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Top Students Earning Record GPAs

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BRANDON - When her guidance counselor told her she had a shot at doubling the 'perfect' 4.0 grade-point average, Durant High School valedictorian Saima Siddiqi set her goal.

'As soon as I heard that, I thought, 'That's what I'm going to do,'" Siddiqi said.

And for sure she did.

Siddiqi in May became one of at least two Hillsborough County valedictorians to surpass the 8.0 GPA threshold.

High school students used to have one GPA goal to reach, a perfect 4.0. But nowadays they can earn higher scores by taking advanced-placement classes in person or online.

King High School valedictorian Rumela Das achieved her 8.08 in February, when the district freezes GPAs for class rank and valedictorian and salutatorian determination. The salutatorian, Emmanuel Berhmans, had a 7.9485.

Siddiqi in February locked in her valedictorian standing with a 7.92 GPA, but by the end of her senior year she had accrued an 8.2.

The valedictorian is the student with the highest academic rank in a school's graduating class. The salutatorian is the second highest-ranked student.

With more students taking online courses for free through the **Florida Virtual School**, or through one of its seven franchises, including Hillsborough Online, the dramatic increase in over-the-top GPAs shouldn't be too surprising, school officials say.

School district records show that of the 46 valedictorians and salutatorians who graduated in 2000, 17 scored a 6.0 GPA or higher. An additional 24 top students scored higher than a 5.0.

In contrast, records for this year's top 6- students showed 11 scored higher than 7.0. Thirty-two students had GPAs between 6.0 and 6.97, and 16 scored between 5.0 and 6.0. The remaining student earned a GPA of 4.98.

Mike Greco, Hillsborough's assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, called the district's first 8.0-plus GPAs amazing.

'It's a great testimony to students who are very focused on trying to get the most rigorous classes, not for one year, but for all four years of high school,' Greco said.

To achieve a GPA higher than 4.0, which reflects a straight-A report card, a student must take courses that 'weight' the average.

'I have to explain to a lot of parents who have children coming into high school how students can get over a 4.0,' said Durant Assistant Principal Claire Mawhinney. 'For

most parents, that was unheard of when they were in high school.'

Weighting works like this: Taking a half-credit honors class adds .04 points to a GPA. A half-credit college-level Advanced Placement class called AP, or dual-enrollment class at Hillsborough Community College, earns a student a .08 bonus.

To illustrate, four As in a grading period amounts to 16 points. Divided by 4, the result is a 4.0 GPA. If two of those classes were honors, and one was an AP offering, the GPA is 'weighted' with an additional 1.6 points, amounting to a 5.6 GPA.

James Pirotta, previously an assistant principal at McLane Middle School, is on special assignment with the school district to oversee online instruction. His position was created because of the increased popularity of online classes, which are taught by certified teachers who 'meet' with students via phone, e-mail, instant messaging and discussion forums.

Students take online courses to enrich their transcripts, repeat a class for a higher grade - the average of the two grades replaces the lower grade, or to make more room in their school schedules for electives, such as band, chorus and art.

Pirotta said 1,394 students signed up for Hillsborough Online classes throughout the 2006-07 school year, with a 60 percent completion rate. This summer's enrollment topped 1,400 students.

'We've got more in the summer signed up than we did for the whole school year, and we see those numbers growing even more,' Pirotta said.

Florida Virtual School began in 1997 with a handful of courses and 77 enrollments. Today, more than 90 courses are available, including 10 Advanced Placement classes.

Meanwhile, county GPAs have been rising steadily.

'I don't say that kids are getting smarter,' said Deputy Superintendent of Schools Ken Otero. 'But I do think they're taking more and more rigorous coursework than in the past, especially with the increasing competitiveness of college and scholarship selections. I think you'll probably get to the point where you'll have students take everything that they can conceivably take.'

Such was the case for Siddiqi, who in eighth grade took Spanish I, algebra I honors and physical sciences honors. In ninth-grade she took all honors courses and her first of 13 Advanced Placement classes.

Online she took two Advanced Placement classes, two honors classes and her required electives in team sports, personal fitness and health. She also took eight dual-enrollment classes at HCC.

Siddiqi said she never earned a grade below an A. Becoming eligible for exam exemptions with perfect attendance, she said, 'in a lot of cases saved my As.'

'If you want to break an 8.0 GPA, you have to take as many honors and AP classes as you can and as early as you can,' Siddiqi said. 'I'm just fortunate because Durant early on let me waive some prerequisites because they thought I could handle it.'

As for online courses, Siddiqi urges caution.

'Really, if you do it just for the credit, and not to absorb the instruction, don't do it,' she said. 'It was never about the credit for me. I always wanted to learn something from the classes I was taking.'

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