



CONSORTIUM ON
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Freshman grades, attendance striking predictors of later graduation for Chicago high school students

School culture, teacher relationships also shape performance in critical first year

For Chicago Public High School freshmen, grades and attendance trump test scores and family background by a long run as the most powerful predictors of graduation, according to a study released Tuesday by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.

High grades are so inextricably tied to graduation, the research found, that freshmen who end the year with a B average have a 95 percent chance of graduating in four years. Grades, in turn, are much more strongly tied to attendance than previously realized. Freshmen who miss two or more weeks of school per semester flunk, on average, at least two classes—even if they arrive at high school with top test scores.

This research on freshmen offers schools and families some concrete information they will use to determine when students are at risk of dropping out—a top reform priority for urban districts such as Chicago, where almost half of all high schools students fail to graduate. Chicago school leaders will present key findings to incoming 9th graders and their families during freshmen orientations citywide this month, and CPS Chief Executive Officer Arne Duncan mailed a summary of this report to the homes of about 30,000 incoming freshmen.

“Even though we often think of dropping out as influenced by many different factors, it is a predictable event,” said Elaine Allensworth, a co-director at the Consortium and the lead author of the study, *What Matters for Staying on Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools*. “We can tell with surprising accuracy who is eventually going to graduate, who is going to drop out, and who could go either way by looking at students' grades in the freshman year.”

The freshman year is a make-it-or-break-it year that offers students a crucial chance for a fresh start, the research concludes. Strong students can quickly fall off course if they start cutting freshmen classes and not completing assignments. And students who struggled in elementary school can turn things around if they come to school every day and aim for at least a B average.

Among the findings:

- Freshmen who earn a B average or better have an 80-percent chance of finishing high school with at least a 3.0 GPA. Freshmen with less than a C- average are more likely to drop out than graduate.
- Course attendance is eight times more predictive of ninth grade failure than eighth grade test scores. Students with very low 8th grade test scores who miss one week of class are less likely to fail than students with very high test scores who miss just one additional week of class.
- Nearly 90 percent of freshmen who miss less than a week of school per semester graduate, and half end their freshman year with a “B” average or better.
- There is little evidence of grade inflation in Chicago high schools despite the common perception that students receive high grades in low-performing schools because of low academic standards.

The research also demonstrates that school factors play an important role in shaping freshmen academic outcomes.

- Attendance, pass rates and grades are higher than expected in schools where more students feel their classroom teachers can be trusted to keep their word, give them individual attention and show personal concern for their academic success.
- Schools able to make the connection between high school work and life after high school and where students report that there is a school-wide press for all students to have high aspirations and plan for the future have lower than expected absence rates and higher than expected grades.
- Attendance rates vary substantially across schools, even when comparing schools with similar student achievement and background—by as much as one month a year.

Intervention efforts for just-below-average students could have a particularly large impact on high school graduation rates. Students with GPAs in the C- to D+ range (about a fourth of all freshmen) who miss one or two weeks per semester are about as likely to graduate as not to graduate, yet often these students are not seen as needing support.

The solutions may sound simple enough, but the challenges remain formidable in Chicago high schools, based on an analysis of first-time ninth graders in the 2004-05 school year. **About half of freshmen failed a course. About 40 percent miss more than a month of school in that first year (which includes class cutting). And the average GPA is lower than a “C.”**

The researchers looked at graduation rates among students who entered Chicago public high schools as freshmen in the 2000-01 school year and who should have graduated by the 2004-05 school year. Information on their freshman course absences and grades was combined with information on eighth grade test scores, economic and demographic backgrounds, and elementary school information to determine what really mattered for graduating from high school. The study also looked at the course performance of more recent freshmen—those beginning high school in the 2004-05 school year. Among these students, information on freshman year grades and absences was tied to responses on a survey of students and teachers conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research in the spring of 2005.

The Consortium on Chicago School Research aims to conduct research of high technical quality that can inform and influence policy and practice in Chicago and nationwide. Founded in 1990, the Consortium is located at the University of Chicago.