reflect their actual accomplishment. Um, but one of the ways I do that is to actually, is I teach AP literature courses, is to look at my AP numbers at the end of any given year. **And while we don't look to make the AP numbers and the grade point averages equal exactly, we certainly like to see a correlation between the way our students score and the AP exam and the way those letter grades then reflect those transcripts.**

I am comfortable with the way my students reflect in that comparison. I am comfortable as AP coordinator in the previous years with the way the teachers at South County Secondary school and their relationship between those two numbers – to, to uh evaluate those um– it holds up.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Greg, what I would like to ask our teacher to respond to is what would be your sense of if Fairfax County enjoys its reputation of being one of the nationally recognized public schools but when you compare our grade distributions against other comparable school districts, why are 50 percent less of our kids earning an A minus average or better in their courses. Why, why is that if you have the SAT...

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

Megan, I don't think that's a question which involves, first of all...

**Troy Ketch, FCPS Teacher – South County High School:**

I don't have that information. I can't speak to that data (or... inaudible) to evaluate. All I can tell you is that as a means of translating information to my students, the more detailed that tool is uh the better I can communicate with my students. If I can give a student in the first quarter an assessment of his performance or her performance and, and it's more detailed – a B plus as opposed to an A then I believe that student knows where they have to go to achieve a higher level of success.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Well the question is does it bother him if we were to consider a different grading scale? Does that concern the teacher?

**Troy Ketch, FCPS Teacher – South County High School:**

I, alright it doesn't bother – I'm not bothered – AUDIENCE LAUGHTER -

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Does it concern you?

**Troy Ketch, FCPS Teacher – South County High School:**

I am concerned about the tools that I have at my disposal or to communicate with my students and that is my primary concern. **The grading scale, as it stands, is an effective tool for communicating with my students and their families. I believe my students know what I mean when I say that they have a Cplus, a B, a B plus or an A. I know they know what they have to do to achieve the grades they want to achieve. If the grading scale changes to something that is less detailed, then I have to bring more to the table to communicate to them the expectations of the school and the county.**

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

I want to let Susan jump in here because she's been very nice to be sitting here listening to everyone else. You can choose to respond to that or you can respond to this. I read somewhere that the parent said my kid came home and said to their siblings – you know this is what I'm saying - don't take any AP classes – they are just going to hurt you. – AUDIENCE SAYS “HONORS” – THEN APPLAUSE -- and that is really kind of (inaudible) it seems to me - AUDIENCE INTERJECTS WITH ‘YOU MEAN HONORS CLASSES’ - oh pardon, I was reading from the McLean paper which says, this is the quote, “The trick is just don't take those AP courses.” - AUDIENCE INTERJECTS WITH ‘IT'S HONORS – IT SHOULD HAVE SAID HONORS”-

**Susan Rexford, Career Center Specialist – West Springfield High School:**

I think we want to define exactly what the college admissions people have been saying – if your students are not challenging themselves to the best of their ability, that doesn't mean that you necessarily have to have to have a whole a bunch of APs. John just mentioned they cap out rigor at six APs. **You need to take the most balanced curriculum that you as an individual student can handle. And by handling that means how you are willing to set yourself up to work for a class. Troy just mentioned that his students know what it takes to get an A in the class, uh, they know what it takes to get a B plus. They know what it takes to get a C. Sometimes it is taking that extra challenge and running with the extra challenge and that's where I personally think Fairfax County Public Schools can shine because those students who have achieved high success in a rigorous situation are those students who are being rewarded at the next level. And I personally think it's a good thing to look at where you are within yourself as a student and what is it that I can cope with every single day and (inaudible...to help them schedule for the following year?) take the courses that you can handle**

but challenge yourself because there has to be a balance in there. So the challenge has to be there but you also have to be willing and able to do the work to get the kinds of grades that are necessary.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Greg, but what needs to be clarified for parents and students to understand is this – and Susan is exactly right – colleges want to see the most rigorous course and curriculum that you have taken. But this is where the problem presents itself for our current grading policies. Fairfax County students do not receive weights for their Honors courses. So either they end up taking the tougher courses – they sacrifice and get the lower grade and their GPA is lower. If they don't take those tougher courses, because they want to protect their GPA and they want to get the A in the lesser class, then they jeopardize their competitiveness with the admissions review. **So right now, our grading policies don't serve our students' best interests and that's what this is all about. – AUDIENCE APPLAUSE – Money gets lost. Money ends up getting lost for the families so it's not just admissions, money is lost in the scholarship process. – AUDIENCE APPLAUSE --**

