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## Chicago's Ninth-Grade Focus Triggers Climb in High School Graduation Rates

Efforts to improve the academic performance of ninth-graders drove large improvements in graduation rates three years later in a diverse set of 20 Chicago public high schools, according to a report released Thursday by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (UChicago CCSR). This suggests that the recent dramatic improvement in the percentage of Chicago ninth-graders who are “on track” to graduate should continue to propel system-wide graduation rates in Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

A second report released today by UChicago CCSR helps explain why ninth grade is such a key leverage point for reducing dropouts.

In 2007, CPS launched a major effort, centered on keeping more ninth-graders on track to graduation. Freshmen are considered on track if they have enough credits to be promoted to tenth grade and have earned no more than one semester F in a core course. The effort was a response to research from UChicago CCSR showing that students who end their ninth-grade year on track are almost four times more likely to graduate from high school than those who are off track.

The district initiative promoted the use of data to monitor students' level of dropout risk throughout the ninth-grade year, allowing teachers to intervene before students fell too far behind. The diversity of strategies was notable—from calls home when students missed a class to algebra tutoring to homework help. The goal was to match the intervention to the specific needs of the student and prevent the dramatic decline in grades and attendance that most CPS students experience when they transition to high school. Since that time, **the CPS on-track rate has risen 25 percentage points, from 57 to 82 percent.**

The first report, [\*Preventable Failure: Improvements in Long-Term Outcomes when High Schools Focused on the Ninth Grade Year\*](#), shows that **improvements in ninth grade on-track rates were sustained in tenth and eleventh grade and followed by a large increase in graduation rates.**

This analysis was done on 20 “early mover schools” that showed large gains in on-track rates as early as the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years, allowing for enough time to have elapsed to analyze how the increase in on-track rates affected graduation rates.

“On its face this did not seem like an initiative that would produce a system shift in performance, redefine approaches to school dropout, and call into question the conventional wisdom that urban neighborhood high schools could not make radical improvements. And yet, CPS’s focus on on-track achieved all of this,” said report author [Melissa Roderick](#), Hermon Dunlap Smith Professor at the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago and a senior director at UChicago CCSR.

### **Other Key findings from *Preventable Failure*:**

**Between 2007-08 and 2012-13, system-wide improvements in ninth-grade on-track rates were dramatic, sustained, and observed across a wide range of high schools and among critical subgroups—by race, by gender, and across achievement levels.** Although all students appeared to gain, the benefits of getting on track were greatest for students with the lowest incoming skills. Students with eighth-grade Explore scores less than 12—the bottom quartile of CPS students—had a 24.5 percentage point increase in their on-track rates. On-track rates improved more among African American males than among any other racial/ethnic gender subgroup, rising from 43 percent in 2005 to 71 percent in 2013.

**Improvements in on-track were accompanied by across-the-board improvements in grades.** Grades improved at all ends of the achievement spectrum, with large increases both in the percentage of students getting Bs *and* the percentage of students receiving no Fs. Thus, evidence suggests that on-track improvement was driven by real improvement in achievement, not just a result of teachers giving students grades of “D” instead of “F.”

**Increasing ninth-grade on-track rates did not negatively affect high schools’ average ACT scores—despite the fact that many more students with weaker incoming skills made it to junior year to take the test.** ACT scores remained very close to what they were before on-track rates improved, which means that the average growth from Explore to ACT remained the same or increased, even though more students—including many students with weaker incoming skills—were taking the ACT.

### **Key Findings on how to support students during the ninth-grade year from [Free to Fail or On-Track to College](#):**

*Free to Fail or On-Track to College*, the second report released by UChicago CCSR, details the dramatic drop in grades, attendance, and academic behavior that occurs between eighth and

ninth grade and demonstrates how intense monitoring and support can help schools keep more ninth-graders on track to graduation.

**Both high- and low-achieving students struggle when they enter high school.**

Between eighth and ninth grade, average grades drop by more than half a letter grade (0.6 points on a 4-point scale). This decline happens across all performance levels. Even among students with very high GPAs in eighth grade, only about one-third maintain a high GPA in ninth grade.

**Grades decline because students' attendance and study habits plummet across the transition to high school—not because the work is harder.**

Students miss almost three times as many days of school in ninth grade as in eighth grade, and this increase is primarily driven by a significant increase in unexcused absences. Freshmen also report putting in less effort than they had in seventh and eighth grade. Furthermore, students do not perceive ninth-grade classes as more difficult than their eighth-grade classes.

**Adult monitoring and support can prevent the declines that typically happen across the transition from high school.**

Interviews with students revealed a significant shift in adult supervision between eighth and ninth grade, which makes it easier for students to skip class and stop doing work. But school and teacher practices can make a difference in the course grades ninth-graders receive, even among students with similar prior performance.

“Taken together, these two studies show that ninth grade is a pivotal year that provides a unique intervention point for reducing high school dropout,” said [Elaine Allensworth](#), Lewis-Sebring Director of UChicago CCSR. “Schools truly can prevent course failure and high school dropout, particularly if they provide students with the rights supports at the right time.”



Following the release, both the *Preventable Failure* and *Free to Fail* reports, a researcher video, and other materials will be available at a new website launching today: [ontrack.uchicago.edu](https://ontrack.uchicago.edu)