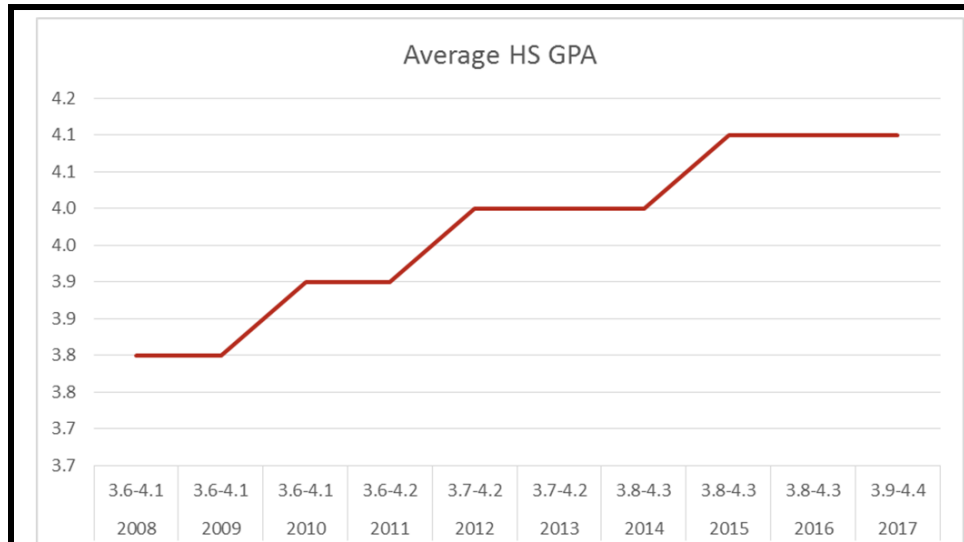




## RESPECTFUL DEBATE: THE WIDENING GPA GAP



[Photo courtesy of Inside Higher Ed](#)

*Does the high school GPA contribute to social inequality? Should the HS GPA be abolished?*

**Rationale:** As students study how presidential administrations attempted reforming the US education system they will encounter reformers who call for more radical change to inequality, funding, the increased competition and costs to attend college. In this lesson, students will weigh opposing perspectives on whether or not high school GPA contributes to social inequality. Students will engage in a respectful debate, listen to both sides of the argument to regulate their emotions, build collective understanding and empathy for how aspects of the U.S. education system disadvantage some and yet offer advantages to others. Such skills are necessary for students to practice to support their efficacy in participating in and leading respectful debates for healthy civil discourse.

**Objective(s):** Students will analyze the impact(s) that the GPA gap has on students and society by reading, summarizing, and reflecting on two research-based articles to hone their summarizing and perspective taking skills.

**Target Grade Levels:** 5-8

**Standards:**

- **NJSLS-SS. 6.1.12.HistorySE.14.b:** Use a variety of sources from diverse perspectives to analyze the social, economic and political contributions of marginalized and underrepresented groups and/or individuals.
- **NJSLS-SS. 6.1.12.HistoryCC.16.b:** Determine past and present factors that led to the widening of the gap between the rich and poor, and evaluate how this has affected individuals and society.
- **NJSLSA.RI.11-12.7.** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

**Focal SEL Skill:** Social Awareness

- Demonstrate an awareness of the differences among individuals, groups, and others' cultural backgrounds.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the need for mutual respect when viewpoints differ.

**Materials & Resources**

- Notebook
- Pencil/Pen
- Computer connected to a projector for the teacher
- Chromebooks for students with internet connection
- Access to the video: [Schools & Social Inequality: Crash Course Sociology #41](#)
- Copies of the *U.S. News* article "[Another Advantage for Wealthy Students](#)" by [Lauren Camera](#)
- Copies of *The Atlantic* article "[Why Suburban Schools Are Inflating Kids' Grades](#)" by [Jon Marcus](#)

**Timing:** Can range from one 45 minute lesson to two 45-minute lessons.

**Lesson Procedure:**

**Part I: Introduction & Preparation (30 minutes):**

1. Homework Activity

Have students read and take notes on the following video: [Schools & Social Inequality: Crash Course Sociology #41](#) for homework. Encourage them to use a common note taking method like the Cornell Notes and write the following vocabulary terms and main ideas on the left-hand side with any corresponding notes from the video on the right-hand side.

- meritocracy
- Social-conflict theory
- class gaps in educational attainment
- school funding
- cultural capital
- race gaps in educational attainment
- tracking
- school to prison pipeline
- standardized test scores
- NCLB/federal funding

2. Do Now (5 minutes)

As students get settled into class tell them ***“today we are going to engage in a respectful debate about grade inflation and how it correlates to factors such as socioeconomic status and race. Now that you have watched the “Schools & Social Inequality” video, you should have an understanding of how the U.S. educational system potentially disadvantages some individuals while providing advantages for others. Today we will read two articles to consider if the high school grade point average (GPA) plays a role in reinforcing social inequalities”.*** To prime their thinking, have them respond in writing to the statement below as a focusing/do now activity.

