



Ongoing Research from the UChicago Consortium

Annotated Bibliography of UChicago Consortium Research on the Transition to High School

Since the initial research on the On-Track metric, UChicago Consortium researchers have studied the transition to high school again and again to develop a large body of work on the critical nature of freshman year in Chicago Public Schools. This annotated bibliography provides an overview of the most important UChicago Consortium research over the past decade as well as how the findings push practice on the ground.

Annotated Bibliography of the UChicago Consortium Research on the Transition to High School

The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation

JUNE, 2005

Elaine M. Allensworth and John Q. Easton

This research brief identifies the relationship between ninth grade course performance and high school graduation for the first time in UChicago Consortium research.

What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools

JULY, 2007

Elaine M. Allensworth and John Q. Easton

This report is the foundational text for On-Track work in Chicago. *What Matters* deepened researchers' and practitioners' understanding of the relationship between ninth grade and high school graduation by making connections between Freshman On-Track, absence rates, and the culture and climate of Chicago's high schools. The report also challenged the idea that students' academic skill level—as measured by achievement tests—was their biggest barrier to success in high school. Instead, the report suggested practitioners focus on boosting student attendance, increasing classroom engagement, and building stronger student-teacher relationships as strategies for increasing freshman course performance. Ultimately, the report hypothesized that supporting freshmen would lead to increased graduation rates.

What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools: A Focus on Students with Disabilities

DECEMBER, 2009

Julia Gwynne, Joy Lesnick, Holly Hart, and Elaine M. Allensworth

This report examines whether or not On-Track is an effective early warning indicator for students with disabilities in Chicago. The authors found that freshman year course performance—more than background characteristics such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, or prior achievement—predicts which students with disabilities are most at risk for dropping out of high school. This means that, while the work of keeping freshman with disabilities On Track to Graduate may be difficult, it is still the right strategy for increasing graduation rates among this particularly vulnerable sub-group of students in Chicago Public Schools.

What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools: A Focus on English Language Learners

MAY, 2012

Julia Gwynne, Amber Stitzel Pareja, Stacy B. Ehrlich, and Elaine M. Allensworth

This report examines whether or not On-Track was an effective early warning indicator for English Language Learner (ELL) students in Chicago. The authors found that course performance indicators are highly predictive of graduation for ELL students. In fact, course performance is more predictive than other ELL-specific indicators, including English language proficiency level and whether students experienced interruptions in their education. This means that, while the work of keeping ELL students On Track to Graduate may be difficult, it is still the right strategy for increasing graduation rates among this particularly vulnerable sub-group of students in Chicago Public Schools.

Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance

JUNE, 2012

Camille A. Farrington, Melissa Roderick, Elaine M. Allensworth, Jenny Nagaoka, Tasha Seneca Keyes, David W. Johnson, and Nicole O. Beechum

This literature review was the beginning of a new line of work at the UChicago Consortium to understand noncognitive factors and how those factors shape students' success in school. Noncognitive factors can be habits and mindsets like belonging, academic perseverance, study habits, self-regulation, and many others. This work called attention to the idea that skills and habits can be shaped in schools, particularly in the classroom, and pushed educators to explicitly incorporate these factors into the ongoing work of teaching and learning. Noncognitive factors can offer practitioners a new way of seeing the On-Track work from a student's perspective and shed new light on freshman success. Rather than just focusing on student attendance and work, this review encourages educators to think about shaping students' mindsets as learners to make a successful transition into high school.

Preventable Failure: Improvements in Long-Term Outcomes When High Schools Focused on the Ninth Grade Year: Research Summary

APRIL, 2014

Melissa Roderick, Thomas Kelley-Kemple, David W. Johnson, and Nicole O. Beechum

What happens to graduation rates as On-Track rates rise? After many years of strong improvement in On-Track rates across Chicago's schools, UChicago Consortium researchers re-evaluated the relationship between the On-Track indicator and graduation. The authors found that schools that experienced substantial increases in On-Track rates also saw increases in graduation rates. In addition, On-Track increases paid off for all kinds of students in all kinds of schools, with African-American and Latino males—those who had the lowest On-Track rates to begin with—making the greatest gains. This research gave practitioners in Chicago confidence that the focus on ninth grade is the right focus for high school improvement.

Free to Fail or On-Track to College Series

SEPTEMBER, 2014

W. David Stevens, Elaine M. Allensworth, Amber Stitzel Pareja, Marisa de la Torre, Julia A. Gwynne, Todd Rosenkranz, and James Sebastian

This series comprises three short reports:

- An Introduction to the UChicago CCSR Research Series
- Why Grades Drop When Students Enter High School and What Adults Can Do About It
- Setting the Stage for Academic Challenge: Classroom Control and Student Support

The *Free to Fail or On-Track to College* series uses qualitative data from student interviews—in addition to the UChicago Consortium's quantitative data archive—to help illustrate new and ongoing challenges students face in the transition to high school. Among other important findings, this work identifies the enormous scope of talent loss between eighth and ninth grade in Chicago Public Schools, even among high-achieving students. These reports draw attention to the decrease in ninth grade course performance generally as well as the more specific problem of students who earn As and Bs in eighth grade but only Cs and Ds in ninth grade. Low course performance pushes students off the path to college readiness in the same way that course failure pushes students off the path to high school graduation.

