“The research... the Consortium on Chicago School Research produced was like a compass for those of us who were working so hard to reform the schools there.”

—Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education and former CEO of Chicago Public Schools
UCHICAGO CCSR

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
CONSORTIUM ON CHICAGO SCHOOL RESEARCH
The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (UChicago CCSR) produces groundbreaking research on Chicago Public Schools that drives school improvement in Chicago and nationwide.

Capacity-building Research

UChicago CCSR focuses on building schools’ capacity to address their most pressing issues and challenges. Its research provides insight into what works, what doesn’t, and why, giving policymakers and educators information to develop their own solutions to the problems they face. Primary capacity-building activities include:

• Seeking answers to core questions about what it takes to improve school and student performance.
• Identifying key indicators for improvement and tracking district-wide progress on these indicators over time.
• Evaluating the theory of action behind new district-wide policies and how these new policies fare in practice.
• Engaging a wide range of stakeholders in research findings through public convenings and presentations; individualized data reports; and accessible, actionable publications.

School Closings

In 2009, UChicago CCSR released a report providing much-needed evidence on the highly controversial CPS policy of closing underutilized and low-performing schools. The report found that overall there was no impact—either positive or negative—on the learning trajectories of students who were displaced by school closings. Though students who transferred to high-performing schools did have significantly higher levels of achievement than would have remained at their previous schools, the vast majority of students transferred from one low-performing school to another, undermining any potentially positive effect of the policy.

The findings have shaped all subsequent policy on school closings in Chicago. After the report release, CPS immediately instituted a “Students’ Bill of Rights,” guaranteeing that no school would be closed unless displaced students had access to higher-performing schools. In 2013, as CPS considered the largest round of school closings in the nation’s history, the commission charged with recommending which schools to close, as well as many other stakeholder groups, drew heavily on the UChicago CCSR report. The report also has received extensive attention nationally as the federal government has promoted school closures as one strategy for dealing with chronically low-performing schools. National media outlets, including The New York Times, ABC News, and Education Week, all reported on the findings.

EXAMPLES OF IMPACT ON POLICY AND PRACTICE

Preventing Dropouts

In complementary reports in 2005 and 2007, CCSR used freshman course performance data to develop a “freshman on-track indicator” that could be used to predict future high school graduates and dropouts as early as ninth-grade. CCSR defined on-track students as having no more than one semester F in a core course by the end of their first year in high school. This simple indicator proved incredibly powerful. Students who were on-track at the end of their freshman year were nearly four times more likely to graduate from high school than their classmates who were not on-track. This finding shifted the local and national conversation about high school graduation from factors that schools cannot control—such as neighborhood poverty and teen pregnancy—to factors that schools can influence: student academic behavior and course performance.

Four-year graduation rates by freshman on-track status

First Quartile

Second Quartile

Third Quartile

Fourth Quartile

Reading

0.21

0.90

Math

0.66

164

276

On-Track

Off-Track

22%

42%

2007, CCSR defined on-track as passing core course by the end of first year. The indicator was used by all districts to improve policies and practices. CPS added the on-track indicator to its accountability system and also used the indicator to identify at-risk students as they enter high school and to follow them throughout the freshman year. Many schools put in place “on-track coordinators” or freshman teams to coordinate interventions to get students on-track to graduation. Since making on-track a priority, CPS has seen freshman on-track rates increase dramatically. In 2002, 74.8 percent of freshmen were on-track to graduate, compared with 57 percent in 2007.

UChicago CCSR’s on-track research also has had a national influence. The National High School Center adopted the indicator and used UChicago CCSR research to develop an early-warning system tool, which districts across the country now use. Several districts, including Dallas, Albuquerque, Philadelphia, Omaha, and Rochester have been trained by UChicago CCSR to use the indicator as part of their accountability and intervention strategies. The U.S. Department of Education Institute of Educational Sciences also recommended the use of the indicator in its practice guide for dropout prevention.
In Chicago Public Schools

UChicago CCSR researchers combine expertise on a range of topics with deep knowledge of the Chicago Public Schools. This concentration has allowed UChicago CCSR to remain focused on issues that matter to practitioners on the ground, build a cumulative knowledge base, apply findings to policies and practice, and respond quickly to emerging questions and policy changes. UChicago CCSR considers itself a critical friend to Chicago Public Schools—Independent, candid, and deeply committed to improvement.

A Distinctive Model

A number of features distinguish UChicago CCSR from more typical research organizations: a focus on one place—Chicago, involvement with a diverse group of stakeholders as part of the research process, a wide range of methods and disciplinary perspectives, and a deep commitment to engaging with policymakers and practitioners around research findings. UChicago CCSR is now contributing to the incubation of applied research centers in 20 major urban centers across the country. New York City, Los Angeles, Newark, Kansas City, San Diego and Baltimore have already established research consortia based on UChicago CCSR’s work.

Post-Secondary Success

From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College helped CPS pinpoint factors driving the large gap between the percentage of CPS students who aspire to attend a four-year college and the much smaller number who actually enroll. Researchers found that the financial aid process presented one of the most significant barriers for CPS students. Specifically, many students were failing to successfully complete the Federal Application for Student Aid, a complex form needed to access much-needed financial aid.

IMPACT: CPS mounted a robust response to the findings, making a district-wide push to improve FAFSA completion rates. One initiative was to establish a FAFSA tracking system that generates weekly reports for schools on student-by-student FAFSA completion. The tracking system has now been implemented in 10 school districts nationwide. In 2011, FAFSA completion in CPS was 91.8 percent, up from 64.5 percent in 2007. The federal government also streamlined the FAFSA, making it easier for students across the country to access much-needed financial aid.

The Five Essentials for School Improvement

Based on 20 years of research in more than 400 schools, UChicago CCSR identified the five factors—the 5Essentials—that matter most for school improvement. Schools strong in 3 to 5 of the Essentials are 10 times more likely to improve student learning than schools weak in 3 to 5 of the Essentials. Those differences remain true even after controlling for student and school characteristics, including poverty, race, gender, and neighborhood characteristics. UChicago CCSR researchers documented these findings in Organizing Schools for Improvement, named the top education policy book of the decade.

IMPACT: In 2011, UChicago Impact, another unit of the Urban Education Institute, launched the 5Essentials, an online survey tool that provides individualized, actionable reports on how schools stack up on the 5Essentials. The 5Essentials survey has been administered in schools in Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New York and Indiana and statewide in Illinois.


“As educators, we have long understood that test scores alone do not represent the full scope of school life and learning,” said Illinois State Superintendent of Education Christopher A. Koch. “The Illinois 5Essentials Survey will finally help us paint that fuller picture of learning conditions and guide local and state improvement initiatives so that every student has access to a world class education.”