

March 9, 2022

Dear Parents of Students in the Class of 2026:

As educators we are constantly researching best practices in relation to student learning. We learn from colleagues throughout the nation, and we engage in professional development so that we are giving our students the best experience possible. We also spend time examining our current practices to ensure they align with our educational philosophies.

The current practice of honoring class Valedictorians is one we have discussed for many years. The role of the educator is to teach all of our students, not to rank and sort them. The practices of class rank and Valedictorian status are outdated and inconsistent with what we know and believe of our students. We believe all students can learn at high levels, and learning is not a competition. According to Thomas Guskey, *On Your Mark* (2015), "...when students' grades depend on their relative standing among classmates, learning becomes a highly competitive endeavor in which students must compete against each other..." (64). Additionally, David Gleason, *At What Cost* (2017) says, "Our emphasis on high achievement for all students necessarily pits them against each other as rivals, forcing them into competition for the same achievement credentials" (135).

In examining the practice of selecting this designation, we found inconsistency among our schools in numbers of Valedictorians, qualifications of Valedictorian status, and a misunderstanding of what a Valedictorian is. According to Guskey's research, "the term *valedictorian* has nothing to do with achievement. It comes from the Latin *vale dicere*, which means 'to say farewell.' It is the individual selected from the graduating class to deliver a farewell address at the commencement ceremony, called a *valedictory*" (65). Additionally, while we continue to find ways to decrease the angst so many students face on a day-to-day basis, this is one more way we can take away unnecessary pressure, "Regrettably, these intense pressures accumulate, and in a variety of direct and indirect ways, inflict the most harm on the most developmentally vulnerable individuals, students" (Gleason, 49-50). Furthermore, many high-achieving schools throughout the nation no longer recognize this designation, so we will have a similar practice in this regard.

Beginning with the Class of 2026, the high schools in the Cherry Creek School District will no longer recognize a Valedictorian designation. We will, however, continue to acknowledge the academic achievements of our students through various other ways (i.e., honor roll, GPA cords at graduation, department and school-specific awards, etc.). To ensure we are in alignment with colleges and universities' admissions processes, we sought counsel from local schools:

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At the University of Denver, we are not concerned with schools eliminating class rank or valedictorian recognition, as these are not factors used in our admission process. Many college and university admission committees stopped considering class rank years ago, as very few high schools still report a class ranking. Furthermore, when students apply for college admission during the fall and winter of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, any status associated with valedictorian and salutatorian are unknown and have never been utilized by our admission committee. We share the philosophy of Cherry Creek Schools – we aren't trying to sort or rank students, but rather identify and select students who are motivated and curious learners and committed to their classroom success. – Todd Rinehart, Vice Chancellor of Enrollment, University of Denver

We will also continue to assess students on what they know, and we will continue to offer them multiple ways to show their learning. We believe this will positively impact all students in the Cherry Creek School District.

Sincerely,

The High School Principals of the Cherry Creek School District