

Ninth Grade On-Track

A data point that changed adults' focus, school practices, and student outcomes.

20 YEARS AGO...

- In 2006, 57% of Chicago Public Schools ninth-graders graduated from high school in four years—nearly half didn't graduate.
- Local reporting and public sentiment saw students' likelihood of graduating high school was like flipping a coin; up to chance.
- Educators weren't sure how they could effectively support more students to graduate. The problem felt big and complex.

Then UChicago Consortium researchers shared the power of "Freshman OnTrack"

RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Students who were "on track" in ninth grade were **3.5 times more likely to graduate high school**.

"On track" status was **more predictive** of students' high school graduation **than all other data combined**, including test scores, income, gender, race, and ethnicity.

THE METRIC

A ninth-grader was "on-track" for high school graduation if:

- 1 They had no more than **1 core course** failure in ninth grade
- &
- 5 Had **earned 5 credits**, enough to be promoted to tenth grade

Chicago Public Schools started using Freshman OnTrack data for improvement, and over time...

ADULTS' FOCUS SHIFTED

Teachers and staff focused on **predictive indicators** of student success that they could **organize their collective work** around, and embraced **responsibility** for helping students establish strong foundations in ninth grade.

SCHOOL PRACTICES SHIFTED

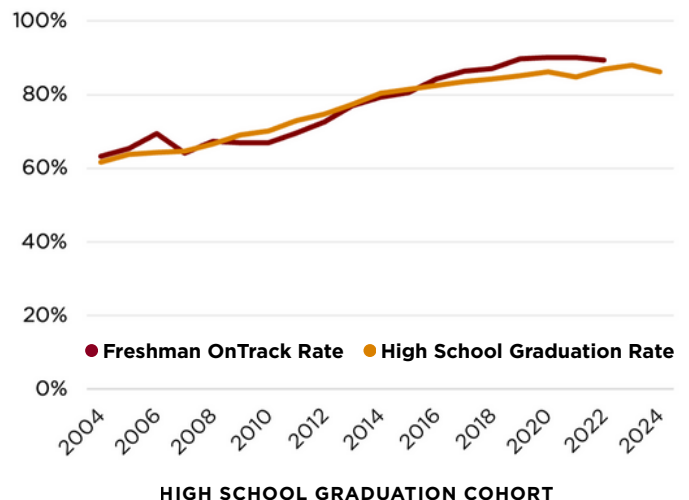
Schools shifted away from focusing on hard-to-move outcomes like test scores, and started proactively tracking students' **attendance and grades**. When ninth-graders' attendance and grades were low, school staff worked to understand why, and created **interventions and supports**.

STUDENT OUTCOMES IMPROVED

Some were concerned that if high school graduation increased, test scores and college enrollment would drop. Instead, Chicago found that supporting students to establish strong foundations in ninth grade had **long-term payoffs for many key student milestones**:

- ACT scores increased
- College enrollment rates increased
- GPAs increased
- College degree and post-secondary certificate attainment increased
- High school graduation rates increased

By 2024, graduation rates were 25 percentage points higher than 2004, and there were 5,978 fewer non-graduates.



Note: Data is organized by high school graduation cohort, and **only includes students who also had a calculable freshman on-track (FOT) rate**, and thus does not include students who attended charter schools for ninth grade and students who transferred into the district after ninth grade. For the class of 2024, 68% of students had a calculable FOT rate and are included in both lines here; 78% of students in the class of 2004 a calculable FOT rate. Given these exclusions, the rates shown here differ from other publicly-reported rates—most notably, slightly lower high school graduation rates.

KEY POINTS IN NINTH GRADE ON-TRACK WORK

1999

UChicago Consortium researchers first developed Freshman OnTrack (FOT) indicator.

2003

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) adopted Freshman OnTrack in school accountability measures.

2005

UChicago Consortium published a [report](#) validating that FOT is a stronger predictor of high school graduation than all other available data combined. A 2007 FOT [report](#) noted the importance of grades and attendance for high school graduation.

2006

The [Network for College Success](#) (NCS) emerged to help principals use research insights to support students.

2008

CPS began providing regular FOT data reports to schools for strategy and accountability.

2009

NCS formed a network with ninth-grade teams in CPS high schools; learnings were shared in the [Freshman Success Framework](#).

2015

[To&Through Online Milestones Tool](#) launched to help school communities access their own data trends.

2018

CPS launched Elementary On-Track (EOT) to extend on-track work into all CPS schools.

2022

A joint To&Through and Consortium report offered [simplified EOT categories](#), and showed strongest outcomes for on-track students.

2024

CPS created new definition for **9th grade on-track (9OT): 6.5 credits earned in the 9th grade**

That means failing no more than 1 semester of any course.

DISRUPTING NARRATIVES & EMPOWERING EDUCATORS

Freshman OnTrack challenged the myth that it's normal and expected for students to fail some classes as they adjust to high school, and that failure would be a motivator.

High school **educators were empowered** to positively affect students' adjustment into high school, and their graduation four years later. They had early data that helped them identify students who needed more support, and then collaborated with colleagues to **provide support and monitor students' progress**.

Schools had, and still have, autonomy to decide what their systems and strategies look like, including:

- ✓ Looking at student data and school trends at regular intervals, leading to a data-focused school culture
- ✓ Professional learning and coaching opportunities, including with the Network for College Success (see timeline)
- ✓ Building supportive relationships *with* students, and *among* students
- ✓ Utilizing grade-level teams to consider students' experiences across their classes

I know for sure that there are kids who would not have finished high school, who would have very different life outcomes, if not for the on-track work.

— Elizabeth Kirby

FORMER CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS
PRINCIPAL & CHIEF OF SCHOOLS

A NOTE ON TERMS:

Freshman OnTrack

Original Consortium research focused on *Freshman OnTrack*, and we use that term when referencing past work.

Ninth Grade On-Track

We use *ninth grade on-track* for current work, and also when talking about both current and historical work together.

NINTH GRADE ON-TRACK RESOURCES:

- [The Second Window: How a Focus on Freshmen Transformed a System](#) (online documentary)
- [Family Playbook: How Can We Understand Students' Progress in School?](#)
- [Freshman On-Track Toolkit](#)
- [The Make or Break Year: Solving the Dropout Crisis One Ninth Grader at a Time](#) (article)
- [The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation](#) (report)
- [Hidden Risk: Changes in GPA across the Transition to High School](#) (report)
- [What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools](#) (report)
- [To&Through Online Milestones Tool](#) (publicly available data)