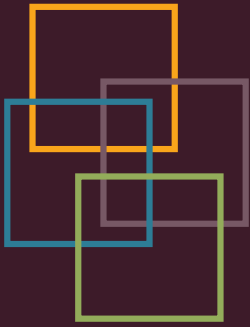


THE NETWORK FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS



A Capacity-Building Model for School Improvement

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



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Melissa Roderick conceptualized the Network for College Success (NCS), and her wisdom, passion, and foresight brought it into being and guided its development. NCS was built on her groundbreaking research. Roderick has dedicated her life to improving the life chances of our nation’s high school students. Her respect for educators in the field made possible not only the research-practice dialogue but also a generative discussion that transformed how researchers and practitioners approach their work.

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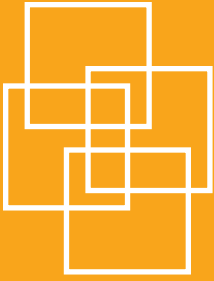
This paper and the accompanying Freshman On-Track Toolkit were made possible by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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This working paper is dedicated to the educators with whom we have had the privilege to work: the principals, teachers, counselors, and staff in the 32 schools with which NCS has partnered over the past 10 years. Your wisdom, unflagging commitment, and partnership are our inspiration. Thank you for opening up your practice and allowing us to learn with you.

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Executive Summary

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the **Network for College Success (NCS) model for school improvement using Freshman On Track as an example of building school-level capacity to enact improvement. The four key elements of this model are: 1. Creating Professional Learning Networks; 2. Applying Research-Based Data to Practice; 3. Coaching and Capacity Building; and 4. Distributing Leadership and Building High-Functioning Teams.**

Executive Summary

The Network for College Success, located at the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration (SSA), bases its model on the belief that educators want to improve their outcomes, but need the tools, skills, and strategies to effectively implement real changes. The NCS model provides an alternative to the “buy a reform model” approach often used in low-performing high schools. NCS's approach is about fostering the conditions for whole-school change, such as capacity building and systems thinking. NCS's strategies are based on the idea that educators know a great deal about the ways schools need to change in order to better prepare students, but need guidance in how to make these changes and how to implement them well.

NCS has developed a model of supporting schools to build the systems, structures, and capacity to engage in a process of ongoing improvement that transforms how practitioners approach their work. It helps schools build a focused work environment and provides the strong professional learning needed to organize for positive change. NCS embeds learning in a sustained, professional learning community working toward long-term goals and improve-

ment; one-time, “drive-by” professional development is insufficient in creating deep and lasting change. The NCS model fills a critical gap in the current high school reform movement by helping educators develop the capacity to address the complex challenges facing their students and schools, and to implement sustainable change.

This paper describes NCS's model and specifically draws on the example of Freshman On Track to illustrate how NCS supported high schools to dramatically improve graduation rates for their students. With the On-Track indicator at the center, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) made students' transition to high school a priority and, in 2008, started providing real-time early-warning data reports to help high schools strategize around their efforts to improve student performance. NCS supported schools by providing training and resources to help school leaders put the data into practice. Since 2006, the year NCS was founded, the district's On-Track rate has improved from 61 to 85 percent in 2015.

This paper captures the model and history of NCS, including excerpts from interviews with over 30 stakeholders, and it situates NCS's work within current research to provide a larger theoretical basis for the work of NCS.

It is not intended to be an evaluation of NCS nor evidence of its efficacy; rather, the paper's purpose is to document the NCS model and our stakeholders' experiences. By doing so, we seek to help education leaders, school practitioners, policymakers, and others gain a better understanding of a school improvement model that helps practitioners address the complex problems of school improvement across a range of school contexts and student backgrounds, and see how transformative change in a large urban district is possible when those in the education and research fields work together to identify issues, insights, and solutions to improve student outcomes.

Four Elements of the NCS Model

This paper describes the NCS model and organizes chapters around its four key elements:

1. Creating professional learning networks;
2. Applying research-based data to practice;
3. Coaching and capacity building; and
4. Distributing leadership and building high-functioning teams.

Professional Learning Networks

NCS was founded to support the transfer of innovation across schools and to break the professional isolation between and within schools. NCS established professional learning networks to provide school leaders and practitioners the space to learn and share knowledge with each other. School leaders need a professional community of their peers in which they can engage in honest, open reflection of their practice; candid exchanges of ideas and feedback; and discussion that challenges them to further develop their own leadership and transform their school communities.

Applying Research-Based Data to Practice

NCS has helped move practitioners from seeing data as a tool for accountability and compliance to using data to improve their performance. Data on research-based indicators, like Freshman On-Track, provide clarity for both defining what the goal is (e.g., ensuring that all freshmen are passing their classes) and understanding each school's (and teacher's and student's) performance toward that

goal. Data show clear points of comparison that can uncover patterns across subgroups within schools, and can show how performance for similar students differs across schools. These analyses create the opportunity for insight and action planning. Moreover, student performance data can be the most effective tool to critically assess school practices, from classroom instruction to school policies.

Coaching and Capacity Building

NCS developed structures, such as Collaboratives and Performance Management sessions, to provide schools with facilitated opportunities to learn from research, identify problems, and develop action plans. However, no matter how high-quality these learning opportunities are, educators may need individual support to translate the learning into their unique school contexts and turn good plans into sustainable practices. Because schools are not typically organized to implement change, leaders can benefit from on-the-ground coaching. To address the need for individualized support for school leaders, a key element of the NCS model is to provide job-embedded coaching to those leaders—including principals, teacher leaders, and counselors.

Distributing Leadership and Building High-Functioning Teams

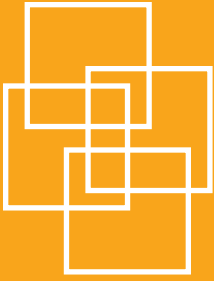
The NCS theory of change at the school level positions the principal as the primary driver of change. The NCS model requires investing significant resources in developing the capacity of principals as executive managers, instructional experts, and leaders of people. While the model relies on strong and committed principals, a single leader is not a viable path to sustained improvement. Early on, NCS acknowledged the complexity of high schools as organizations and the need to help principals develop and support a broader group of staff to share leadership responsibilities. In order for lasting change to occur in schools, principals need to empower leaders at all levels of the school to be drivers of change; create the systems and structures necessary to carry out change initiatives; and build a consistent culture throughout the school that reinforces the message that all students—and all teachers—are capable of excellence.

Conclusion

Chicago's fast-rising On-Track and graduation rates defy common assumptions about high-poverty schools, adolescents, and school reform. The progress in Chicago challenges the notion that improving urban high schools is among the most intractable problems in education—and has reframed high school dropout from a problem outside educators' control to one that can be addressed through effective school-based strategies. These improvements

have been sustained by schools through multiple changes in district leadership, low per-pupil expenditures, and complex external factors including poverty and violence in the community.

The magnitude of the results illustrates the power of building school leaders' capacity to translate research and data into improved practice, leading to improved outcomes that change students' lives.



Introduction

The story of urban school reform since the 1990s can easily be viewed as an endless cycle of improvement efforts that ended in little changed and little learned.¹ The predominant tendency of school reform initiatives is to address problems through bureaucratic strategies ranging, for example, from accountability mechanisms to delivering more rigorous standards to greater investment in professional development aimed at delivering a new curriculum. However, successful implementation of these efforts depends on the capacity, leadership, and culture and context of schools, as well as if and how the policies are supported.² Furthermore, mandated solutions rarely take into account the sustained effort necessary to build the capacity of schools to implement these strategies.³ As a result, good ideas that are not well implemented produce little results. Although the importance of strong implementation has been well documented, as Charles Payne, education scholar, noted, “So many reform efforts continue to proceed in all innocence, as if implementation were just a matter of bringing good ideas and clear thinking to the benighted.”⁴

The Network for College Success (NCS), located at the University of Chicago’s School of Social Service Administration (SSA), bases its model on the understanding that educators want to improve their outcomes, but need the tools, skills, and strategies to effectively implement real changes. The NCS model provides an alternative to the

“buy a reform model” approach often used in low-performing high schools. NCS fosters the conditions for whole-school change, such as capacity building and systems thinking. NCS’s strategies are based on the idea that educators know a great deal about the ways schools need to change in order to better prepare students, but need guidance in how to make these changes and how to implement them well. The NCS model supports schools to build the systems, structures, and capacity to engage in a process of ongoing improvement that transforms how practitioners approach their work. It helps schools become a focused work environment and provides the strong professional learning needed to organize for positive change. NCS embeds learning in a sustained, professional learning community, working toward long-term goals and improvement because one-time, “drive-by” professional development is insufficient in creating deep and lasting change.

In this paper, we describe the NCS’s model for filling a critical gap in the current high school reform movement by helping educators develop the capacity to build and sustain school improvement efforts and adapt to new challenges. We specifically draw on the example of Freshman On Track to illustrate how NCS supported high schools to dramatically improve graduation rates for their students. This paper includes excerpts from interviews with over 30 stakeholders and it situates NCS’s work within current research to provide a larger theoretical basis for

1 Payne (2008); Ravitch (2013).

2 Elmore (2005); McLaughlin & Talbert (2003).

3 McLaughlin (1993).

4 Payne (2008).

The Network for College Success at the University of Chicago provides:

- **A Research & Development Network** involving intensive partnerships with 17 high schools—serving over 18,000 students and representing approximately 20 percent of the district’s high school population.
- **Cross-school professional learning networks and job-embedded coaching** for: principals, instructional leadership teams, counselors and college coaches, data strategists, and classroom teachers engaged in disciplinary literacy practice; and training and support for grade-level and On-Track leaders.
- **District partnership providing data support and professional learning** for all district high schools and district network teams around high school improvement, including freshman success, post-secondary success, and improving course performance.
- **A National Freshman Success Institute** that brings together school teams from across the country to support improved freshman success and high school graduation rates through research, data, and professional learning.

the NCS approach. It is not intended to be an evaluation of NCS nor to provide evidence of its efficacy; rather, our purpose is to document the NCS model and our stakeholders’ experiences. By doing so, we seek to help education leaders, school practitioners, policymakers, and others gain a better understanding of a school improvement model that helps practitioners address the complex problems facing schools across a range of contexts and student backgrounds, and see how transformative change in a large urban district is possible when those in the education and research fields work together to identify issues, insights, and solutions to improve student outcomes.

