

# Research to Practice to Results: The Network for College Success

## A unique partnership has played a pivotal role in helping Chicago high schools improve their freshman On-Track rates.

In 2007, when the UChicago Consortium on School Research released “What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools,” stakeholders at all levels galvanized around the importance of focusing on the transition to high school and attendance and course completion in freshman year. Yet school leaders felt ill equipped to help students stay On-Track (earning sufficient course credits) and intervene to support struggling students. Determined to keep On-Track from joining warehouses of education research that doesn’t change schools, classrooms, or student performance, Consortium researcher Melissa Roderick and school leaders came together to focus on building school capacity to lead improvement. That focus on implementing evidence-based practices launched the Network for College Success (NCS), a partnership between the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration and Chicago Public Schools.

## Translator and Catalyst: “Now that we know this, what do we do?”

Since its launch, NCS has grown to work intensively in Chicago high schools, serving 400 educators and more than 20,000 students annually. NCS membership is voluntary and has included, at various points, neighborhood, charter, and selective enrollment schools. The NCS partnership catalyzed improvements in On-Track performance in its partner schools.



NCS’s strategies soon infused district-wide conversations about education reform, extending NCS’s influence far beyond the member schools with which it works most intensively.

NCS translates research findings into concrete actions that schools can implement. NCS coaches work to adapt research findings in the realities of individual schools, helping them use resources that currently exist inside a school and to help staff develop solutions. One day, coaches might be helping school staff analyze On-Track data. Another day, NCS coaches might be encouraging 9th grade teachers to work together to address a struggling student’s academic or emotional needs. A primary focus of NCS is to build capacity among school leaders and key personnel to effectively implement new strategies and manage change.

## Research to Practice to Results: The Network for College Success

### Leadership and Collaboration: Building Capacity and Community

Thanks to NCS, productive collaboration doesn't happen just within schools, it happens across schools. NCS brings principals, teachers, and counselors from across member schools together in professional learning communities. These collaborations encourage principals and staff to share strategies, problem-solve, be inspired by each other, and avoid wheel reinvention. Absent NCS and the professional learning communities they have created, adults in schools would largely be tackling problems in isolation and without established mechanisms to share tools, strategies, or innovations. The NCS model allows participants to be simultaneously supported and pushed by their peers in a way that builds camaraderie and instills a sense of common purpose. It also builds concrete skills, ranging from running effective meetings and facilitating conversations to management, and expands the pool of tools and solutions that schools hear about.

### Data: Finding the Patterns that Drive Decisions

School leaders are deluged with student data. NCS standardized procedures to help schools access data in a way that was understandable and actionable. NCS guided them through what to pull and how to manipulate the raw numbers. NCS builds schools' capacity to configure the data so it illuminates nuanced trends and patterns that inform decisions. Are the off-track students missing classes early in the morning or after lunch? Are they consistently struggling in math or English? Are boys faring worse than girls? NCS supports member schools in finding solutions informed by data—an approach that represented a culture shift for teachers and principals who had previously felt data were used only to penalize them. Data drives cross-school conversations too, with, for example, a school that focused on one segment of its student population comparing experiences with a school that prioritized a different group.

### Personalization: Tailored Solutions Meeting Individual Needs

Leadership, collaboration, and student data are mechanisms through which NCS pushes schools to organize around making each child successful, with all adults in the building owning responsibility to ensure students remain On-Track. Students who have been pulled back on track consistently tell stories of the importance of an individual teacher or counselor's persistence and compassion. NCS participants share strategies about scheduling classes so freshmen are concentrated in one corridor and among teams of teachers, teachers have common planning time, and students are less likely to miss core subject instruction if they're late to first period. They discuss the discipline and tardy policies that can have unintended consequences for attendance, and brainstorm how to address issues like credit recovery and grading scales that inform course passage rates.

### Beyond On-Track: Outcomes and Reach

NCS's research-to-practice expertise extends beyond On-Track, with significant attention also devoted to improving instruction and to increasing college access and success. NCS can point to success on a range of key student metrics, including student attendance, GPAs, participation in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses, and college enrollment. Based on that success, NCS is increasingly serving as a resource throughout Chicago Public Schools, advising District leadership on how to increase momentum for high school improvement across the city.

**For more information on the Network for College Success, visit [ncs.uchicago.edu](https://ncs.uchicago.edu)**