**Susan Rexford, Career Center Specialist – West Springfield High School:**

(inaudible) ...if the grading scale or way to keep score, for lack of a better word, is modified – and I'm not opposed to modifying and I'm not pro keeping what we currently have – but my question would be - how much would the grades ever actually change? If you went to a different grading scale, do you literally go back and say, numerically this is where we are, and then when you go straight numeric how do you distinguish if you have multiple students, say for example, with a 4.0, all 4.0s won't be created equal. So again, you have to have some kind of method of separating the 4.0 from the 4.0 or whatever, for me, because that is going to be an important part of that. But Troy just said he would have to go back and re-look at how he evaluates his students. **So I guess my concern is would we actually end up with students receiving more As than there are already students receiving As or would it stay the same.**

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

It can't possibly stay the same if teachers are following the numeric scale. What happens right now is our students who earn - and let's say for example a science class – the student has earned the numeric grades that put them at a 92. If Fairfax County now says a 92 falls within the A range, the student ends up with an A. I'm hard pressed to believe that in some of these courses where they are numeric tests that if a student has earned that achievement of a 92, how would the teacher turn around and say, 'Well, I still think that kid is a B even though he got a 92 so I'm still gonna give him a B. It doesn't' make sense. Of course – AUDIENCE APPLAUSE – (rest of sentence is inaudible due to applause)

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

I want to hear from Troy himself and then we'll go to you (points to Andrew Flagel)

**Troy Ketch, FCPS Teacher – South County High School:**

I would just like to – I will address the question of whether or not the student is somehow tied to a completely objective numerical scale. But I would also like to talk about just briefly the question of whether or not students should take AP courses at the risk of their GPA.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

It's actually honors courses.

**Troy Ketch, FCPS Teacher – South County High School:**

Or honors courses. The, the grading scale that you have, the numeric grading scale, and I hear you mentioning some courses that are traditionally thought of as completely objective – completely multiple choice types of courses – those courses are not completely multiple choice types of courses – there are a number of variation that teachers look into when they assess a grade. In fact the whole staff development program here at Fairfax County Public Schools is to talk about how a student is maturing and developing and learning as a whole student and not just as a reflection of a multiple choice test which you may get. In that respect, each teacher would need to reassess how that number then relates to a letter grade that will best convey information to the student about their accomplishments during the course of the year and how to proceed to an even higher accomplishment.

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

And are your courses...

**Troy Ketch, FCPS Teacher – South County High School:**

Just briefly, the honors – as AP coordinator at South County Secondary High I heard all the time the argument I'm not going to have my student enroll in all these courses because they are too rigorous and their grade point will suffer. That argument falls away when we point out that the real accomplishment of an AP course or an honors course is not in the achievement of the grade at the end of the year but in the achievement of higher expectations and better learning – AUDIENCE EXPRESSES SKEPTICISM AS HIS REMARKS – SOME LAUGHTER - I don't find it funny. To me it is my life's work.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

No no, I think unfortunately what, I completely – my father was a high school teacher, I have tremendous respect for the sacrifice

**Troy Ketch, FCPS Teacher – South County High School:**

I'm not talking about the sacrifice. What, what I am talking about is my expectations for my students is what I am talking about.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Yes, but what I think parents are saying is -

**Troy Ketch, FCPS Teacher – South County High School:**

Whether or not when they meet those expectations they can go off and be better prepared for college, for work, and for life as a productive and world-class citizen – AUDIENCE APPLAUSE – that is the ultimate goal not an A. – AUDIENCE APPLAUSE –

**Andrew Fligel - George Mason University:**

Just give me a chance

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Sure Andrew you go right ahead.

