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## Schools end valedictorian tradition

Collegiate rankings recognize more high-achieving students

By JOHN L. GUERRA / Citizen Staff

Ending generations of tradition in Florida Keys high schools, the school district no longer will use the valedictory system in Key West, Marathon or Coral Shores. In its place, the district will adopt collegiate rankings, from magna cum laude on down. Any student who meets the requirements for the rank will earn it.

It seems the traditional valedictory system has become outdated and controversial in the age of advanced placement, dual enrollment, honors classes and other "A-weighted" courses that let students earn more than 4.0 grade points.

Competition has grown fierce in the high schools; in some years, students have tied for the valedictorian and salutatorian slots. In most years, salutatorian-level students are separated from the valedictorian slot by only a couple hundredths of a grade point.

"Beginning with this year's freshman class, which graduates in 2011-2012, there will not be a valedictorian or a salutatorian," Schools Superintendent Randy Acevedo said. "It helps with consistency; we have some kids where it comes down to a fraction of a point. The consensus of the three high school principals is to move to the college ranking system."

The three high school principals have been discussing the idea for at least four years, said Christina McPherson, assistant principal at Key West High School. She also headed the districtwide committee that looked at changing the valedictory system. "We compared ourselves with other districts not only in Florida but around the country and found that they were adopting it," she said.

Under the new guidelines, students who earn at least a 4.5 GPA will be deemed magna cum laude; those who earn at least a 4.25 earn summa cum laude status, and those who earn a 4.0 will be designated cum laude.

The new rules were part of the annual Pupil Progression Plan, which was included in a long list of documents and contracts the School Board approved as part of its consent agenda on Aug. 27.

"I can't believe that," School Board member Andy Griffiths said of the change, adding that he may bring it up for discussion at the next board meeting. "[Parents and students] will be rabid if we try to get rid of valedictorian/salutatorian; that's been going on for generations. I can't believe something that huge would be on the consent agenda."

Coral Shores honored its first valedictorian and salutarian -- Sally Jinette and Venetia Felton, respectively -- in 1953, the year the school opened, according to [www.keyshistory.org](http://www.keyshistory.org) [1].

Board member Debra Walker said the change makes sense these days.

"We've had in the past few years so many super achievers fighting for the few spots; it often comes down to the hundredths of a point, between a 4.862 GPA and a 4.8653 GPA -- some teeny, tiny fraction."

At Coral Shores High School last year, a student considered a shoo-in for the valedictorian spot by his peers and teachers instead was named a salutarian, said Vice Principal David Murphy.

"We had juxtaposition," he said. "The calculations happened in the last nine weeks [of the semester]; the person who had been considered the valedictorian became the salutarian when all of the data was in."

The idea is to honor all high-scoring students at graduation so families and friends will know they've all worked hard to achieve great things in high school, Murphy said. But class rankings -- first in class, second in class and so forth -- will continue, so students can use those rankings on their college applications.

Another question: Who gives the student commencement speech if there's no valedictorian?

There's no direction to that question in the progression plan, but Mike Henriquez, the deputy superintendent of instructional services, said it was a common question from school advisory councils that reviewed the new plan. "As it stands now, each school will select an outstanding student to make the commencement speech."

A look outside the Keys may provide further guidance. West Ottawa High School in Michigan faced that question in June. Intense competition among seniors led to the naming of eight valedictorians. The school decided to let all eight students give a speech.

Quick answer, long commencement.

[jguerra@keysnews.com](mailto:jguerra@keysnews.com) [2]

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