Based on research by the UChicago Consortium, a student is considered “On-Track” to graduate if he or she earns at least five full-year course credits (10 semester credits) and no more than one semester F in a core course (English, math, science, or social science) in the first year of high school.⁵ In Chicago, five full-year course credits are required to be considered a sophomore; 24 credits are required for graduation. The simplicity of this metric makes it easy to calculate at the school level with the data the school itself generates.

Background on the Network for College Success

From its founding in 2006, NCS was grounded in the problems faced by schools and school leaders. It began with a small group of high school principals who approached Melissa Roderick—a University of Chicago SSA professor and co-director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium)—for help interpreting and applying UChicago Consortium’s groundbreaking research in their high schools. By that time, UChicago Consortium’s research had begun to inform Chicago Public Schools (CPS) high school policies and accountability metrics. Believing that the solutions to the problems identified by research are found in the field, Professor Roderick responded to the principals’ request by creating a Principals’ Network to help them translate CPS policies and research findings into meaningful actions in their schools. Principals raised these questions:

- **How do we engage students** in challenging work?
- **How do we develop professional communities** in which teachers are challenged to grapple with issues of student engagement, are engaged in looking at data and solving problems, and are setting high standards for themselves and their students?
- **And, how do we prepare all students** for college/post-secondary success?

⁵ Allensworth & Easton (2005).

Since the inception of NCS with the Principals' Network, NCS has partnered with UChicago Consortium to help schools understand and apply relevant research findings to address school leaders' most pressing questions. The ongoing relationship between NCS and UChicago Consortium informs how NCS guides practitioners to engage with research findings. Consortium researchers have discussions about established and emerging research findings with NCS staff, which is comprised of experienced former principals, teacher leaders, and counselors. NCS staff plays a critical intermediary role to the research-practice connection by providing deep understanding of how schools work and thoughtful design and facilitation of high-quality professional learning communities to make the research come alive for schools. Many NCS staff developed their leadership and innovation skills in the small schools movement in Chicago, founding either small schools or charter schools. They had experience creating high-functioning schools, but became frustrated with the lack of a mechanism for transferring innovation to other district schools and the lack of dissemination of knowledge more broadly. Thus, NCS has strived to serve as a *convener for* and a *facilitator of* effective practice across the district's high school leaders and practitioners. NCS staff and Consortium researchers work hand-in-hand to engage those working in high schools in the evolving

research coming out of UChicago Consortium and the implications it has for their work in schools.

From its beginning, NCS took a systems approach to school improvement. It wasn't enough to improve individual schools or create new schools. The goal was systems change and improvement for all high schools and students across the district. NCS prioritizes spreading innovation through the whole district over focusing solely on helping the schools in its network.

The NCS model has been guided by four core questions:

- **How do we support high school leadership** to develop instructional visions, strategies, professional communities, and learning environments that raise the bar for CPS high schools?
- **How do we create mechanisms for cross-fertilization of ideas** and for transfer of innovation between schools?
- **How do we create networks of leaders** who have instructional strategies, demonstrated success, and toolkits that will increase the capacity of the entire system to change?
- **How do we develop and retain strong and talented leaders**, encourage them to stay in the field, and create multiple opportunities for them to engage in city-wide efforts to strengthen high schools?

Background on the UChicago Consortium on School Research

The UChicago Consortium, founded in 1990, conducts research of high technical quality that informs and assesses policy and practice in CPS. It seeks to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners as it supports the search for solutions to the problems of school reform. Its role is to encourage the use of research in policy action and improvement of practice, but it does not argue for particular policies or programs. Rather, UChicago Consortium helps to build capacity for school reform by identifying what matters for student success and school improvement, creating and validating indicators of what matters, and providing evidence on what key leverage points can be used to make progress. Consortium researchers use their interactions with NCS staff and other practitioners to better understand the nature of problems from the ground, and to determine what evidence could help practitioners be more effective in their work with students.

Freshman On Track: A Core Focus in the Network for College Success

CPS has been using the Freshman On-Track indicator since 2003, when the district administration included it in the high school accountability system. In 2007, when NCS was in its early stages, UChicago Consortium released an influential report, *What Matters for On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools*, that validated the On-Track indicator as a much stronger predictor of high school graduation than eighth-grade test scores and demographics, including poverty and race/ethnicity.⁶ The report revealed that a ninth-grader who was On-Track was three and one-half times more likely to graduate from high school in four years than an off-track student. With the On-Track indicator as a vital tool, CPS made students' transition to high school a priority. In 2008, CPS started providing real-time early-warning data reports and credit-recovery reports to help high schools strategize around their efforts to improve student performance. NCS supported schools by providing training and resources to help school leaders put the research and data into practice.

Education researcher Tony Bryk and his colleagues have described how having a clear focus on a real problem is essential to establishing buy-in for a professional learning network.⁷ This was the case for the original group of NCS principals; the research on Freshman On Track unambiguously pointed out a way to increase high school graduation. NCS provided a forum for principals to collaborate with each other around the issues facing their schools, share practices, and work together in a facilitated and supportive environment to develop solutions for working on Freshman On Track and more generally organize their schools for continuous improvement.

Freshman On Track was originally was a year-end metric. CPS adapted it for more frequent use, analyzing point-in-time course grades throughout the year to monitor students' progress and to flag students in need of interventions. Beyond the metric, it became a new approach to improving student outcomes as schools began to focus on figuring out

what was causing students to fail, and seeking ways to help them improve their performance. It became the basis for a sea change in how high schools perceived their role with and their impact on students. Schools, now equipped with real-time data that could influence students' high school trajectories, gained a bolstered sense of empowerment and efficacy in their ability to affect students' outcomes.

The district's On-Track rate has improved from 61 percent in 2006 to 85 percent in 2015 (see Figure 1). Over the same time period, graduation rates improved 17 percentage points, going from 57 to 74 percent.⁸ The rising graduation rates were seen system-wide, in schools throughout the city and for all types of students, regardless of their achievement level or background.⁹ These improvements have not come at the expense of achievement; as 5,800 more students graduated, the ACT average score in Chicago actually rose over a point from 17.6 to 18.5.¹⁰

Freshman On Track also notably showed the greatest gains for the lowest-performing schools and most vulnerable populations. On-Track rates for high schools in the bottom quartile of On-Track rates in 2006 increased by 37 percentage points, from 46 to 83 percent, by 2015. Improvements in On-Track rates were largest among African American and Latino males. Between 2006 and 2015, On-Track rates increased from 47 to 77 percent among African American males and from 55 to 80 percent among Latino males. With these improvements in On-Track rates, there were concerns that they did not represent true changes in performance and that graduation rates would not show similar increases. A subsequent Consortium study showed that this was not the case; improvements in the On-Track rate were associated with improvements in the graduation rate.¹¹

Consortium research gave insight to practitioners by identifying ninth grade as a determinant of high school success and providing an indicator that gave a means of understanding the scope of the problem within their schools and the ability to evaluate progress. However, translating research evidence on what matters into action

6 Allensworth & Easton (2007).

7 Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu (2015).

8 The On-Track rate for students who graduated from high school in 2006 was 64 percent.

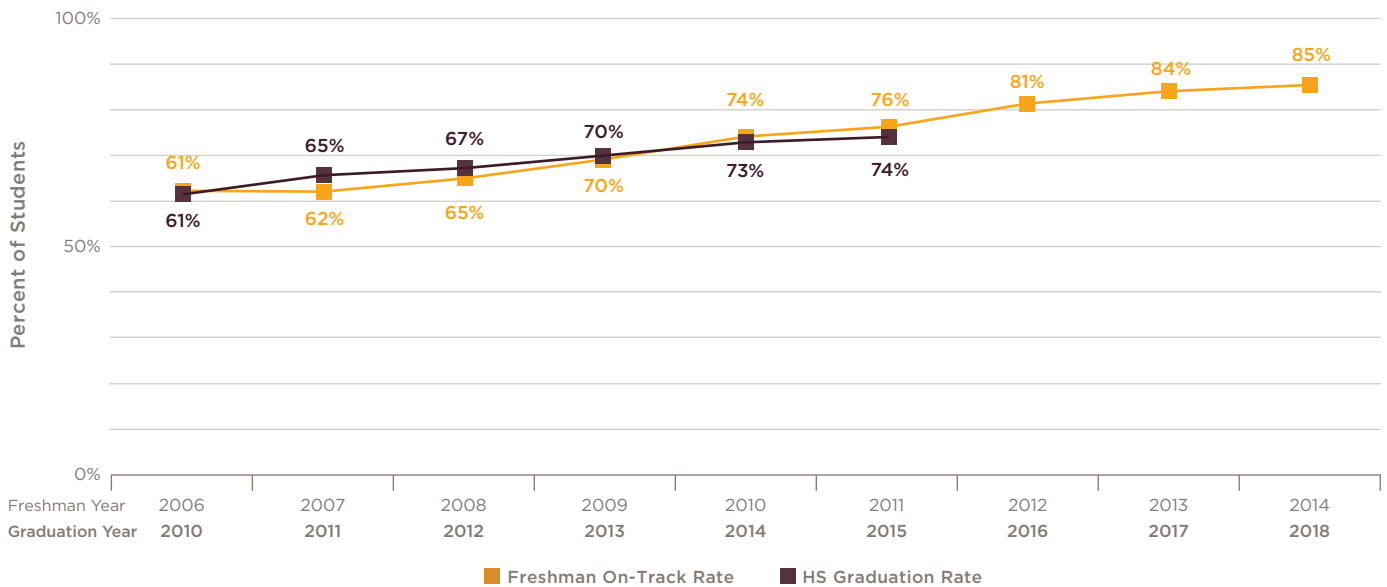
9 Allensworth, Healey, Gwynne, & Crespino (2016).

10 Nagaoka & Healey (2016).

11 Roderick, Kelley-Kemple, Johnson, & Beechum (2014).

FIGURE 1

CPS Freshman On-Track and Graduation Rates Have Significantly Improved Since 2006



Sources: Nagaoka, J. & Healey, K. (2016). *The educational attainment of Chicago Public Schools students 2015: A focus on four-year degrees*. UChicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

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The combination of a research-backed indicator from UChicago Consortium, actionable data from CPS, and support from NCS to guide the necessary changes within schools proved to be powerful in sparking what is perhaps the most dramatic improvement ever seen in a large urban school district.
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requires more than simply knowing what the research evidence says. NCS provided practitioners opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue about how the evidence could help them in their day-to-day work, as well as in developing their long-term strategies.

