

Top of the class expands in Lee Schools

District eliminates titles of valedictorian and salutatorian and adopts Latin honors system

By MATT CLARK

Tuesday, September 30, 2008

BONITA SPRINGS — Last-minute sabotage. Covert surveillance. Strategic execution. Intellectual warfare.

The GPA-thirsty battle over valedictorian and salutatorian honors that took place in Lee County — as it has in districts across the country — is over. When seniors hit the stage on graduation day this year, they will only be carrying Latin honors. Cum laude, magna cum laude and summa cum laude will be the new sought-after designations, the new words to compete for on the academic battlefield.

Superintendent James Browder said the new system will prevent the unfair situations he handled as a principal at three different Lee County high schools. He said it will increase the number of students to be honored and will prevent the problem of forcing an unwilling student to make a speech in front of thousands on graduation day. Under the new system, students receiving the top, summa cum laude honor will vote to select two individuals from their group to speak at graduation.

“We had kids and parents that would do things at the last second so that a youngster would bump somebody out and get the recognition,” Browder said.

The decision to oust the “val” and “sal” designations began a little over three years ago. Browder said a lengthy discussion over the policy change eventually led to the Lee County School Board approving the new system 5-0 in June of 2005.

At a recent board meeting, School Board Chairwoman Jeanne Dozier praised the new system for allowing more than just two seniors being honored. She also said the new system will ease the transition to college, where it is frequently used to honor graduates.

If graduation were tomorrow, district officials say an estimated 4,320 seniors would be recognized with Latin honors for achieving an unweighted grade point average of 3.00 and higher. The highest designation, summa cum laude, would be given to 575 students for achieving an unweighted GPA of 4.00 and higher.

"We had a lot of discussions around it," Dozier said of the decision. "This is patterning ourselves, preparing students for the next phase of life, like college."

But the system does have its critics. Estero High School sophomore Kyle Cusson, 15, doesn't feel this will encourage students to attend college.

"Honestly, I don't think today's students care either way," Cusson said. "If students want to go to college, than they will. I don't think fancy words at graduation will make a difference."

Some district officials have said it would give students a leg up over the previous system, as more students will get to put a designation on their college applications. The new system doesn't do away with the old, weighted-GPA class ranking system. The top student will still know they were on top, but they won't be recognized publically for it.

The weighted system allowed valedictorians to vary wildly from the rest of their peers. Students who took advanced placement or International Baccalarate courses would get more credit, 1.04 credits as opposed to the one credit for a regular course. As Browder points out, some of the former valedictorians were rarely seen on the campus of the high school they graduated from.

"And see look, that's still there, there's still a class rank. What we opted to do, and what we did, all the universities do," Browder said. "There are valedictorians that go early enrollment at a university and then they come back the last year. I don't think that was meant to be."

Under the weighted system, students would also take courses that didn't necessarily apply to their future career options for the sole purpose of becoming valedictorian, district officials have said. More recently, students

would also take courses from the online-based Florida Virtual School to improve their credit base.

As such, Fort Myers High School chose only to honor valedictorians from the standard academic program and allowed International Baccalaureate students to choose two of their own to speak at graduation. The system led to few complaints, Principal David LaRosa said.

"Oh yeah, kids try to work their schedule all the time to try and get an advantage to those types of things," LaRosa said. "It's really become an issue, it's become an easier outlet for them, Florida Virtual and that type of thing, that's available to them now. They try to do things to manipulate the system."

LaRosa said he and district officials have been notifying parents about the Latin honors in several ways, among them letters sent to parents. When graduation rolls around, he said, there should be no surprises.

"We've been talking about this for three years," LaRosa said. "So, I would be shocked if anybody's really surprised with it, just because I said we've communicated it district-wide."

Browder said the plan will also address another issue: the fear of public speaking. Those who fight hard on the academic battlefield aren't always prepared for their post-achievement address. The new system fixes this problem.

"I had a salutatorian that was deafly afraid to stand in front of a group and talk. The young man came to me and said, 'I just can't do this.' I said, 'Okay, look let me help you.' He and I putzed around a little bit and got an English teacher and he read a short speech. We got him to do it and his family was real appreciative," Browder said, "but the bottom line is, they will pick people that want to be up there and speak. In this situation, they pick people that are willing to do it."

Niki Tonnessen, Estero High School's first valedictorian, acknowledges the advantages to the new system of recognition, but does not see the need to eliminate the title she fought so hard to receive 21 years ago.

The title she battled for also led to her being accepted into and graduating from the U.S. Naval Academy. She went on to serve eight years as a naval officer and receive her master's degree. The 37-year-old now leads retail troops into battle as a store manager for Target, and is confident she will

continue moving up the ladder.

“I think they could do something in combination with valedictorian and salutatorian and still recognize students for other achievements,” Tonnessen said. “There’s a certain pride an individual feels when they achieve that goal. There is nobody else who graduates No. 1. There is one person who dedicated themselves to their studies over a four year period.”

© Naples News