**Andrew Fligel - George Mason University:**

I think we all get wrapped up and in this area it is a particular liability. It is challenging whatever side of the equation you are on that we get more tied up in this as a winning the game the system than in the educational outcomes. And I really value the teachers who have to day in and day out try to be focused on (inaudible) - AUDIENCE APPLAUSE – on that issue it's important. That being said, **there is no doubt in my mind that there are a large number of teachers who regardless of the grading scale that we adopt, are going to normalize their grades – that there is some subjectivity and their grades are going to adjust and they are still going to be roughly giving out the same number of letter grades as they are now.** If defies imagination that there aren't also some teachers who with a different letter grading scale won't give out more As. Right? I think we can safely agree that there's going to be an easier grading scale - quote/unquote easier – some more As given out. We also heard that we need the GPAs in context so we try to scrub a lot of that out. Does every school do it perfectly? No. So what I think is important here is that I don't there is a wrong place to be on this issue. **I think that there is the potential to add some value to some students in the competitive game of getting into certain colleges by adjusting the grading scale. But I think there is a real danger whether looking at the grading scale or weighting system (inaudible) whatever piece of this puzzle we try to unlock at believing that it is going to make a dramatic difference in admissions rates, that it is going to be a silver bullet.** And I just want to caution us about not getting too far out ahead on how much it will change things because what will happen – as we know there will be some teachers who won't adjust as much, and some schools who will respond

differently to it so in the end I tend to lean towards the data that make it so wide. I think there is some interesting stuff out there to keep exploring, but I don't think folks should make the assumption that it is going to make a radical difference particularly in the admissions process.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Greg, I think what help the admissions officers to answer – all four of them – is specifically this – among the nation's nationally ranked high schools - the vast majority use the 10 point scale- **is it your belief that those schools that employ the 10 point scale have lesser academic standards than say Fairfax so are Montgomery County standard, for their students, lower than ours? Will we be viewed as lowering our standards if we switch to a 10-point scale?**

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

Let me do this because we are right now at the hour mark and I don't want to go over. Let's hold that thought ok and go to the questions. I'm sure we have lots of questions from the audience so if you need to ask that again at the end of this you are welcome to ok?

**AUDIENCE:**

Answer it now. We'd like to hear the answer.

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

You'll get the answer I promise.

**Andrew Flagel - George Mason University:**

He's holding up his hand now so that's (inaudible)

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

Ok that was just a TV time out and now we are going to get to the actual questions. (NOTE: FCPS' Barbara Hunter gives note cards containing questions from the audience to Greg Toppo). And these are questions from our actual audience.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Greg, I think we've everyone saying I think it would be to everyone's benefit to answer that question first – AUDIENCE APPLAUSE -

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

It's your school district. Why don't we start with Greg from UVA. Why don't you just say the question again?

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Ok for example, Albermarle County in Charlottesville just converted to the 10 point grading scale. Montgomery County, Howard County already use the 10-point grading scale. **In your opinion, do you view Albermarle County and these other counties as having lower academic standards than Fairfax County and therefore, their achievement is less rigorous?**

**Greg Roberts – Sr. Associate Dean of Admission, University of VA:**

That is not a difficult yes or no question. Of course not. However, I do argue that some school districts you can look at who is (inaudible). If you see at a particular county what is a 4.5 fits at the bottom quarter of the class you wonder about if that – schools are going – admissions officers are going to adjust their standards. We can't accept everyone. You have five times as many applicants. But your simple question – do you think a school with a 90-100 is better or worse than a 94-100 or a school that has a 50-100, of course not.

**Shannon Gundy – University of Maryland:**

I sort have to agree with Greg. I don't think you can automatically say that one school system is of a lesser quality simply because of the grading scale.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Yes, but the achievement is considered less.

**Shannon Gundy – University of Maryland:**

One of the things that is important to recognize as Andrew was saying earlier and as Troy is indicating, **When teachers are evaluating students, I think they make very deliberate decisions about the kinds of grades that- that they want to assign to students and how those students are assessed within that curriculum. Admissions officers are going to do exactly the same thing. When the school grading scale is changed, then we are going to have to look at how we are evaluating the students within that system. But I definitely don't think that you can make an automatic assumption that because one school system has this grading scale and another school has that that that has anything to do with the quality of the curriculum within the school system.**

**John Lattin g – Johns Hopkins University:**

I think if the question is um grades – is there a difference across the country in terms of the amount of inflation – absolutely there is and

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

No, no John the question is whether - if Fairfax County were to adopt a 10-point grading scale does it then lower - not only its academic standards or is it being perceived as lowering its academic standards.