The combination of a research-backed indicator from UChicago Consortium, actionable data from CPS, and support from NCS to guide the necessary changes within schools proved to be powerful in sparking what is perhaps the most dramatic improvement ever seen in a large urban school district.¹² Freshman On Track was more than

an indicator; it helped practitioners approach the dropout problem in a new way—as something to address at the beginning of high school instead of only at the end. With a resolve built on research, educators took on much more responsibility for student success than they had before, creating a shift in their conception of schools’ and teachers’ roles.

Freshman On Track is an excellent working example of how the NCS model not only plays out on the ground in schools, but also fosters the conditions for whole-school change toward the long-term goal of increasing college/post-secondary success. The On-Track work itself was an important starting point for high school improvement more broadly. It was empowering for teachers and principals to use research and to see the effects of their work in a matter of weeks. On-Track improvement laid the groundwork for schools to become learning organizations by developing structures for collaboration, creating teams focused on metrics, and building capacity to lead improvement.

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¹² Allensworth (2013).
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The Network for College Success Model

NCS focuses on building the capacity of school leaders to transform their high schools into data-driven learning environments that prepare all students for graduation, college enrollment, and success. Its programming is designed to develop principal leadership and improve instruction, as well as to build school teams that help students transition successfully into high school and then into college. The core strategy is to help schools employ structures and processes that build widespread collaboration, trust, and other conditions necessary to continuously improve student outcomes. NCS offers a comprehensive and research-based model for school improvement that incorporates student data analysis, professional learning, job-embedded coaching, and cross-school networks for open reflection and shared problem-solving.

The NCS whole-school improvement model includes supports for partner schools in the following areas:

- **Principal Leadership Development** to support principals to lead and manage school improvement and to strengthen their capacity to institute new systems, structures, and opportunities for school teams to engage in thoughtful joint work toward the goal of improving outcomes for students.
- **Instructional Improvement Efforts** to improve the quality of teaching and learning school-wide through Instructional Leadership Teams and teacher collaboration teams that design and implement professional learning plans. Teams use data to select an instructional focus, integrate cycles of inquiry, identify powerful teaching practices, and monitor progress by observing classrooms and analyzing student work.
- **Teacher Development in Adolescent Literacy** to integrate literacy across the disciplines and increase student capacity to understand complex texts, acquire and use academic language, and develop meta-cognitive and problem-solving skills to become independent learners.
- **Freshman Success Supports** to help grade-level teacher teams increase the number of students who are On-Track to graduate, particularly in the crucial freshman year when students are transitioning into high school. NCS supports schools to move beyond mitigating course failure to focusing on increasing student achievement and course performance, so that all students are working at college-ready levels.
- **College Access, Enrollment, and Success** to support high school counselors and college coaches to develop systems that ensure all students receive the necessary supports to access and enroll in the best possible post-secondary options according to their qualifications, interests, and needs.
- **Access to and Use of Research and Data** to help high schools bridge the gap between cutting-edge research on high school reform and everyday practice. NCS supports the use of real-time data so that school-based teams can understand the impact of their practice and implement timely adjustments and interventions when needed.

The NCS model is grounded in a set of core beliefs. Its work is organized around the idea that improving the outcomes of students must be addressed through building the capacity of school staff to solve the problems facing their schools. Guided by these core beliefs, NCS developed an approach to working with schools to increase student success.

NCS Core Beliefs

- **School-based leaders drive change in schools.** Increasing their capacity as leaders is an essential lever for improvement.
- **Educators have the capacity to solve their own problems** when there are actionable data, research-based strategies, collaborative teams, and professional trust.
- **Challenging leaders to interrupt inequities** in schools and districts is vital to improving schools. All students from all backgrounds deserve equitable educational outcomes.
- **Students' intellectual capacity is not static.** It grows when challenged and develops when teachers explicitly build academic mindsets and noncognitive skills.
- **School improvement** happens when adults make their practice public and critically examine their work collaboratively. Trust is essential to the willingness of adults to engage in this process.
- **Data is a powerful tool for school improvement** when used to trace causes, seek solutions, and guide change. Data can be destructive when used to judge and punish.

In this paper, we describe the NCS model for school improvement by highlighting four key elements:

1. **Creating professional learning networks;**
2. **Applying research-based data to practice;**
3. **Coaching and capacity building; and**
4. **Distributing leadership and building high-functioning teams.**

In the following four chapters, each element of the NCS model is described in detail. We use the Freshman On-Track work to illustrate how the elements of the model operate in practice. We also rely on the voices of practitioners who have worked with and for NCS to bring a practice-based lens to the concepts.

For each element, we address the following questions:

- **What does the literature say? What is the research base from which NCS operates?**
- **What is the NCS approach? How does NCS describe and operationalize this concept?**
- **How is this element important to the On-Track work? What is the practical application to freshman success?**
- **How do practitioners describe this element? In what ways did stakeholders in our qualitative study find this concept to be important in their work?**
 - Here, we provide both a brief summary of the qualitative data as well as more detailed vignettes that describe how the NCS model works in practice.



*In the final chapter of the paper, we describe implications for schools and districts, policymakers, and researchers. This paper is accompanied by a **Freshman On-Track Toolkit** (<https://ncs.uchicago.edu/freshman-on-track-toolkit>) that includes specific artifacts and tools used by NCS and its school partners to help support students through the critical ninth-grade transition and through graduation. The Toolkit is organized around four key components: Developing Capacity & Leadership, Applying Research & Data, Cultivating Trust & Respect, and Building School-Based Teams.*



ELEMENT 1

Creating Professional Learning Networks

The work of school leaders and practitioners is often done in isolation. Time is a precious commodity, and it is rare to have the time to learn and reflect on how to be more effective in supporting students. NCS was founded to support the transfer of innovation across schools and to break the professional isolation between and within schools. NCS established professional learning networks to provide school leaders and practitioners the space to learn and share knowledge with each other. School leaders need a professional community of their peers in which they can engage in honest, open reflection of their practice, candid exchange of ideas and feedback, and discussion that challenges them to further develop their own leadership and transform their school communities.¹³

What Does the Literature say about Professional Learning Networks?

Over the last decade, building networks has become an increasingly prevalent strategy for providing professional learning and improvement support to schools.¹⁴ Networks help facilitate the transfer of innovation and foster collective capacity—where schools are working to get better, not just individually but as a group. As Michael Fullan, noted authority on education reform, wrote, “The work of transforming schools means all or most schools, and this

means it is a system change. For system change to occur on a larger scale, we need schools learning from each other.”¹⁵

In order to facilitate deep levels of collaboration and learning, networks need to develop strong cultures. These cultures need to foster trusting relationships and build environments that enable participants to confront difficult issues and engage in honest and open problem-solving. Education expert Elizabeth City and her colleagues at Harvard described the conditions needed for collective learning as requiring “a safe space in which people can share their questions and understanding without fear of being judged harshly by their peers or their supervisors.”¹⁶ If people perceive that speaking honestly will have negative consequences, the flow of information about problems or larger organizational issues will be suppressed, making improvement unlikely.

Effective networks focus on what is essential and maintain ambitious, measurable goals.¹⁷ To be successful, schools and districts need to narrow their focus to a few priorities and then to sustain those priorities to allow time for learning and adapting.¹⁸ Especially in the education field, where there is a tendency to move from one reform effort to another without giving adequate time for learning or implementation, the need for sustained focus on a few high-leverage goals and efforts over time has been identified as critical.

¹³ Louis, Marks, & Kruse (1996); Talbert & McLaughlin (2002).

¹⁴ Bryk et al. (2015); Daly (2012); Smith & Wohlstetter (2001); Wohlstetter, Malloy, Chau, & Polhemus (2003).

¹⁵ Fullan (2006).

¹⁶ City, Elmore, Fierman, Teltie, & Lachman (2009).

¹⁷ Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow (2011); Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu (2010); Fullan (2006).

¹⁸ Fullan (2006).

How Does NCS Approach Professional Learning Networks?

NCS was formed to help spark systems change in Chicago. The goal was not to create a boutique network of schools, but rather to create a research and development network to create and share innovation among NCS schools and all high schools within the district. The intent was to align with and support district goals, in particular as they relate to high school graduation and post-secondary success; to work with schools to achieve improved student outcomes in those areas; and to use key findings to help inform the district’s practice and policy for high schools more broadly.

NCS has maintained a focus on a few key priorities over the past decade: Freshman On Track; improving teaching and learning toward college readiness; and post-secondary success. It has remained steadfast in its focus, despite five district administrations in the last 10 years and the changing winds of education. This steadfastness has been a valuable support to NCS schools. They count on NCS to help them keep their focus on the research-base for what matters for high schools and stay the course for continuous improvement in their schools.

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Transforming high schools in ways that will dramatically change student outcomes is a complex, developmental process—calling for ongoing cycles of collaboration, professional learning, public practice, and analysis of student outcomes—that differs significantly from the traditional isolation that has characterized high school practice.
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Within the broader network, NCS designs and facilitates Collaboratives that are cross-school communities of practice that bring together role-alike groups from across schools to learn from each other and scale effective practices. The purpose of the Principals’ Collaborative is to help leaders organize their schools to create the change that they hope to see—building learning organizations that can identify what works through ongoing review of data, and sharing effective practice across schools. Collaboratives are the primary mechanism by which NCS fosters network-wide learning and sharing. NCS provides

Collaboratives for principals, assistant principals, counselors, teacher leaders, and data strategists. The NCS model for professional learning networks involves long-term partnerships—rather than a one-time workshop—to provide the time and developmental opportunities that support real change.

NCS is unusual among school support organizations in that it provides professional development for multiple roles within each of its partner schools. The multiple Collaboratives support each other and deliver a coherent message across principals, teachers, and counselors. This model evolved from principals’ requests to support them in building teams to drive improvement, and from NCS’s commitment to whole-school improvement.

