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Contact: Bronwyn McDaniel
University of Chicago Consortium
on Chicago School Research
773-834-0168
bmdaniel@uchicago.edu

Contact: Maggie Monrad
National High School Center
202-403-6828
mmonrad@air.org

Ninth Grade Course Performance Found to Be the Strongest Predictor of High School Graduation for Chicago English Language Learners

Chicago, IL/Washington, D.C. – How well English Language Learners (ELLs) perform in their ninth grade courses is highly predictive of their high school graduation from Chicago Public Schools (CPS) regardless of race or ethnicity, and much more predictive than their language proficiency or background, according to a new report from the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) and the National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research.

Nationally, ELL students are the fastest growing student demographic group and represent 10.8 percent of the pre-K-12 student population in the United States. In 2006, the CPS ELL population was slightly above the national average, at 14.3 percent. ELL students face substantial challenges in school. They must learn to speak, read, and write English while mastering content in a range of subjects. These challenges are reflected in the academic performance of high school ELLs, who generally have lower grade point averages (GPA), earn fewer credits in core courses, and have a disproportionately higher likelihood of dropping out of high school than their non-ELL peers.

The report, *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools: A Focus on English Language Learners*, builds on the findings from earlier CCSR reports to examine whether ninth-grade early warning indicators that are used to determine if students are on-track to graduate high school – such as absences, grade point average (GPA), and course failures – are as predictive of graduation for high school ELLs as they are for the general student population. The report finds that course performance indicators are actually more predictive of graduation than other ELL-specific indicators, including English language proficiency level and whether students experienced interruptions in their education.

The study also found that ELL students who were newcomers to CPS after age 12 were less likely to graduate than other students with the same grades and attendance. The most important factor associated with these lower graduation rates was the quality of schools these students attended, suggesting that ELLs who arrive in CPS after elementary school may struggle to navigate CPS's system of high school choice. These students were also more likely than other ELL groups to begin high school after age 14, which also reduced their likelihood to graduate.

“This report indicates that English Language Learners who are on on-track at the end of their freshman year were up to 3.5 times more likely to graduate than off-track students,” said Joseph Harris, Director of the National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research. “However, it also demonstrates the importance of monitoring ELLs’ progress through high school, even for those students deemed proficient in English, to ensure that students are graduating high school ready for college and careers.”

The report focuses on a cohort of CPS students who were in ninth grade in 2004-05, and follows them for five years, until 2009, when they should have graduated. It looked at the performance of ELLs versus non-ELLs in CPS, and also compared several ELL Hispanic subgroups to each other. It concentrates primarily on Hispanic students because they represent the largest group of ninth grade ELLs in CPS, however, the same analyses of course performance and graduation are also reported for white and Asian students. In CPS, one out of every seven students is designated as ELL and 30 percent of students in the entire district have been designated as ELLs at some point while enrolled in CPS.

Additional key findings from the report include:

- Hispanic students who entered CPS as ELLs and obtained English language proficiency before sixth grade performed better in their ninth grade courses in comparison to other Hispanic sub-groups in the study.
- Only 52 percent of Hispanic ELLs who had been enrolled in CPS since elementary school and had not achieved proficiency when they entered high school (classified by the study as “long-term ELLs”) graduated within four years – the worst course performance and graduation rates of all Hispanic groups studied.
- Hispanic ELLs who were new to CPS in the middle or high school grades and entered ninth grade as ELLs performed as well or better than any other group in their freshman class, but they graduated at lower rates than all other groups except long-term ELLs.
- Hispanic, white, and Asian students had similar patterns of course performance and graduation rates. However, Hispanic students, regardless of ELL status, graduated from high school at far lower rates than white and Asian ELL students.

“Only 60 percent of Hispanic ELL students who gained proficiency in the middle grades graduated high school within four years,” commented Julia Gwynne, one of the co-authors of the report. “Hispanic ELL students who were proficient before sixth grade fared a bit better, with a 68 percent graduation rate over four years. These findings highlight the distinctive needs of ELL students, especially those new to the district and those who do not achieve proficiency by ninth grade.”

The full report is available on the National High School Center’s [Web site](#) and the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research’s [Web site](#).

About the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research

The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) conducts research of high technical quality that can inform and assess policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners as we support the search for solutions to the problems of school reform. CCSR encourages the

use of research in policy action and improvement of practice, but does not argue for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school reform by identifying what matters for student success and school improvement, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.

About the National High School Center

The National High School Center (www.betterhighschools.org), established in 2005, serves as a central source of expertise on high school-related issues for the Regional Comprehensive Centers, a national network developed by the U.S. Department of Education, and the states they serve. Jointly funded by the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) and the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at the U.S. Department of Education, the National High School Center provides the latest research, user-friendly tools and products, and high-quality technical assistance on high school improvement issues. The National High School Center is housed at the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and partners with other leading education research organizations, such as the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, Matrix Knowledge Group, Quill Research Associates, LLC, and West Wind Education Policy Inc.

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