**John Latting – Johns Hopkins University:**

No – not lowering academic standards, but potentially it depends on the effect of it. If the number of As increases by a third, then the value of an A goes down – that's inflation.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

Of course, **but I think what we've seen in the grade distributions is when only 10 percent have an A minus or higher, I don't think we have grade inflation in Fairfax County. – AUDIENCE APPLAUDS-**

**John Latting – Johns Hopkins University:**

**There are high schools around the country – and not that you are proposing that schools here get to the point – but where it is just out of control – where an A – half the grades given in a class are A grades and it actually puts the admissions profession in a difficult position – I mean who are the strongest students in a population like that? It only becomes more difficult to establish that. It's certainly a question that I think you have to confront.**

**Andrew Flagel- George Mason University:**

I think Fairfax County Schools are the most rigorous, outstanding school system in the United States - AUDIENCE LAUGHTER/APPLAUSE - and will continue to be the best because Jack Dale says its so.

**Susan Rexford, FCPS Career Center Specialist – West Springfield HS:**

I have a question- kind of a follow-up. When a school system – and this is more for my edification – when a school system makes a modification in grading scale, do colleges want or need to see some additional information that maybe they haven't had previously – would that be something you would automatically ask for or would you just say, "Ok last year Fairfax County was on a six point scale, now Fairfax County is going to a 10 point scale or do you need to see something – grade distribution or whatever it would be that would make a difference in how you perceive that new scale?

**Andrew Flagel- George Mason University:**

I think in all seriousness, I think John (Latting- Johns Hopkins) had it right. It depends on how radical the change becomes. I think if the change – and **I think that most of the changes being proposed are extraordinarily reasonable and (inaudible), If it is those types of changes, I don't think that there is a lot of explanation that needs to happen because, as I said, I don't think that you will see a radical shift in grades coming out. I think you'll see a moderate one.** If you do something as some counties have, that not only shifts grading scale but weighting at the same time and shifts it considerably, if suddenly we're graduating students – and I see these as- we're joking about it but we do get out applications with our 4.5 with Bs and Cs and we disadvantage

those school districts quite heavily and I, I don't think that is any of the proposals that we are looking at. I don't want to confuse that issue with what is being discussed here. But that is the fear, I think for many of us, is that this becomes very addictive and we don't want it to reach a point where we are in very good intention creating a disadvantage.

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

Let's to some audience questions - This is an interesting one I hadn't thought of yet and maybe Pat you can take a whack at this or maybe Greg. **Why doesn't VA set a state grading scale? (inaudible)**

**Pat Murphy FCPS Ass't Superintendent – Dept. of Accountability:**

**That is a great question and that is something that a number of states around the country are looking at because of the many issues that we are talking about. For instance, Florida is one of the states that have adopted a system-wide scale. There are other states out there along the same continuum and as recently, I guess, the last two weeks, one of our counties in the commonwealth has asked the state board of education to look at such a thing so there is some push in that direction for that to be considered. So that's a very good question.**

**Moderator Greg Toppo – USA Today:**

You want to comment on that?

**Greg Roberts – Sr. Associate Dean of Admission, University of VA:**

I just want to say one quick thing. I do think that there is a lot to be said for the autonomy of the districts and the counties and the schools even at the higher levels of education. I think that makes us one of the strongest states for academics in the country and we don't have a system where there is the University of North Carolina Wilmington, Ashborough, Chapel Hill and so and so on where you are tied together with everybody else. The community college system is fantastic but again you are separated into these levels. So I think that I am not a politician, so I do not know how that would actually work. I'm not opposed to it at all but I do think there is a lot to be said for the individual strengths of the counties and the individual strengths of the institutions that are making these decisions.

**Andrew Flagel – Dean of Admissions, George Mason University:**

**Yea I like the idea of a simplified system, but I just fear Richmond telling us how to run our school district. (AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)**

**Moderator Greg Toppo – USA Today:**

This is another question for Pat. What is the downside of numerical grading? You know this is something that came up earlier. You know – why not?