Collaboratives create a structured time for principals and other school leaders to work together on shared problems, examine research, share effective practice, and engage in joint problem-solving to improve student achievement. Transforming high schools in ways that will dramatically change student outcomes is a complex, developmental process—calling for ongoing cycles of collaboration, professional learning, public practice, and analysis of student outcomes—that differs significantly from the traditional isolation that has characterized high school practice.

An important characteristic of NCS Collaboratives is that they are intentionally diverse. They are not only for certain types of schools (e.g., using a specific curriculum or serving a particular population) or for a specific point in a leader’s career (e.g., first-year principals). A diverse community supports rich conversation that leads to deep learning.

NCS has developed a network culture that is highly collaborative and provides a safe space for learning. Safe learning environments for adults are essential when practitioners are being asked to take risks and think critically about their practice. In order to create a safe and trusting environment, NCS establishes norms across the various Collaboratives. In addition to articulating norms at the beginning of each Collaborative session, NCS takes time to engage participants in making meaning of each norm and identify reasons that it is important to the learning community. Taking real care about protecting participants allows NCS to build the trust needed to share data across schools and to push practice.

How Do Professional Learning Networks Support On-Track Work?

Supporting freshman success has been a part of the work of virtually all NCS Collaboratives as educators have come to understand the foundational importance of freshman-year outcomes for each student's high school trajectory and post-secondary pathway. Counselors have learned about the transition to high school from the perspective of adolescent development; data strategists have shared strategies about how to work with freshman course performance data; and school leaders at all levels have worked on Freshman On Track across multiple Collaboratives.

For many years, NCS convened a Success Team Collaborative that focused on creating systems and building capacity to increase On-Track rates. The Collaborative comprised teacher leaders and staff who organized and led ninth-grade-level teams to improve On-Track rates. These key leaders came together in a cross-school professional learning community for professional development, as well as to learn and share strategies for building teams, use data to monitor and support student progress, and develop academic and social interventions to keep students On-Track. As most schools became proficient in integrating the basics around On Track into their practice, NCS began to grapple with determining what structure would best support the developmental nature of the work as schools collectively moved from merely mitigating course failure to improving course performance. In the last three years, as NCS partner schools have made great increases in their On-Track rates and as evidence from UChicago Consortium has pointed to the significance of grades as a predictor for college success, NCS has shifted attention from only focusing on On Track to also focusing on improving grades/course performance. Schools have reviewed “Bs or better” data in NCS performance management sessions, and now NCS is working to integrate the course performance improvement work into

broader instructional efforts and Collaboratives learning. NCS uses performance management to help schools analyze their grades data and identify students who are struggling—not only those at-risk of falling off-track, but also higher-performing students whose GPAs are dropping.¹⁹

Informed by Consortium research showing that principal leadership is a key lever for school improvement,²⁰ the Principals' Collaborative has been a core component of the NCS model since its inception. The Principals' Collaborative meets monthly and focuses on the most important elements of school leadership. It is designed to provide principals with the opportunity for open and honest reflection on their practice, shared learning, and joint problem-solving. Discussions and learning experiences are guided by relevant research and data that matter most for high school improvement, including the critical freshman year. In addition to ongoing work on building school leaders' instructional leadership and executive management skills, On Track remains a priority for the professional learning and peer problem-solving that takes place in this professional community of school leaders.

What Do Practitioners Say About Professional Networks?

In thinking about the change that was needed in CPS high schools, it seemed clear that a great deal of learning needed to happen. UChicago Consortium's research on On Track clarified that the core challenge was not the students, but rather school environments that either supported or did not support student success.²¹ Principals needed a peer community in which they could interact with the research and grapple with the change required to transform their school environments to better support improved outcomes for students. As one principal noted, “As a result of the focus in the network I was able to come up with all these ideas, and I was armed with arguments behind why this was a good thing to do.”

¹⁹ NCS uses a 3.0 GPA as a proxy for college readiness based on the Consortium research showing that GPA is the best predictor of college graduation—better than ACT or SAT scores. (Roderick, Nagaoka, Allensworth, Coca, Correa, & Stoker, 2006).

²⁰ Bryk et al. (2010).

²¹ Allensworth & Easton (2005).

Principals' Collaborative



“The work of transforming schools means all or most schools, and this means it is a system change. For system change to occur on a larger scale, we need schools learning from each other.” — Michael Fullan (2006)

When NCS was founded in 2006, the Principals' Collaborative was its first program. Principals gathered monthly in each other's schools to examine a problem of practice. Participants engaged with research, interrogated data, and shared their practice with their colleagues. None of these elements were unique in the professional development world. What distinguished the NCS Principals' Collaborative from other professional development was the intentionality with which NCS designed the learning to be rooted in the real challenges faced by principals and schools, coupled with corresponding research. As Principal Karen Boran remarked, “What's different is, NCS often asks us what we want. They invite my fellow principals to share their work. And because I know and trust these school leaders, I'm happy to share my work, warts and all, and I'm anxious to learn what they know.”

For the last decade, it has remained a priority to design and facilitate the monthly Principals' Collaborative to continuously build community among school leaders, and to both challenge and support them to lead and manage change in their schools.²² The planning is done by NCS coaches who are in the schools, know the issues facing the principals, and can design the learning to meet their

needs. Coaches spend hours planning each session so that no time is wasted and participants get maximum benefit from the time they invest. NCS uses norms for behavior to create a safe space for honest and open problem-solving to occur. Protocols provide structure for sharing practice, protect presenters in being vulnerable, and ensure equity of voice among participants.

NCS takes care to build cross-school sharing into every session. People learn best from their peers. Boran described the importance of “getting us to open up our practice and to go into each other's schools, and to wrestle with these common problems together.” Founding NCS principal Elizabeth Kirby, who now serves as CPS Chief of School Strategy and Planning, said, “We would be able to see who was doing what, what was working, what wasn't working, things we could try, things to be careful about. Honestly those would be the most valuable parts of the meetings, sharing best practice.”

Participants found the cross-school data sharing helpful in identifying who was doing what well. Former CPS principal Elizabeth Dozier observed, “It pushes you as you're looking at your own data, when you see schools that are like yours that are having success, to really question

²² The Freshman On-Track Toolkit includes protocols that are used at Collaborative sessions.

what they're doing, and then think—how does this apply to what's happening in my particular school?" Don Fraynd, former CPS principal, commented, "I remember looking at a colleague's data and seeing really great progress on things, and then being able to say, 'It looks like in the second quarter you completely resolved this grade problem, and by the time the semester hit! How did you do that?'"

In addition to harnessing the knowledge and practice of the principals themselves, NCS brings in outside resources in response to principals' needs. Fraynd commented, "Any time we needed something, NCS would try to mobilize it." Over time, NCS's vision, understanding, and skills have

been enhanced by external voices and expertise, including Harvard's Ronald Ferguson; UChicago's Charles Payne; Simmons College's Theresa Perry; Harvard's Catherine Snow; Targeted Leadership's Framework for Achieving Powerful Results; and WestEd's Aida Walqui and also its Reading Apprenticeship Instructional Framework.

The Principals' Collaborative has progressed over the last 10 years to incorporate evolving research findings from UChicago Consortium that are critical to high school improvement, as well as continuously bringing learning and resources that meet the developmental needs of the principals and their schools.



ELEMENT 2

Applying Research-Based Data to Practice

Improved technology and the movement for accountability have led to the proliferation of data in schools. In Chicago, over the course of only a few years, school leaders have moved from a world in which there was essentially no ability to collect, aggregate, or analyze important data on student outcomes in any kind of systematic or ongoing way into one in which there is so much student-level data that it can be overwhelming. Accountability metrics and the accompanying data systems frame and communicate a set of priorities that are established by district leaders. In Chicago, the inclusion of On-Track rates in the district accountability system signaled the importance of outcomes other than test scores, and specifically set a focus on students' transition to high school and avoidance of course failures. While the availability of data in the accountability era has been a tremendous tool for savvy educators, creating conversations around data that are supportive and effective in driving wide-reaching improvement has been a persistent challenge for the field.

What Does the Literature Say About Data Use in Schools?

Data use has been described as a fundamentally interactive endeavor as practitioners integrate data into the flow of activity within classrooms, schools, and districts.²³ Data use in schools is both enabled and constrained by the district policies and accountability systems, accessibility of data, data use routines, and the context within the school.²⁴

Data have primarily been used in accountability systems to improve student outcomes and close achievement gaps; more recently, however, data's potential use as a tool in school improvement efforts and the development of early-warning indicator systems has come to the forefront.

Experts in data use point to a distinction between data for accountability, which serve the primary purpose of informing the decisions of leaders from outside the school, and data for improvement, which first and foremost support school-based professionals to evaluate their performance so that they can adjust instructional practice.²⁵ Accountability policies are based on the idea that by clarifying goals, making outcomes public, and attaching clear consequences, schools and teachers will change their practice and be more effective in their efforts to improve student outcomes.²⁶ It has been suggested that classroom and school practices—such as supporting diagnosis of students' needs, encouraging better professional development around instruction, or motivating teachers to work harder—would improve as a result of accountability policies, but the mechanism by which this change would happen is less clear.²⁷ Using data for improvement emphasizes examining data without judgment; rather, the focus is on using data to guide adjustments in strategies with the goal of improving outcomes.²⁸ However, even under an accountability system, district leaders can use strategies to encourage educators to use data by developing tools and processes for data

²³ Coburn & Turner (2012).

²⁴ Lampert (1985); Sherer & Spillane (2010); Spillane (2012).

²⁵ Hargreaves & Braun (2013); Weiss (2012).

²⁶ Jennings (2012).

²⁷ Stecher et al. (2004).

²⁸ Marsh (2012); Weiss (2012).

use, providing data coaches, or establishing norms and expectations for using data.²⁹

The impact of accountability policies and the building of data systems, such as early-warning indicator systems, rests on the capacity to implement them within schools.³⁰ The provision of more and better data alone is not sufficient; transforming the data into action and making changes in practice requires the skill set to interpret and analyze data and engage in deep planning to address issues that have been identified.³¹ It also requires creating structures to allow for reflection and analysis of data so that it becomes a part of the routine within schools.

How Does NCS Approach Using Data in Schools?