Looking Forward to High School and College: Middle Grade Indicators of Readiness in Chicago Public Schools

NOVEMBER, 2014

Elaine M. Allensworth, Julia A. Gwynne, Paul Moore, and Marisa de la Torre

When released, this report helped Chicago practitioners make a shift from thinking about On-Track work as a way to mitigate course failure and increase high school graduation to envisioning a more holistic approach to supporting freshman success and ensuring that students are ready to succeed in college. UChicago Consortium researchers re-investigated the foundational relationship between students' academic performance in the middle grades and their performance in high school, and once again reinforced the importance of ninth grade as an inflection point in students' academic trajectories. The report also added important pieces of evidence to the body of research, such as the use of eighth grade attendance and GPA as indicators of high school readiness and the surprisingly low rate of academically talented eighth graders going on to earn B averages in high school. This research provides the evidence behind the "Risk and Opportunity" Framework that is now used by the Network for College Success and schools across the city as a robust early warning indicator system in the transition to high school.

Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework

JUNE, 2015

Jenny Nagaoka, Camille A. Farrington, Stacy B. Ehrlich, and Ryan D. Heath; with David W. Johnson, Sarah Dickson, Ashley Cureton Turner, Ashley Mayo, and Kathleen Hayes

Building off of the previously released literature review on noncognitive factors, this report provides a clear and detailed conceptual framework for supporting human development in schools and society-at-large from preschool to college. The Framework provides a developmental lens on how to best support students in the transition to high school. It also challenges high school educators to think about the extent to which we are developing *agency* and *integrated identity* in developmentally appropriate ways for adolescents, who have tremendously malleable mindsets and need special attention in the transition to high school.

High School Graduation Rates through Two Decades of District Change: The Influence of Policies, Data Records, and Demographic Shift

JUNE, 2016

Elaine M. Allensworth, Kaleen Healey, Julia A. Gwynne, and René Crespín

This report examines two decades of data on Chicago's rising graduation rates and parses out different reasons for those improvements. While some increases in high school graduation rates could be attributed to factors like increased student achievement in grades K-8 or changes in student demographics, the authors find that the biggest contribution are increases in ninth grade factors, like On-Track rates. The report also lays to rest concerns that Chicago's graduation rate may be inflated by artificial changes or factors outside the control of Chicago's high schools. It makes clear that authentic changes in course performance for Chicago's freshmen has been the primary driver of the 20 percentage point increase in high school graduation rates over the last decade.

The Network for College Success: A Capacity-Building Model for School Improvement

NOVEMBER, 2016

Mary Ann Pitcher, Sarah J. Duncan, Jenny Nagaoka, Eliza Moeller, Latesha Dickerson, and Nicole O. Beechum

This model-capture paper uses qualitative data and a deep understanding of the Network for College Success approach to describe a comprehensive model for supporting freshman success work in a network of high schools. The paper accompanies the NCS Freshman On-Track Toolkit.

The Predictive Power of Ninth-Grade GPA

SEPTEMBER, 2017

John Q. Easton, Esperanza Johnson, and Lauren Sartain

This research report takes a deeper look at the importance of grades in ninth grade. The authors find that while freshman GPA has risen steadily over the past decade, alarming differences in GPA persist across race and gender as well as across high schools. The report further elaborates that a student's ninth grade GPA is a strong predictor of a wide range of later outcomes—including high school graduation, college enrollment, and college persistence. Ninth grade GPA predicts these outcomes better than standardized test scores, and the predictive power of GPA holds even when controlling for variables such as student background, prior achievement, and high school choice.

Practice-Driven Data: Lessons from Chicago's Approach to Research, Data, and Practice in Education

OCTOBER, 2018

Eliza Moeller, Alex Seeskin, and Jenny Nagaoka

This concept paper shares lessons learned about how, when, why, and under what conditions “the use of data has supported real and sustainable improvement in Chicago’s public high schools. The authors identify five lessons that apply to schools, districts, and researchers about how to use data to change practice. Taken together, the lessons form an approach called “practice-driven data” and can inform data work nation-wide.

Hidden Risk: Changes in GPA across the Transition to High School

OCTOBER, 2018

Alex Seeskin, Jenny Nagaoka, and Shelby Mahaffie

This report investigates the changes in GPA that students experience between 8th grade and 9th grade. As researchers previously identified, the decline in GPA between 8th and 9th grade is about a half a grade point for the average student, but these declines are different across schools and across sub-groups of students. The largest GPA decline identified is for Chicago's highest-achieving Black students, who ended 8th grade with over a 3.5 GPA and declined .73 grade points on average. Additionally, the researchers found that no single subject area was driving the declines in GPA, but that low grades in non-core subject areas, like the arts and physical education, were a hidden risk to students' overall academic performance in 9th grade.

The Forgotten Year: Applying Lessons from Freshman Success to Sophomore Year

AUGUST, 2020

Alex Seeskin, Shelby Mahaffie, and Alexandra Usher

In light of over a decade of improvement in 9th grade course performance across Chicago's high schools, this report turns the focus to 10th grade. Researchers first validated that the 9th grade on-track indicator is still just as predictive of high school graduation as it was when it was initially calculated, reinforcing the importance of 9th grade as critical for improving high school graduation. The report further finds that there is a group of students (about 8%) who fall off-track between 9th and 10th grade, and that these students are very unlikely to graduate. Paying extra attention to students who ended the 9th grade year on-track but also had a course failure or below 85% attendance could help strengthen schools' early warning indicator work as students progress into 10th grade.

High School GPAs and ACT Scores as Predictors of College Completion: Examining Assumptions about Consistency across High Schools

AUGUST, 2019

Elaine M. Allensworth and Kallie Clark

This analysis strengthens our ongoing understanding that high school GPA, rather than standardized test scores, is the best available predictor of college-readiness. The authors find that the relationship between high school GPA and college graduation remains strong and reliable, even across high schools. These findings are summarized in a working paper on the Consortium's website, and the final article is available in the academic journal *Educational Researcher*.