



Press Release

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**Indicator Predicts Students' Likelihood of Graduating,  
Offers Local and National Applications for Monitoring Student and  
School Performance**

A new study finds that information on students' freshman-year course credits and failures can be used to predict whether they will graduate from high school, providing an early indicator of dropout risk to parents, teachers, and schools. The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago today released a report examining an indicator that uses credit accumulations and course failures to determine whether students are "on-track" to finish high school.

*The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation* was written by Consortium Associate Director Elaine M. Allensworth and Executive Director John Q. Easton. This indicator was created and developed at the Consortium and was later adopted by the Chicago Public Schools as part of its accountability system.

Students are on-track if they earn at least five credits (a credit is equal to a full-year course) and no more than one semester F in their freshman year of high school. On-track students are three and one-half times more likely to graduate from high school in four years than off-track students. The indicator's ability to predict graduation is equally strong among students at all high schools. It is also a more accurate predictor of graduation than students' previous achievement test scores or background characteristics.

This report finds that on-track students are not just those with the highest achievement test scores. A number of students with high standardized test scores fail to graduate from high school, while significant numbers of students with low standardized test scores succeed in graduating from high school. Success in high school requires that students have abilities besides those measured by achievement tests, such as social and behavioral skills.

Another important finding of this report is that students' likelihood of being on-track varies widely across schools. This is partly due to the fact that students vary in their preparation for high school. However, even after controlling for these differences there are significant discrepancies across schools in the percentage of students on-track. This suggests that school climate and structure play a significant role in helping students succeed.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of carefully monitoring students' progress, because freshman-year failures make a student much less likely to graduate from high school. Just one semester F decreases the likelihood of graduating from 83 to 60 percent; a second semester F decreases the likelihood of graduating to 44 percent; and only 31 percent of students with three semester F's graduate. The report authors argue that parents and teachers should carefully monitor students' grades, especially in the first semester of freshman year, when there are still many opportunities to improve grades.

The on-track indicator is a valuable tool because it enables schools to use readily available information on student course credits and grades to determine which students are in danger of dropping out. Allensworth and Easton believe that schools can increase their graduation rates with targeted interventions of off-track students and through critical analysis of which students are off-track and examination of patterns of course failures in the school.

For Chicago's public schools, the evidence presented in this report is positive: from the 1994–95 to 2003–04 school years, on-track rates have increased 10 percentage points, from 48 to 58 percent of students on-track. This is largely the result of increased course-taking, which has grown out of more rigorous graduation requirements.

For the nation's public schools, this indicator could prove very useful as a way to improve reporting requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act. In the report commentary, the Urban Institute's Duncan Chaplin notes that the on-track indicator could be used to hold schools accountable for graduation rates, rather than focusing solely on test scores. Chaplin argues that determining on-track status would be easier for high schools to do and more accurate than estimating graduation rates.

*The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation* can be downloaded for free or ordered from the Consortium's web site at [www.consortium-chicago.org](http://www.consortium-chicago.org). Additional information about the Consortium, its previous publications, and its current research is also available.

The Consortium aims to conduct research of high technical quality that can inform and assess policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. By broadly engaging local leadership in our work, and presenting our findings to diverse audiences, we seek to expand communication between researchers, policy makers, and practitioners. The Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action, but does not argue for

particular policies or programs. Rather, we believe that good policy is most likely to result from a genuine competition of ideas informed by the best evidence that can be obtained. The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago was founded in 1990.