NCS helps move practitioners from seeing data as a tool for accountability and compliance to using data to improve their performance. Data on indicators like Freshman On-Track provide clarity for both defining what the goal is (e.g., ensuring that all freshmen are passing their classes) and understanding each school’s (and teacher’s and student’s) performance toward that goal. Data create clear points of comparison that can uncover patterns across subgroups within schools, and they can show how performance for similar students differs across schools. These analyses create the opportunity for insight and action planning. Moreover, student performance data can be the most effective tool to critically assess school practices from classroom instruction to school policies.

How Are Research and Data Incorporated into the On-Track Work in NCS?

In Chicago, the move toward tracking ninth-grade outcomes created an opportunity for NCS to support school leaders to understand the dynamics of what is happening in their schools, innovate, and learn from each other in an effort to develop data-driven solutions for freshman success. Interactions with NCS staff and school-based practitioners helped Consortium researchers understand the nature of problems at the ground-level and learn what evidence could help practitioners be more effective in

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The provision of more and better data alone is not sufficient; transforming the data into action and making changes in practice requires the skill set to interpret and analyze data and engage in deep planning to address issues that have been identified.
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their work with students. Through this collaboration, the Freshman On Track Individual School Report (ISR) was developed to provide customized data for each CPS high school, so that leaders can determine how the research findings play out for their students and analyze the trends in their schools. The ISR, like other Consortium tools, helped school leaders to determine specific, measurable, and attainable goals, and subsequently to evaluate progress towards those goals.

NCS first brings skillful facilitation to schools’ review and analysis of their historical data trends, and then provides real-time data to support schools’ ongoing monitoring and analysis of students’ current progress. NCS operationalized the key research findings of another Consortium report, *Looking Forward to High School and College: Middle Grade Indicators of Readiness in Chicago Public Schools*, into a framework that helps schools organize their freshman class into meaningful subgroups. The On-Track data are disaggregated by student incoming achievement that include grades and attendance, which provides principals with a more sophisticated analysis. This helps schools monitor and support On-Track status and GPA for students with varying levels of incoming performance throughout the freshman year. The objectives for the data review, which is conducted in performance management sessions, are for leaders to identify their school’s strengths and weaknesses; share effective practices for improvement; assess their performance against their peers; and create authentic structures for peer accountability. NCS leaders describe the performance management process as a critical component of their ongoing professional learning.

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²⁹ Datnow & Castellano (2001); Marsh (2012); Weiss (2012).
³⁰ Allensworth (2013); Davis, Herzog, & Legters (2013); Kennelly & Monrad (2007); McLaughlin (1987).
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³¹ Parker Boudett, City, & Murnane (2014).

How Do NCS Practitioners See Data Use?

When asked about how NCS uses data and how data use is a part of On-Track work, the school-based practitioners and NCS coaches that were interviewed drew clear distinctions between the approach that NCS takes to using data to drive improvement and accountability-only forms of data use. NCS practitioners described a supportive and solutions-oriented approach to working with On-Track

data, highlighting the importance of setting the right conditions for practitioners to work toward improvement, making space for sharing promising practice with peers across the network, and keeping the work grounded in the research findings about what matters for freshman success. In addition, teachers, who often do not receive training in data use, value the opportunity to build their skill, comfort, and capacity in engaging in data-based inquiry.

Leveraging Performance Management for Improvement



“It’s about sharing ideas—and the fundamental belief that everyone in the room has the capacity to change and to do better, as opposed to the carrot and stick approach—it allows you to analyze your data in a more thoughtful and constructive way.” — Elizabeth Dozier

While NCS supports its partner schools to effectively use data at the individual school level, using data in cross-school environments has also been an essential strategy. For the past four years, NCS has facilitated performance management sessions that provide space to examine freshman success data, both within and across schools; compare performance of similar students across schools; and share effective practices for supporting freshman success.

As principal of a high school in one of Chicago’s most under-resourced neighborhoods, Elizabeth Dozier was familiar with struggling students. Many of her students came from economically disadvantaged families and, not surprisingly, Dozier’s student performance data reflected the challenges that they faced outside of school. Dozier greatly appreciated the way that NCS used data and research to help her guide school improvement.

Setting the Conditions for Real Conversations About Data

NCS performance management sessions begin with a presentation on Consortium research on the transition to high school and on high school success, which participants commonly cite as part of the power of the learning experience. With many priorities competing for their attention, the clarity of the research is compelling. Additionally, using data for improvement starts with creating a safe, supportive environment for people to take ownership

of their outcomes, release their defenses, and honestly reflect on their successes and struggles. Dozier described NCS’s approach to performance management, in comparison to other kinds of data-driven conversations: “Often times, there’s a culture and approach of, ‘Here are your numbers. You’re failing. Go fix it.’ NCS’s approach is about creating the right environment so that productive conversations can happen, and people can actually grow and take action to move outcomes in their schools.”

NCS coaches intentionally design a safe and supportive learning environment so that reflective data review and dialogue can occur. When data are focused on improvement, the conversation can focus on practice rather than blame, defensiveness, or panic. Dozier further described how principals are likely to respond to data for improvement, as compared to data only for accountability: “When data work is done in such a way that it’s about sharing ideas—and the fundamental belief that everyone in the room has the capacity to change and to do better, as opposed to the carrot and stick approach—it allows you to analyze your data in a more thoughtful and constructive way.”

Data Starts the Conversation—and Solutions Come from Peers

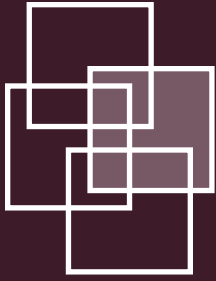
One of the most important elements of NCS performance management sessions is that the sessions happen as a part of a professional learning community. Principals in

NCS are supportive of one another and eager to learn about what people are doing to solve problems with similar students (incoming freshman performance) in different schools. Dozier described the importance of this community to the work done in NCS performance management sessions on Freshman On Track: “There’s something about being in a collaborative and nurturing space where you get to really work with your colleagues—especially those who have similar schools—to problem-solve. You can’t help but compare your own data to theirs and see how other schools are performing. It pushes you to consider, ‘Okay, how does this apply to what’s happening in my school?’”

Participants also described an appreciation for the emphasis placed on everyone being a learner and a teacher at the same time—that strong schools have something

to learn, and that struggling schools have something to teach. As Dozier stated, “At each performance management session, NCS acknowledged that all the schools have something good going on.” Building from strength can lead to faster improvement.

Using data as a tool in efforts to support increased student performance in schools is a common practice in education, but the lessons learned from leaders of the On-Track movement in NCS point to the importance of building a system of data analysis very carefully and intentionally toward the end goal of using data for improvement. Data are vitally important for any effort to improve Freshman On Track, and so too is paying attention to ensuring that when the data are on the table the discussion is conducted in a safe space for honest reflection that opens up opportunities to learn from peers.



ELEMENT 3

Coaching and Capacity Building

The Network for College Success developed structures, such as Collaboratives and Performance Management sessions, to provide schools with facilitated opportunities to learn from research, identify problems, and develop action plans. However, no matter how high-quality these learning opportunities are, educators need individual support to translate the learning into their unique school contexts and turn good plans into sustainable practices. In order to make significant changes to how schools organize around this work, schools need intense, on-the-ground support to successfully implement change efforts. To address the need for individualized support for school leaders, another central element of the NCS model is to provide job-embedded coaching to key school leaders, including principals, teacher leaders, and counselors.

What Does the Literature Say About Coaching and Capacity Building?

In describing the demands of leading and teaching today, adult learning expert Ellie Drago-Seveson stated, “We must build schools to be learning centers...places where both adults and children can be nurtured to grow.”³² One of the ways research suggests this can happen is by empowering leaders through coaching that can transform their leadership; move teams; and create dynamic, collaborative learning centers in schools where both teacher and student learning can thrive and grow.³³

Many of the challenges in our schools stem from unsupported leaders who work in isolation and are often limited to environments that emphasize and reward transactional leadership rather than transformational leadership. With little or no support, they are expected to set the tone for change at their schools and dramatically raise student achievement.³⁴ Effective coaches take into account adult learning, emotional intelligence, cultural proficiency, and an emphasis on building the leader’s capacity to make decisions that positively impact the entire school culture and the outcomes for students.³⁵ A masterful coach, according to renowned coach Robert Hargrove, can support a leader to accomplish what she needs to do, thereby giving her more power. The notion that coaching is transformational in nature, rather than transactional, acknowledges development as a fluid process, a “process of becoming.”³⁶ Focusing on adult learning is a critical component of the NCS model.

Coaches bring a specific skill set to support leaders in this process of understanding themselves, effective decision-making, and the impact on their school communities for all stakeholders. In the Blended Coaching model,³⁷ coaches bring skills, strategies, and tools that support leaders in solving complex problems. Listening, emotional support, focus, and commitment to a coachee allow the coach to push for clarity and attention to organizational goals. Effective coaches are able to hold leaders accountable by creating a trust-based relationship in which they

³² Drago-Seveson (2009).

³³ Blase & Blase (2000).

³⁴ Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren (2005).

³⁵ Bloom et al. (2005).

³⁶ Hargrove (2008).

³⁷ Bloom et al. (2005).

can push leaders to challenge their assumptions and beliefs in order to make impactful decisions, build sustainable communities, and ultimately impact student outcomes. Coaches can bridge the learning gap and support educators to meet their goals.

How Does NCS Approach Coaching and Capacity Building?

NCS adopted the Blended Coaching model, which aligns well with the professional learning approach of NCS because both are rooted in the principles of adult learning theory.³⁸ Based on years of practice and research, the model is grounded in the work of cognitive coaching, life coaching, and peer coaching.³⁹ Blended Coaching honors leaders and teachers as professionals by building on their existing knowledge base and expertise, and by supporting them to identify problems and develop solutions. It meshes well with NCS’s strength-based approach, premised on the idea that educators can solve the problems in their schools.

NCS coaches navigate a variety of Blended strategies and tools to support their school coachees. As part of the

NCS’s approach to coaching supports the development not only of individuals within a school but also of schools’ shared leadership systems, structures, and culture.

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Blended model, coaches support school practitioners in both “ways of doing” and “ways of being.” This approach initially addresses the behaviors and actions necessary to do the work differently (i.e., planning and facilitating effective team meetings), and through changes in ways of doing, aims to ultimately effect mind-shifts and culture, “ways of being,” which are needed for transformative change.

