



Calculating Freshman On-Track

Technical Notes for Freshman On-Track

This document was created by Chicago Public Schools to define how Freshman On-Track is calculated and provides considerations for appropriate use of the metric. The Network for College Success has edited this document to remove out-of-date references.

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What is Freshman On-Track?

Freshman On-Track (FOT) is a measure of how many first-time freshmen are, by the end of their first year, “On Track” to graduate from high school within four years. The measure is based on two freshman year data points: (i) credit accumulation; (ii) course failures. An eligible first-year freshman is On Track by the end of the year if s/he has: (i) earned at least five course credits; (ii) failed *no more than* one semester of a *core* course—otherwise, s/he is off track. UChicago Consortium research shows that freshmen who finish their first year of high school On Track are more than three times as likely as those off track to graduate from high school within four years.

There are a few technical points regarding FOT calculation that anyone using this data should be aware of:

- Eligible freshmen count towards the FOT rate of the school they attend *on the 20th day of school*, regardless of where they finish, or spend the majority of, the school year.
- Freshman year dropouts *are* included in the metric, and they are counted as off track.
- Freshmen attending the following types of schools (as of the 20th day) are *not* included in the metric:
 - Charter schools
 - Jail schools
 - Alternative schools
 - Special Ed schools
- Students repeating ninth grade are not included in the metric.

While attendance may impact whether a student earns the necessary amount of credits and/or passes courses, attendance *does not* directly factor into the calculation of this metric.

Components of the Freshman On-Track Metric

- Credits accumulated during first year of high school (≥ 5)
- Number of semester core course failures during first year of high school (≤ 1)

How are results reported?

Annual

- **School-level** Freshman On-Track data for the years 1997-2016 is currently available on the CPS Performance Data website. To obtain it, go to Related Links and click on School Data. Then navigate to Metrics > Freshman On-Track.
- **Student-level** Freshman On-Track data—which is aggregated up to the school, area, and district levels for reporting and accountability purposes—is not available directly via website.

Point-in-time

A “point-in-time” Freshman On-Track rate—a rough approximation of end-of-year Freshman On-Track rate—is also available, on a dynamically updated basis, via the Freshman Success Report located on Dashboard. This point-in-time rate may be useful to monitor and manage school and area performance within the school year: be advised, however, that the value of this rate jumps around quite a bit during the school year, is always lower at the end than the beginning of the year, and is based on an approximation of the end-of-year FOT criteria.

What questions can Freshman On-Track data answer?

Freshman On-Track data can be used at the aggregate level—whether district, area, or school—to gauge what percentage of students are “On Track” to graduate in four years—in turn, we know that students who are On-Track after freshman year are over three times as likely as those off track to graduate in four years. In short, it helps us answer the broad question: “How good of a job is this part of the district doing making sure its freshmen have attained the education they need to graduate on time?”

Freshman On-Track data can also be cut in numerous ways to indicate how successful schools, areas, or the district as a whole have been at intervening with “at risk” students to ensure they are on pace to graduate on time. Interesting analytical questions and possible deep dives include:

- What % of students who were flagged on the beginning-of-year Freshman Watchlist (or any of the quarterly Freshman Success Reports) finished the year “On Track”?
- What kinds of “at risk” students are we most (and least) successful at getting On Track—kids with attendance problems? Academic problems? Both?
- How do different racial/demographic groups break down in terms of Freshman On-Track rates, and how (if at all) should this information inform school- and/or classroom-level FOT strategies?
- Did tailored, school-level interventions “work”?—How much more likely were “at risk” students who received particular types of intervention (e.g. tutoring, parent conferences, etc.) during their first year of high school to be “On Track” than those who did not?
- Among our off-track students, what particular classes or subject areas are causing the most semester failures? Do we have a plan to ensure that proper supports are in place to help reduce failure rates in these areas going forward?
- Among a high school’s freshman student body, are there substantial variations/patterns depending on what elementary feeder school a student attended, and how should this impact our feeder school outreach strategy?
- What percentage of our *off-track* freshmen graduate within four years?—and do we have effective credit recovery programs in place to get these kids back On Track during sophomore/junior/senior year?
- What percentage of our *On-Track* freshmen graduate within four years?—and do we have effective sophomore/junior/senior year transition programs in place to ensure that On-Track kids *stay* On Track?

What questions can Freshman On-Track data **NOT** answer?

- Freshman On-Track was designed to be predictive of high school graduation—NOT of either college enrollment or college success. Standardized test scores and GPAs are much better indicators of the latter.
- The Freshman On-Track rate will tell us how many of a given school’s freshmen were On Track, but not how close a given student was to the FOT “cutoffs”—i.e. it will NOT tell us:
 - How many more credits/fewer failures off-track students needed to be OnTrack
 - How far beyond “On Track” baseline cutoffs On-Track students were, in terms of credit accumulation
- Without deeper analysis, FOT will not indicate *why* a student was off track, i.e. whether it was because s/he did not *attempt* enough credits, or because s/he did not *pass* enough credits.
- FOT cannot directly answer any questions about student attendance, nor does it incorporate such data.
- FOT will not tell you anything about what happens to students who have been retained, i.e. are second-time freshmen.
- Also, keep in mind that FOT rates are highly dependent on:
 - Ability level and work habits of incoming students
 - Grading policies at individual high schools

How is Freshman On-Track data used within Chicago Public Schools?

Freshman On-Track data is a key self-monitoring tool for schools, which can be used to help gauge the effectiveness of school-specific intervention and transition strategies for 9th graders.

It is also a key district accountability metric, in two ways:

1. First, the metric **% of Freshmen On-Track** appears on the districtwide annual high school scorecard, which is used to gauge progress towards district and area goals.
2. Second, FOT is a crucial component of the district's Performance Policy, which dictates whether or not a given school is on probation. Specifically, a high school can earn up to three (3) points for its current FOT level, and up to (3) points for its FOT trend—six (6) points, total.