**Pat Murphy FCPS Ass't Superintendent – Dept. of Accountability:**

You know I have a couple thoughts on that and this is probably more Pat Murphy talking rather than sort of the objective FCPS person who comes to the table. Sure – why not. I think that is reasonable. But I also have to think that I'd be interested with the follow up with the colleges - how they would interpret that. I think that is one of the things we have to be mindful of. But sure there is an alternative there or a possibility with a numerical as a way to approach this.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

We talked about this earlier. Andrew responded directly to that but Shannon from Maryland was very clear with the audience – **the problem with numeric grades is it depends on what Fairfax County still does in defining those numeric grades. If Fairfax County goes the route of New York or Texas where it is a pure numeric scale, there is no letter grade definition to those numbers then it is left up to the colleges. And as we have seen from the U.S. Department of Education generally they default then to a 10 point grading scale if they feel like recalculating it to a 4.0 scale, but if Fairfax County still wants to maintain this more rigorous grading scale – then even though they put the numeric grade on that transcript the colleges will still calculate that based on Fairfax County's grading scale and our kids are no better off than if the letter grade were left on there in the first place.**

**Andrew Flagel – Dean of Admissions, George Mason University:**

Yea I think that what most of us tend to do is if it is not on the transcript, then we call the school, we'll get a hold of it from the school or we'll look at old data. We're as guilty of that as anybody. So I think they take a risk if its just numeric of many places just defaulting to what was Fairfax's previous grading scale. Or calling and saying what is it asking for – I know I've called some school districts where they don't list it anywhere and they'll generally say its on a 10-point scale (inaudible).

**Shannon Gundy – University of Maryland:**

One of the advantages to having numeric grades as opposed to just the letter grades is that you can see the strength of letter grades, which is something you can't discern when you just have the letter itself. So I don't we're still not going to change a B to an A but if I can see that you have a very strong B, I can see that is going to make a difference as opposed to a lower B.

**Moderator Greg Toppo – USA Today:**

Maybe Susan can take a crack at this one. (Inaudible) system you will see hard data showing that Fairfax County students apply to less prestigious universities than those students in Montgomery County with lower grades that have lower expectations. How do you respond?

**Susan Rexford, Career Center Specialist – West Springfield High School:**

I'm not sure that I would agree that students are applying to lesser institutions in Fairfax County. I think we have a pretty good representative sampling of students applying to colleges all over the United States, not just the Virginia public schools or private schools or whatever. I – just from my personal experience, I haven't seen the students complaining so much about the grading scale itself, as maybe how rigorous a class may be or not be but I just don't see that this what might be driving the issue. I don't feel that students are shying away from Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Hopkins, Duke, Stanford. They are looking at all of those schools. Are they getting in at the same numbers as students from other counties and other states – that I honestly don't know because we don't have access to that particular data. But I do feel that they are getting in - not in huge numbers, but they are getting in at least in some schools all over the country. So I think what people tend to forget in all of this process is that the majority of schools in this country admit well over 50 percent of the applicant pool. They are admitting – the national average is something like 69 or 70 percent of all applicants who are admitted to college. So we may be just talking more about the selective students and if we are I think we need to make that distinction.

**Catherine Potter, FCPS Parent:**

(inaudible) I would like to make a point here. I understand Pat's point from a while ago that we need data and so on and so on but I would like to at least urge us to get that data fairly quickly. We may never be able to get it and **there are over 11,000 rising seniors who are going to be applying for the same colleges and I know there is a college out there for everyone but unfortunately in Fairfax County we pretty much all want the same schools. That's just the reality of it. And I want to level the playing field. And I want to do it this year –** AUDIENCE APPLAUSE – (inaudible) you can't deny this. **You can talk about admissions rates and everything else but you cannot deny the fact that when it comes to scholarships, our kids are not receiving scholarships at the same level.** – AUDIENCE APPLAUSE - Let me give you an example of what happened to my son at the University of Colorado. We thought he was a shoo in based upon the conversations we had in the admissions office. He was a very strong candidate. We then couldn't understand why he wasn't getting his out-of-state, automatic merit scholarship letter. We went there for the perspective students, walked into the scholarship office and said we're not understanding. They said that's a very simple criteria for scholarships – GPA/SAT – objective. There's no turning that around. This year we took the top five percent of our applicant pool and your son's GPA did not make that. Now he had six APs, I mean rigorous coursework - it doesn't matter when it comes to scholarships. **So you know we can play around with the data but it's not just a matter of getting into these schools, it's a matter of affording these schools.** –AUDIENCE APPLAUSE- (inaudible)

I want my kids to go to Virginia schools and frankly, I'm not sure that Charlie would be at the Naval Academy if he had gotten into UVA. He did not have that choice. **My daughter is a rising senior. Is she going to get into the top Virginia schools? I don't know so we are having to look out of state. What would make it palatable to me is if she were then to receive some of these automatic, out of state scholarships then suddenly the playing field is level.** That's not going to happen.