NCS’s approach to coaching supports the development not only of individuals within a school but also of schools’ shared leadership systems, structures, and culture. In addition to coaching key individuals who lead priorities at the school, NCS provides coaching to the teams

they lead: Instructional leadership teams; freshman level teams; and counseling/post-secondary teams. Coaching supports teams to develop their functioning so they are collaborating at high levels and can focus on improving student outcomes by regularly monitoring and responding to student data.

How Is Coaching and Capacity Building a Part of On-Track Work?

In the early years, NCS provided On-Track coaching to its partner schools in an effort to support the development of systems, structures, and practices that would make ongoing efforts in Freshman On Track part of the fabric of the school. This was achieved through a network-wide focus on On Track, coaching, and cross-school learning.

Coaches meet with principals and other school leaders regularly, in most cases biweekly, to review and interpret On-Track data, identify problems of practice, and create action plans; design interventions; and plan subsequent team meetings. It is not uncommon to see an NCS coach co-plan a Freshman Success Team meeting with a team leader, but the ultimate goal is to support the development and facilitation skills of the team leader to plan and lead meetings on her or his own. Coaches also serve as a resource for schools, providing professional texts and protocols as well as access to technical support (i.e., data strategists) or suggesting a visit to another school to observe their practice. The coach’s broad perspective and expertise speed the process of learning that the school undergoes.

Culture shifts about On-Track work in schools requires ongoing support that pushes and challenges existing ways of thinking about students and how to support them. A successful On-Track initiative requires adults to shift their thinking about how students experience their ninth-grade year, how expectations are communicated to students, how grading practices support or undercut student achievement, and the role of academic failure in students’ lives. Coaches use individual sessions to push coachees to think critically about issues of equity and organizational culture that may serve as barriers for increasing On-Track

³⁸ Bloom et al. (2005).

³⁹ Bloom et al. (2005).

rates, so that they can incorporate this same kind of push and thinking into their team meetings and school-wide.

What Do NCS Practitioners Say About Coaching?

In interviews, school-based practitioners who received coaching from NCS staff highlighted a few important components of the coaching as it applied to their role in On-Track work and school improvement efforts more broadly. NCS coachees value that the coaching they receive is focused

on building their capacity as leaders of the work, allowing them to truly take a learner stance in their coaching sessions and identify challenges openly. They also highlight the extent to which coaching is about collaborative problem-solving and how NCS coaches push them to take time to reflect on the problems they face in their work—and develop effective strategies to address those problems. In a culture that rewards doers, coaches provide the space for busy school leaders to reflect and analyze.

On-the-Ground Partnerships



“I believe that having a coach who pushes me and my team to explore the ‘why’ of the work has been essential in creating high-functioning grade-level teams that move the On-Track work forward.” — Heather Pavona

Heather Pavona had many years of experience as a ninth-grade teacher and team leader prior to becoming Hancock College Prep High School’s On-Track Coordinator. By all accounts, she was well acquainted with the needs of high school freshmen. Yet she believes that having a coach who pushes her and her team to explore the “why” of the work has been “essential in creating high-functioning grade-level teams” that move the On-Track work forward at Hancock. Within a few years, Hancock’s On-Track rate has jumped from 60 to 91 percent. The coaching approach focuses on the “why” of the work and stands in contrast to the compliance-driven models that teachers and principals more commonly receive. One practitioner described NCS coaching as “strengths-based and focused on using our assets to improve our work.” NCS Freshman Success Coach Adelric McCain agrees, saying the approach is about “meeting schools where they are” to facilitate capacity building and collaborative problem-solving as a thought partner with school and team leaders.

Coaching to Build Capacity

Coaching to build capacity is an essential part of the NCS’s work; it provides a link between the learning in Collaboratives and school-level implementation. Coaching helps principals and team leaders develop their skill sets and

empower others in the school by distributing leadership and knowledge. Capacity building is facilitated both by focusing on concrete, technical skills and by developing staff-wide competence and ownership.

Pavona attributes the sustained momentum around Freshman On Track at Hancock to the systems and structures, especially in facilitating team meetings, her NCS coach helped her to create. She noted that NCS “coaching around team structure and ways to make teams function” were essential in “getting those teams off the ground.” Because those meetings are “rooted in norms and protocols,” which she learned from her NCS coach, she went on to say that the meetings are “efficient and well run.”

In his role as a coach, McCain observes and at times facilitates portions of grade-level meetings. He also meets one-on-one with his coachees on a regular basis. As a result, his coachees trust that his guidance is grounded in their school’s context. Pavona described McCain as being “intimately involved with our work and our teachers and our school in a different way that doesn’t feel macro.” To understand the school in this way, McCain works closely with the team leader to plan action-oriented meetings that explore the needs and future direction of the team’s work. This is achieved using protocols (which are explicit ways to structure conversations for efficiency and equity of voice) and other tools that NCS found or created.⁴⁰

Coaching Through Collaborative Problem-Solving: “Time and Space to Reflect on the Work”

Pavona recalled a time when Hancock was not differentiating supports based on individual students’ needs. She remembered thinking, “a kid will come to me with seven failures, and a kid will come to me with two failures...those are not the same thing; those are different issues...I know something else is happening here.” She shared her frustrations with an NCS coach who, through guided reading and discussion, helped her think through how the district’s Response To Intervention program⁴¹ could work at Hancock.

NCS coaches use collaborative problem-solving strategies to facilitate solutions-oriented conversations with school leaders and teams. These conversations are grounded in data or professional readings. With teams, McCain will often use data so that teachers can “ask tough

questions together in a professional learning community.” For many teachers, coaching in team meetings pushes their thinking and supports them to examine data from an equity standpoint. McCain discussed asking coachees to look beyond what is working well and start digging into what isn’t working—which students are not being reached.

The on-the-ground knowledge of NCS coaches, as well as their nonjudgmental approach, create an atmosphere of trust and respect that is evident in the relationships between NCS staff and school partners. Through deep knowledge of the school community and ongoing assessment of school needs, NCS coaches work with their school partners to create schools that are organized for improvement, with distributed leadership and strong teams that ground their work in data. Coaching provides critical problem-solving and implementation support for the learning from the Collaborative meetings.

⁴⁰ These are located in the NCS Freshman On-Track Toolkit.

⁴¹ Response To Intervention (RTI) is a multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs (definition from RTI Network).



ELEMENT 4

Distributing Leadership and Building High-Functioning Teams

In the NCS model, a primary driver for change in schools is distributed leadership. NCS develops leadership not just in principals but also in other key school leaders within the school, increasing their sense of ownership of their practice and of the larger school improvement efforts. NCS works with leaders at multiple levels in the school to develop their teams, build collaboration, and grow their leadership in the context of addressing problems of practice. NCS stresses the importance not just of each person doing his job well but of people moving out of their silos (such as departments) to build a systems-thinking approach.

What Does the Literature Say About Distributed Leadership and Building High-Functioning Teams?

Findings from a long history of research by UChicago Consortium have built a strong case for the value of improving the school's systems and structures as a lever for creating lasting change. In the seminal work *Organizing Schools for Improvement*, Anthony Bryk and his Consortium colleagues used decades of longitudinal survey data to draw the conclusion that schools that were “well organized for improvement” (as measured by the five essential components of school organization in their model) were substantially more likely than less-organized but otherwise similar schools to show long-term improvements in student achievement.⁴² The Five Essentials research

identified the presence of high-quality, instructional leadership as a key lever for whole-school improvement,⁴³ and recent Consortium research has highlighted a more specific theory of action for high schools specifically, showing that principal leadership is most effective as a lever for change when it operates through empowered and collaborative teachers.⁴⁴

Research on leadership points to three broad categories of practices that build high performing organizations: Setting clear direction and goals, developing staff capacity, and building effective systems and structures.⁴⁵ Developing a shared understanding of the direction and goals of the school helps people better organize their work and understand their role within the school. Fostering the capacity of staff to learn and adapt to changing needs is an essential part of school improvement. Building effective systems and structures supports and sustains the efforts of school staff and helps the process of collaboration and decision-making.

Collaboration authorities Garmston and Wellman (2009) advocate for the use of teaming to build collaborative cultures in which adults exchange ideas and share ownership and decision-making responsibilities. According to leadership and learning researchers Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004), student achievement increases as schools increase adult collaboration in teams. Additionally, according to a study by school improvement experts

⁴² Bryk et al. (2010).

⁴³ Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu (2006).

⁴⁴ Pareja, Hart, & Gordon (forthcoming); Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang (2016); Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang (forthcoming).

⁴⁵ Hallinger (2005); Hallinger & Heck (1996); Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom (2004).

Goddard, Goddard, and Moran (2007), schools with higher levels of collaboration between school staff improved instruction. Further research shows how teaming within schools builds capacity for learning and improvement not only in individual schools but also system-wide as it nurtures multiple forms of capital—human, social, and financial.⁴⁶ Transformational change occurs when adults organize thoughtfully through teams focused on student outcomes.

How Does NCS Approach Distributed Leadership and Building High-Functioning Teams?

The NCS theory of change at the school level positions the principal as the primary driver of change. The NCS model requires investing a great deal of resources in developing the capacity of principals as executive managers, instructional experts, and leaders of people. While the model relies on strong and committed principals, a single leader is not a viable path to sustained improvement. Early on, NCS acknowledged the complexity of the high school organization and the need to help principals develop and support a broader swath of staff to lead the work. In order for lasting change to occur in schools, principals need to empower leaders at all levels of the school to be drivers of change; create the systems and structures necessary to carry out change initiatives; and build a consistent culture throughout the school that reinforces the message that all students—and all teachers—are capable of excellence.

In NCS partner schools, much of this work of distributed leadership and building sustainable practices revolves around creating teams to carry out important scopes of work, as well as empowering administrators, counselors, and teacher leaders to lead those teams. While different schools may utilize different teaming structures, NCS partner schools commonly develop the following teams: Senior Leadership Teams to align and monitor work at a high level school-wide; Instructional Leadership Teams to guide and support comprehensive improvements in teaching and learning; Post-secondary Leadership Teams to build a school-wide college-going culture and drive stu-

dent college application and enrollment; and Grade-Level Teams to support student success at each year of high school. These teams are in addition to the administrative and department (content) teams that are common in high schools. Freshman teams not only monitor student progress, but also examine the school’s systems, structures, and policies for their effect on student success. The work of the principal is to create, support, and monitor these teams, and to train and empower their leaders.

