



CONSORTIUM ON
CHICAGO SCHOOL RESEARCH
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
URBAN EDUCATION INSTITUTE
1313 East 60th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60637

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE
Aug. 26, 2010

Contact:
Emily Krone
773-834-8036
ekrone@uchicago.edu
General questions/arrange interviews

Chicago's college-prep-for-all policy failed to improve student achievement

As states and districts across the country implement college-preparatory curriculum standards for all students, emerging research on a policy implemented in Chicago suggests that the effects of these efforts could be the opposite of those intended. In 1997, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was ahead of the current national trend, eliminating remedial classes and requiring all high school students to take college-preparatory coursework. But this policy had no positive effects on student achievement and may actually have hurt the college prospects of some top students, according to a new policy brief from the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.

The brief, *College Prep for All? What We've Learned from Chicago's Efforts*, compares outcomes for students in Chicago before and after the policy in two subject areas: ninth-grade English and ninth-grade algebra. It also compares long-term outcomes—graduation and college-going rates—for students before and after the policy. Researchers found that the policy did successfully increase equity by ending the practice of tracking and leading far more students to take college-preparatory classes; however, other important outcomes such as grades, test scores, absences and failure rates remained at low levels or got worse. Specifically, math and English test scores remained virtually flat while grades declined and course failures increased for students with the weakest skills. Moreover, students with strong grades (B average or better) were slightly less likely to go to college after the standard college-preparatory curriculum was mandated for all students.

The findings have strong implications for districts across the country considering requiring a college-preparatory curriculum for all students. Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia now require all students to take some version of a mandatory or default college preparatory curriculum to graduate—generally defined as four years of English and math and three or more years of science and/or social science. The report also has implications for states and districts implementing the new Common Core standards, which are designed to increase equity and expose all students to more rigorous material. One key message is that schools must attend to implementation issues carefully—by providing support for low-skilled students to meet the new standards, ensuring that coursework does not become less rigorous for high-skilled students, and supporting teachers to reach a larger number of students with diverse skills.

A complementary policy brief also released today explores the effects of requiring students with below-average math skills to take two periods of algebra in a single year. The report, *Are Two Algebra Classes Better Than One? The Effects of Double-Dose Instruction in Chicago*, found that the policy, when paired with additional

support for teachers, showed significant promise for improving the academic skills of all students. Because the policy had the unintended consequence of grouping students by ability level, it affected students who were exposed to double-period algebra, as well as those who were not. Therefore, the study has implications both for policymakers searching for ways to improve math skills, as well as those interested in the effects of ability grouping.

Key findings from the two reports include:

1. The new mandatory **college-prep** policy led more CPS freshmen to take college-preparatory classes. By 2004, seven years after the policy was adopted by CPS, virtually all ninth-graders were enrolled in both English I and Algebra I. Gaps in course enrollment by race and ethnicity that existed prior to the 1997 policy largely disappeared afterwards.
2. The **college-prep** mandate had no positive effects on student achievement: Test scores in math and English did not improve for either low- or high-skill students, and reading test scores actually declined for the highest-skilled students; ninth grade math and reading grades declined for low-skill students; failure rates in both subjects increased for low-skill students; and course absences increased in both subjects for high-skill students.
3. The mandatory **college-prep** curriculum had negative effects on graduation rates and college enrollment. The study found that requiring a full four years of college-preparatory curriculum made it more difficult for students to obtain the credits needed to graduate, and high school graduation rates declined slightly. Furthermore, students with strong grades were slightly less likely to go to college after the mandatory college-preparatory policy was implemented. They were also less likely to take a very rigorous science curriculum that included both chemistry and physics, as it became common for all students to simply take the default three-year curriculum in science.
4. The **double-dose** algebra policy affected both students who were targeted by the policy and those who were not. Researchers found that low-skill and high-skill students improved their math skills significantly, as evidenced by higher test scores.
5. The double-dose policy fell short of its original goal: to reduce failure rates in algebra. Though students' algebra test scores increased under the policy, course-passing rates did not improve. Moreover, though students learned more, grades fell because courses became more demanding.

The authors of the *College Prep for All* policy brief conclude, "Overall, the Chicago reform led to few long-term effects—either positive or negative." They added, "Without improved instruction and engagement, the promise of these well-meaning reforms is likely to go unrealized."