*“According to findings from the College Board and the U.S. Department of Education (Hurwitz & Lee, 2018), grades of typical high school students are higher than ever and have been on the rise over the last 25 years. Similarly, from 1998 to 2016, the average high school GPA increased from 3.27 to 3.38.”*(Source: Hurwitz, M. & Lee, J. (2018). “Grade Inflation and the Role of Standardized Testing” in *Measuring success: Testing, Grades and the Future of College Admissions*. Johns Hopkins University Press.)

3. Introductory Activity - Debrief Homework (15 minutes)

To build students’ background knowledge about the reciprocal relationship between aspects of the U.S. educational system and social inequality, review the main points of

the video they watched for homework. Also, discuss the terms about which they took notes and feel free to add any of the following vocabulary words to the list:

- inflation
- grade point average (GPA)
- systemic disadvantages
- “socioeconomic index”

You may also want to explain to students how their GPA is calculated, too.

4. Arrange Student Groups (to be done in advance)

Divide the class into two groups, one group will assume the “pro” side and the other half will assume the “con” side. Tell the students that “***Today we will engage in an activity called Respectful Debate to practice the skill of perspective taking. This is a skill that you will need to be an effective and involved citizen in your school and community as well as a global citizen. It involves debating not just one side of the debate you agree with but also taking the side of a debate that you don’t agree with.***” Inform the class that “***taking the position of a side you disagree with is the essence of Respectful Debate and this part of the lesson will help you build mutual understanding on the topic.***”

5. Prepare for the Respectful Debate (35 minutes)

Distribute materials (optional in advance): Pass out the background information and have students read it to gain a general overview of the debate. Tell the students that they are going to read two articles about grade inflation and how the high school GPA has risen over the past few decades. You may have students underline/highlight the main elements of the articles that reflect or do not reflect ways that GPA inflation contributes to social inequality. Have the students evaluate the sources to consider the very nature of the chicken and egg relationship - does social inequality cause the GPA discrepancy or does the widening GPA gap contribute to social inequality?

Generate ideas: Both sides have five minutes to write down as many examples as they can, to support their position.

Assign roles: You may wish to have students assign roles in their respective groups, determining who will be the *note taker*, the *time keeper*, *debaters*, and *debate researchers* who can go back to the lesson resources to gather key points made in the debate. Note

the number of debaters can range from one student presenting every point to multiple students presenting fewer points each. Explain to the students that your role is to guide the students through the debate steps.

### **Part II: Engaging the Respectful Debate (15 minutes)**

1. **Reconvene** as a whole class.
2. **Pro side starts the debate:** “Pro” side gives their position and supports with one or two examples to support their position.
3. **Con side summarizes** (“reflects back”) what the “pro” side said and confirms with the pro side whether they summarized accurately. If not, the “pro” side can offer clarifying statements. Then the “con” side gives their own position and supports with one or two examples.
4. **Pro side responds:** “Pro” side summarizes what the “con” side said and confirms with the “con” side whether they summarized accurately. If they did not, they can provide clarifying statements. The “pro” side then has the option of providing one additional example in support of their own position, if they wish.
5. **“Con” side responds:** “Con” side summarizes what the pro side said and confirms with the pro side whether they summarized accurately. If not, the “pro” side can provide clarifying statements. The “con” side then has the option of providing one additional example in support of their own position.

### **Part III: Debaters Switch Sides for Perspective Taking (15 minutes)**

1. **Debaters will swap sides:** Using the same debate statement, have the “pro” side and “con” side switch and repeat steps 1-5 as well as the “generate ideas” and “assign roles” steps of the lesson preparation. The switching of sides is a *critical element of the lesson* to help stretch student thinking to see the topic from a different perspective.

### **Part IV: Reflection & Assessment (8-10 minutes)**

1. Facilitate a conversation about the skill of “Perspective Taking”, which is the ability to see situations from multiple perspectives. Sample questions include:
  - Has your opinion changed at all from when we started, about whether or not GPA contributes to social inequality? How so?

- Did summarizing what the other side said and/or switching sides change your opinion? What about the summary was helpful?
- What lessons does this activity teach us about opinions we have today about issues in the news or historical events?
- How might debates like this help you question issues in history, current events, or the school, and consider other perspectives?
- How does exercising mutual respect for opposing views bring different results from debating opposing views?
- What did it feel like to disagree with someone's points of view but also hold appreciation for their point of view? How might this skill be helpful in society today?

**Formative Assessment:** After the discussion have students choose any one of the questions, or you may assign a question, to write in on a paper for an exit ticket or a digital padlet posting [padlet website](#). Padlet is a Google-chrome extension. Feel free to modify this step as you see fit for your learners.

**Lesson Extension:** Have students imagine that they are a director of admissions at a state university. They have been given the task of developing a new policy to use GPA for the purpose of evaluating student academic achievement in a way that promotes equity and fairness. They should draft a one to two page policy explaining how they plan to go about doing this.