How is Distributed Leadership and Teaming Incorporated in On-Track Work?

Bringing structural change and distributed leadership to the challenge of the transition to high school was an important component of the On-Track work with NCS partner schools. MIT’s Peter Senge (2009), author of *The Fifth Discipline*, said, “Every system is uniquely and perfectly designed to produce the results it is currently producing.” Since schools had graduation rates only around 50 percent, a great deal of school reorganization had to happen in order to increase On-Track rates. At the start

NCS helps principals reorganize their schools to create conditions that most support student success.

of NCS’s On-Track work, schools did not have structures organized around Freshman On Track and lacked a team of people charged with supporting freshman success, reviewing freshman student data, and developing plans to support students who showed signs of struggle.

Creating the systems and structures necessary to solve the problem of Freshman On Track, as well as training and supporting leaders to spearhead the work, are necessary conditions for increasing On-Track rates. NCS helps principals reorganize their schools to create conditions that most support student success. Principals intentionally identified teachers who were best suited for the freshman year and reorganized schedules so that those teachers

⁴⁶ DuFour (2007); Hannay, Wideman, & Seller (2006); McAdamis (2007).

taught mostly or exclusively freshmen. Importantly, these freshman teachers were organized into teams, termed Freshman Success Teams, with an identified team lead. Principals scheduled time for the teams to meet regularly (often biweekly) to review data reports, either through common prep periods or early-dismissal/late-start days.

Building effective teams may also require shifts in adult practice, including re-focusing the topics of conversation. As an NCS Freshman Success Coach put it, “Once you have the people and you have the time for the meetings, what are they actually talking about?” At the Collaborative, team leaders review their data together and talk through it. They learn new protocols for effective collaboration. Then they go back to their schools and, with the support of their coach, examine the data with their team and discuss how they will respond to the data.

Freshman Success Teams identify struggling students or groups of students and create interventions that address academic, attendance, or social-emotional concerns. Teams track the interventions (e.g., a call home, a tutoring session). Did they happen? Who attended? Did the students’ outcomes improve? For many schools, these practices are initially novel. Teachers are used to working individually in their classrooms with little collaboration with their peers. Many teachers respond well to the new structures, feeling more efficacious and more engaged with their peers. Talking about the data in teams highlights many issues. Some teachers may not be inputting grades into the data system, so it is not productive to look at their data. Sometimes it comes to light that a disproportionate number of failing grades are coming from one teacher or one course. Often teachers find that their expectations for students are different from one another—from how work should be turned in, to how to get attention in class, to how

to get make-up work after an absence. As teachers work together, it often becomes clear that there are many differences in how teachers grade students—whether they use rubrics; what percentage of a grade is homework/tests/classwork. Teachers start talking about grading practices. Some teams start thinking about standards-based grading and others begin to write common assessments. Ultimately, teams work to make their expectations common and explicit across the grade-level, making school a more consistent and supportive environment for students.

The work described above is the continuous improvement work of Freshman Success Teams. It takes concerted attention by the principal, team and leader support and development, and access to and engagement in a cross-school network in order to create the kind of collaboration and culture shift required to ensure success for all students. The peer support and research provide educators with a broader perspective on the issues they face and the possible solutions available to them.

What Do NCS Practitioners Say About Distributed Leadership and Building High-Functioning Teams?

Consistently, principals, school staff, and NCS coaches interviewed about their On-Track work came back to the idea of technical versus adaptive change,⁴⁷ distinguishing between the more straightforward and known solutions versus the deeper cultural shifts needed to build collaborative environments and practice. They cite the challenges they face in developing high-functioning teams, getting their colleagues engaged and on-board in the process, and moving beyond the metric (Freshman On Track) and a compliance-based culture to a culture in which adults take ownership for student outcomes and work together to change practice to better meet student needs.

⁴⁷ Heifetz & Linsky (2002).

Shifting School Culture to Impact Student Success



“People started talking about students, the kids’ names got put on the table, and folks started being really intentional about having solution-oriented conversations and taking ownership with students.” — Janice Wells

Janice Wells, principal at South Shore International College Prep High School, had many years of Freshman On Track experience at both the school and district level. Wells had learned one of the most important lessons of Freshman On Track: that real, meaningful, sustained change in Freshman On Track takes place only when educators in a high school build the collaborative structures and culture necessary to deeply reflect on their practice. Wells draws on her experience at Manley Career Academy, her role in supporting district networks of high schools, and her current role as principal at South Shore International. Wells’ strategies for building a culture of high achievement in freshman year serves as an illustration of the critical work of shifting teacher mindsets about their role in supporting success for all students.

Making these changes starts with putting the right teachers together on a team to do the work. Sean Stalling, former CPS Chief Area Officer, described the right people as those who “could work together, had demonstrated leadership...and tend to have a disposition that you should give kids additional chances—you work with them.” Wells added: “I put a designated person in place. I built a team around it. I tried to have as few hands touching freshmen as possible.” Having a team dedicated to teaching freshmen is important in part because it serves to make the school feel smaller; and, in her experience, when the school started to feel more like a community, “people started talking

about students, the kids’ names got put on the table, and folks started being really intentional about having solution-oriented conversations and taking ownership with students. So it no longer was, ‘Well, this kid just doesn’t....’ It became, ‘What can I do to make sure this kid does?’”

Wells described the meetings and the resulting conversations with students:

Then it became real so that in my first-period class, when I saw those two kids I knew I had to do something different with them because I had just had a meeting yesterday where somebody helped me see how a student was being successful in a particular class. This prompts a teacher to ask a student, “How are you being successful in your fifth period? What do I need to do to help you be more successful? Hey, why don’t you give me half of your lunch period so that I can help you be as successful in this first-period class as you are in fifth period, because it’s clearly something about me and you that’s not working because you do have the ability.” That changed everything, because kids stopped going to lunch, not because they didn’t want to eat, but because they wanted to do better in class. That a teacher cared about them: “Y’all talked about me during your meeting?”

Once a team is in place, the work of monitoring and mitigating freshman year course failure can begin. While it

is somewhat straightforward to put the necessary structures in place—creating time for ninth-grade team meetings, reviewing data regularly, developing strategies for supporting individual students—it is much more difficult to shift teachers’ perspectives and their sense of efficacy. Some teachers are ready, even eager, to take on this new way of being. As Wells described, “Some people bought in right away. They thought, ‘Oh, this makes sense. This is why I’m doing the work this way.’” Other teachers may not buy-in right away, but can be persuaded by the research and data. “On-Track work is where the data became important. It’s no longer about, ‘Do this because I said so.’ It’s about, ‘Here’s what the research says happens for and to students who have an experience similar to this. Now you have some decisions to make as an adult. Do you keep doing what you’ve been doing and keep getting the data that you’ve been getting? Or do you feel like your day-to-day encounters with students could be more impactful if you changed something about the way you engage with kids?’”

Bringing actionable data to teacher teams is essential. As Wells explains, “Data just really changes the way that your success as an adult is based on student success; and if they’re not passing, then you’ve failed. So we started having the conversation about the failure rates and looking at data and being able to ask, ‘Whose class?’ ‘What period?’ ‘Which students?’ ‘What’s the root cause?’”

The work of raising and discussing important questions

about the capabilities of students, the efficacy of adults, the core values of educators, and the developmental needs of adolescents is fundamental to re-designing the high school experience to meet the needs of students. While the leadership challenge of shifting culture is often slow, frustrating, and difficult, it pays dividends. As Wells and many other NCS leaders have learned, changing what teachers believe about course failure in the ninth grade can be the beginning of a much more impactful change in how all students in the school are educated.

For Wells the results pay off when students graduate from high school and move on to college. It’s transforming for teachers to see students wearing their college T-shirts on Decision Day. Then they really see the connection between supporting freshmen to excel and their readiness for college four years later. Wells said, “When they see that, it sets the culture of the school.”

When asked what were the most important resources and sources of support for her as the school leader, Wells replied, “I’d have to say that the most significant support has been building teacher leadership and developing teacher teams through the Network for College Success. It was the opportunity for there to be someone else saying what I’ve said and written to my staff. It’s a validation and the *how*. There’s great value in collaboration between schools—that are like you, not like you, next to you, nowhere near you—being able to come together with like minds to improve student success.”



Interpretive Summary

“Improvement requires fundamental changes in the way public schools and school systems are designed, and in the ways they are led. It will require changes in the values and norms that shape how teachers and principals think about the purpose of their work; changes in how we think about who leaders are, where they are, and what they do; and changes in the knowledge and skills requirements of work in schools.” — Richard F. Elmore⁴⁸

Chicago’s fast-rising On-Track and graduation rates defy common assumptions about high-poverty schools, adolescents, and school reform. Chicago’s progress challenges the notion that improving urban high schools is among the most intractable problems in our society—and has reframed high school dropout from a problem outside educators’ control to one that can be addressed through effective school-based strategies. The success of these efforts provides a case study on the incredible opportunities that arise with a focus on building the capacity of educators to manage complex problems and create systems of ongoing improvement. These improvements have been sustained by schools through multiple changes in district leadership, labor unrest, low per-pupil expenditures, and complex external factors including poverty and violence in the community.

The magnitude of the results underscores the potential of the NCS approach as a national model for school

improvement, particularly for large, high-poverty districts. Creating deep and lasting change requires a sustained approach; one-time, “drive-by” professional development is insufficient to create deep and lasting change. The NCS model demonstrates that meaningful change can happen within schools by providing educators with a sustained, professional learning community that shares knowledge and works toward long-term goals and improvement. NCS supports the principal as the primary driver of change and creates whole-school change by providing practitioners with strong professional learning to use data to understand and address the challenges they face; to learn from each other; and to lead effectively.

NCS serves as a powerful illustration of the value of an intermediary to translate research into practice and support effective implementation of identified solutions at the school level. The experience of NCS provides six core lessons:

⁴⁸ Elmore (2000).

1. Research and indicators can play an important role in supporting practitioners in school improvement efforts

The development of the Freshman On-Track indicator by UChicago Consortium was fundamental to the efforts of NCS. Schools need more metrics like Freshman On Track that are reliable predictors of student success. Without good indicators, school practitioners have difficulty determining which students need support and what level of support is needed. Indicators can provide a clear focus for ongoing school efforts and an ability to track whether these efforts are leading to improvements. If the intention is to support school improvement efforts, research needs to be grounded in the needs of district leaders and school practitioners, and provide guidance on actionable strategies for schools and districts.