**Megan McLaughlin, FAIRGRADE:**

I think in terms of what Catherine is saying and what the (inaudible) was referring to is it really comes down to this for our students. **The admissions officers have said that if we change to a 10 point scale we don't weaken our reputation, we don't lose our excellent reputation. But what we do know is that there 3000 colleges in the United States. They have varying admissions policies. They have varying scholarship policies. Why would Fairfax County want to have policies that do not work for its students?** And that is simply what 6000 people on line and over 7000 people through our paper petitions in combination have signed and said, this issue – with all due respect Susan – does matter to families, parents are concerned that its not simply because we want to see our kids getting into Harvard and Yale. Um 250 colleges in the United States are highly selective. They accept fewer than 50 percent and as Catherine said, our students perform at high levels, they have high expectations for themselves, they want that playing field leveled so they can compete as they deserve with the talent and abilities that they have through this amazing school system. We just want them to have fair grades and a fair opportunity to compete and I think that is what will really help our students. – AUDIENCE APPLAUSE -

**Moderator Greg Toppo – USA Today:**

I'm going to do some wishful thinking here – I'm going to ask Pat – so ok, let's say that this is something that the Board this is a good idea– what kind of timeline is possible and what is the process?

**Pat Murphy FCPS Ass't Superintendent – Dept. of Accountability:**

Before I respond to that I would like to again give a little bit of context and a little bit of background. Catherine I appreciate your comments and that is your story and that's about you so please don't misinterpret what I'm saying and that's impacting a lot of folks out here. I know that. The scholarship money is real and that is a full awareness but again I want to put this within a framework of what we are thinking about here. 75 percent of our kids apply to about 104 schools. So 75 percent of our kids apply to about 104 schools. **So again there are another group of kids that apply to some outlier as I call them – some schools where we don't have a lot of kids apply but we're looking at that as a whole piece and I think that needs to part of how you frame this discussion. I think that becomes very important. As I said before, this discussion becomes very complex because**

you are really looking at three elements: you are looking at admissions, you're looking at honors placement and you're looking at scholarships. So there is not just one answer that is going to arrive at the end of the day that is going to give you a complete picture. We have this complicated by the fact that - and these gentleman have said this very nicely that they basically said we all have a bit of a different way of looking at how we accept applicants. **So this is very complex.** That leads me to your question about well, what about change? Here is the timeline that we're on at this point. **Right now, it is our hope for us to finish up with our investigation and gather all the data that we think is important Catherine, and then present that to the superintendent. And it's taking us a little longer than we had anticipated but we're hopefully looking at late fall but at that point I think it needs to fair to the superintendent and to the board to digest the information.** Now I need to really say this will not make me particular popular today but I think we need to put again this - some of this will become a self-fulfilling prophecy well if you finish this well we are gonna move and gonna make change. **There are no plans at this point other than to give the superintendent the report and then at that point he will evaluate what the next steps will be. So I know everyone is anxious for a change and I can really appreciate that but I think we need to look at this realistically, we need to look at it within the framework of the reasoning and I think it's also gonna take some time - AUDIENCE MEMBERS ASK WHY? WHY? YOU CHANGE BOUNDARIES WITHIN A YEAR. YOU ARE WASTING TIME. WHY?**

**Moderator Greg Toppo - USA Today:**

I'm going to get the last word in. Um, all these folks are going to be here for a bit if you want to ask questions of them individually. We've been on this stage for an hour and a half so I want to give them a chance to stretch and take a break. We appreciate you coming and behaving and if you have any questions you can (inaudible) - AUDIENCE APPLAUSE -

***END OF TAPE - END OF TRANSCRIPT***