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New UChicago CCSR report: Sorting students by ability shifts which students, teachers need the most support

How students are sorted into classrooms by skill level can have as much of an effect on their achievement as the content they are taught, according to a new report by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. *Skill-Based Sorting in the Era of College Prep for All* examines the effects of two curricular reforms by Chicago Public Schools, one that sorted students into algebra classes based on ability and another that de-sorted students.

“Tracking, and to a lesser degree, sorting students into classrooms by skill level, has long been a highly contentious issue,” said co-author UChicago CCSR Lewis-Sebring Director Elaine Allensworth. “What this study makes clear is that for students at both ends of the skill spectrum, there are costs and benefits of sorting *and of not sorting*. And there are clear implications for supporting students and teachers, depending on which strategy schools choose.”

Key findings from the report include:

- **Overall, test scores are higher when classes are sorted by skills due to large benefits for high-skilled students’ learning gains.** Low-skilled students have *slightly lower* test scores with sorting, while high-skilled students have *substantially higher* test scores. On average, the gains for high-achievers offset the losses for low-achievers.
- **However, sorting by ability has different effects on test scores than on grades and pass rates; the grades and pass rates of high-skilled students decline, while the grades of low-skilled students improve.** Sorting causes students with slightly above-average achievement to be the lowest-skilled students in their class, which makes a big difference for their performance. While it may be beneficial for high-skilled students’ test score gains to be in classes with higher-achieving peers, it can be *detrimental to their eventual educational attainment* because grades matter more for college outcomes than test scores. Students with the weakest skills *relative to their peers* need close monitoring and

support, regardless of whether they have low- or high-achievement relative to a national comparison.

- **When classes are sorted by skill level, low-skilled students are at higher risk of being in disruptive classrooms.** Thus, sorting can lead students with low entering skills to have a weaker instructional environment. Teachers in these classrooms need support around classroom management and getting students engaged in challenging work.

“We hope this report can be used to think about which students and teachers need support,” said report co-author Takako Nomi, an assistant professor at St. Louis University. “This is a particularly timely question as the Common Core Curriculum requires schools to think intentionally about how to ensure students at all skill levels are able to engage in a common curriculum.”