The evolution of NCS and UChicago Consortium's body of work on Freshman On Track was greatly facilitated by the interactions among Consortium researchers, NCS staff, principals, teachers, and district leaders. Through conversation with NCS staff and other school-based practitioners, Consortium researchers were able to better understand the nature of the transition to high school and what evidence could help practitioners be more effective in their work with students. By continuously interacting with Consortium researchers and engaging in research presentations, principals, teachers, and district leaders deepened their understanding of the research base to inform the strategies they brought back to their schools. Conversations and feedback loops like these are critical to developing insights and tools that will drive improvements in student outcomes.

2. School-based strategies have the potential to address core problems in urban school districts

Until recently, high school dropout was often seen as a characteristic of individual students. UChicago Consortium's findings on Freshman On Track reframed high school dropout from a problem outside educators' control to one that can be addressed through effective school-based strategies. The dramatic improvements seen in Chicago's On-Track and graduation rates across all types of schools were driven by the efforts of school leaders and staff.

The NCS model and these improvements represent an important reframing of the conversation about school reform to school-based strategies. This effort was not

led from the top, nor was it driven by accountability. The district's support for Freshman On Track was presented as a meaningful problem that schools could solve in each of their unique contexts. Given actionable data, professional learning, and adequate time to implement and show improvement, schools have the capacity to create positive change for their students. School-based professionals took up the work, and, using available resources, identified ways to support student success based on what was in their control.

3. Schools need support to maintain a focus on core issues in the face of shifting district priorities

Focus is critical to improvement efforts. Schools' improvement efforts are thwarted and undermined when they are expected to continuously take up the latest priority or program without regard for schools' developmental process and their existing strategy and plan for improvement. Through five district administrations, multiple initiatives, and increasingly dwindling budgets, Chicago high schools focused on Freshman On Track and produced important, life-changing outcomes for their students. A commitment to remaining focused on core improvement efforts is vital if schools are to make a difference in what matters most for students.

4. School leaders need to establish a strategic balance between capacity-building and compliance-based approaches to help facilitate improvement

Often overworked, stressed, and held to strict standards of accountability, district leaders and principals may rely heavily on compliance to manage their schools. There is a place for compliance in improvement efforts. For example, analyzing On-Track data is useless if teachers are not entering grades. However, it is important to differentiate when compliance will support goals and when it is insufficient. Compliance will not support teachers and principals to create dynamic instruction and cultures of achievement, nor has it been shown to build strong relationships between students and teachers. Thus, building capacity to lead change, most prominently distributing and supporting leadership at multiple levels in the school, is a critical task for principals. Leaders have to create space for learning in order to create change. It takes skill and

patience for principals and other school leaders to build staff leadership competencies, but it is more effective and ultimately more sustainable. Building teams focused on metrics and student performance, and giving those teams room to innovate, creates the conditions for real change. It is critical that school leaders build trust and communicate to their staff that data are being used to diagnose problems and set priorities and that sharing data serves as a starting point for improvement, not solely to hold people accountable.

Capacity building around On-Track work in schools requires ongoing support that pushes and challenges existing ways of thinking about students and how to support them. A successful On-Track initiative requires shifts in adults' thinking about how students experience the transition to high school, how expectations are communicated to students, how grading practices support or undercut student achievement, and the role of academic failure in students' lives. Coaches use individual sessions to explore issues of equity and organizational culture that may serve as barriers for increasing On-Track rates. It is important that capacity building is not just seen as developing individuals, but shifting the school culture in ways that support the goals and vision of the school.

5. School leaders need to develop systems, structures, and practices to support improvement

The On-Track efforts in NCS schools were driven by principal leadership, but the development of specific systems, structures, and practices made the changes sustainable. One of the essential changes was creating freshman grade-level teams to move the focus of teachers from delivering subject matter to supporting students in their transition to high school. Schools also provided time for teacher teams to meet and collaborate. The schools developed metrics and goals for freshman teams and the teams engaged in short cycles of inquiry and reflection around actionable data and plans for supporting students toward those goals. Principals also examined their discipline and attendance practices in light of the research. Thoughtfully organizing systems, structures and practices allows school leaders to more effectively leverage their existing resources.

6. Practitioners need opportunities for cross-school learning and honest discussion

Educators tend to operate in isolation, even within the same building, and transferring learning and innovation is difficult. The school schedule and multiple demands on teachers and principals limits time for reflection and learning. The era of accountability has made engaging in open and honest appraisals of performance more difficult for practitioners. NCS uses professional learning networks to provide school leaders and practitioners the space to share knowledge with each other and to build a professional community of their peers. NCS works to establish an environment of trust and respect so that school leaders and practitioners are comfortable in engaging in honest reflection of their own practice and candidly sharing ideas and feedback. Having a community that simultaneously supports and challenges its members allows practitioners to develop their own capacity, spread innovation, and transform their schools.

Conclusion

Even a decade ago, few people would have believed that a large urban district could increase graduation rates by 17 percentage points without solving the many entrenched social problems that plague big cities, including violence in the community, gangs, and concentrated poverty. There is good reason for skepticism about educational reforms. Practitioners who have seen reforms come and go are understandably dubious about the potential of “the next new thing” to take root and make real change. The experience of NCS shows how “the next new thing” may not actually be new at all; dramatic improvement in urban districts is possible if researchers, policymakers, and practitioners collaborate closely to make basic changes inside schools and shift beliefs about what is possible for educators and students.

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About the Authors

Mary Ann Pitcher is the co-director of the Network of College Success. She supervises the day-to-day operations of NCS programming, including the monthly Collaboratives and on-site coaching for participants. Before working at NCS, Pitcher co-founded the Young Women's Leadership Charter School of Chicago (YWLCS) where she served as co-director from 2000-05. She led the school through its start-up phase and its first two graduating classes. Chicago Public School Score Card 2005 data indicated YWLCS as first, of 58 non-selective schools, for both freshmen graduating in five years and graduates enrolled in college or postsecondary education. Prior to YWLCS, Pitcher taught English at Harper High School where she founded FACETS (Foods Academy Connecting Education to Technology), a small school within Harper with a focus on education-to-careers. She received her BA in English and her secondary teaching certificate from Loyola University of Chicago. She received her master's degree in education in curriculum and instruction from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Sarah J. Duncan has 20-plus years' experience in youth development, school reform, and nonprofit leadership. She co-founded and co-directs the Network for College Success, a professional development network for high school leaders, including principals, assistant principals, counselors, and teacher leaders, as well as district leadership, at the School of Social Service Administration (SSA) at the University of Chicago. The Network for College Success supports school leaders with research and data, peer networks, and job-embedded coaching to improve student outcomes, particularly high school graduation and college success. She also founded the Leadership in Community Schools program at SSA.

Previously, Duncan worked at the Ariel Education Initiative for 12 years. She worked in every aspect of the nonprofit: designing and implementing academic, enrichment, and jobs programs; raising funds; supervising and supporting staff and volunteers; board development; finance; and planning. In 1996, Ariel opened a Chicago Public School; and Duncan worked to develop staff and curriculum, program and policy at the school. She has a BA in psychology from Harvard University.

Jenny Nagaoka is the deputy director of the UChicago Consortium, where she has conducted research for nearly 20 years. Her research interests focus on policy and practice in urban education reform, particularly using data to connect research and practice and examining the school environments and instructional practices that promote college readiness and success. She has co-authored numerous journal articles and reports, including studies of college readiness, noncognitive factors, the transition from high school to postsecondary education, and authentic intellectual instruction.

She is the lead author of *Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework* (2015), which draws on research and practice evidence to build a coherent framework of the foundational factors for young adult success, and investigates their development from early childhood through young adulthood and how they can be supported through developmental experiences and relationships. Nagaoka received her BA from Macalester College and her master's degree in public policy from the Irving B. Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

Eliza Moeller is a research analyst at UChicago Consortium, as well as the associate director of research and data strategy at the Network for College Success. In an ongoing effort to make research live in schools, Moeller works with NCS data strategists and Consortium researchers to bridge the gap between research and practice by creating individual school reports on important research-based indicators, like Freshman On Track and college match; supporting school leaders' and practitioners' professional learning; and helping people at all levels of the school system learn how to incorporate data-driven decision making into their practice.

Prior to her work on at NCS, Moeller directed qualitative analysis for UChicago Consortium's post-secondary studies. Eliza is an author on several Consortium research reports, including *Potholes on the Road to College* (2008). She received her BA from the University of Wisconsin and a master's degree in social service administration from the University of Chicago.

Latesha Dickerson is an educator and independent educational consultant with nearly two decades of experience working with students and teachers in Chicago’s public schools. Dickerson began her education career at the Academy of Communication and Technology Charter School. During her tenure, she became a National Board Certified Teacher in the area of Early Adolescence—Science. Over the course of her career, she has served in a variety of roles including as an induction coach, a new school development specialist, and most recently as a team member for the Network for College Success’ Freshman On-Track Project.

Dickerson is a proud alumna of the Chicago Public Schools. She holds a BS in biology from Chicago State University and a master’s degree in education policy and management from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Nicole O. Beechum is a senior research analyst at UChicago Consortium. Beechum is trained as a social worker and approaches the experiences of students in urban school districts from an equity- and strengths-based perspective. Her research interests include the transition to high school and post-secondary opportunities, teacher-student relationships, and how noncognitive factors contribute to student success. Beechum has worked on various research projects for the Postsecondary Transition Project at UChicago Consortium, including research examining the effects of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program in neighborhood schools in Chicago; understanding college match among CPS graduates; designing a teacher learning network to implement noncognitive practices in eighth- and ninth-grade classrooms; and tracking the rise in On-Track rates among CPS freshmen. These last two projects led to work facilitating professional development with schools in the Network for College Success.



969 East 60th Street
Chicago, Illinois 60637

T 773-834-3642

ncs.uchicago.edu

@NCSChicago

Vision

NCS envisions a radical transformation of public high schools in the United States to communities of powerful learning for students and educators. We imagine schools in which all students excel academically and a society in which race and socio-economic status no longer predict future success.

Mission

NCS ensures college readiness and success for all students by translating research into practice and supporting high school leaders to organize their schools for improvement.