



the
To&Through
project

MYTHS & FACTS

About What Matters
for High School
Success



THE UNIVERSITY OF
CHICAGO



URBAN
EDUCATION
INSTITUTE



NETWORK
FOR COLLEGE
SUCCESS



the To&Through project

The To&Through Project is a partnership among the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration and Urban Education Institute. In collaboration with educators, policymakers, and communities, the To&Through Project aims to significantly increase the percentage of Chicago Public Schools freshmen who graduate from high school and go on to earn a college degree, and to share the learning from Chicago with education stakeholders across the country.

MYTHS & FACTS

The path to and through high school and college is riddled with misguided notions and outdated assumptions about what students should know, do, and focus on in order to maximize their chances for success. Fortunately, more than a decade's worth of research and data from The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research has helped solidify the facts and dispel myths about what it takes to make it to and through college.



TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL

MYTH

Students' freshman year course performance drops because their coursework becomes more difficult.

TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL



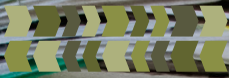
FACT

Existing research suggests the declines in students' grades between 8th and 9th grade cannot be explained by changes in the difficulty of students' coursework. Students' grades decline in part because of developmental and environmental challenges that they face during the transition to high school. Freshmen must adjust to new teachers, peers, environments, and expectations all at once, and they often receive less personal attention and support from teachers and other school staff in ninth grade than they did in elementary school. Challenges like these affect non-cognitive factors like students' academic identity, emotional well-being, and sense of belonging in school, which influence their grades through effects on their attendance and study habits. In 2014, UChicago Consortium researchers concluded that more than 85 percent of the gap in CPS students' Math and English performance between the 8th and 9th grade could be explained by changes in their attendance and self-reported study habits, and that almost none of the gap could be attributed to changes in the difficulty of their coursework.



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Sources: Farrington, C.A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E.M., Nagaoka, J., Keys, T.S., Johnson, D.W. & Beechum, N.O. (2012). Teaching adolescents to become learners: The role of noncognitive factors in shaping schools performance. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.; Rosenkranz, T., de la Torre, M., Stevens, W.D., & Allensworth, E.M. (2014). Free to fail or on-track to college: Why grades drop when students enter high school and what adults can do about it. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL

MYTH

We don't need to worry
about students who enter
high school with high eighth
grade grades and test scores.



TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL

FACT

All students are at risk of seeing significant declines in their GPA in core courses (English, Math, Science, and Social Studies) in the transition to high school, even students with strong eighth grade grades and test scores. In fact, fewer than half of students who earned a 3.0 in eighth grade earn a 3.0 in ninth grade. These declines in GPA for high-achieving students matter because high school grades are a critical component of students' college access and college readiness. Losses during the transition to high school put many students who began high school with a strong record of academic achievement out of range for likely admission to selective or highly selective colleges.





TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL

MYTH

Eighth grade test scores are the best predictors of ninth grade performance.

TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL



FACT

Eighth grade test scores are strong predictors of high school test scores, but they are not strong predictors of high school course performance. Only a third of students with high test scores in eighth grade go on to earn a B average in high school. Students' middle school attendance and grades are much stronger predictors of ninth grade GPA than their test scores.



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Source: Allensworth, E., Gwynne, J., Moore, P., & de la Torre, M. (2014). Looking forward to high school and college: Middle grade indicators of readiness in Chicago Public Schools. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

MYTH



Failing a non-core class like Art or PE in the ninth grade is no big deal — it doesn't really affect students' odds of graduating from high school.

FACT

A non-core course failure is just as detrimental as a core course failure to students' likelihood of graduating from high school. For recent cohorts of CPS students, all course failures in ninth grade, regardless of subject area, were associated with large decreases in students' likelihood of graduating from high school. The graduation rate for students with one core course failure and no other failures in ninth grade was 70%; for students with one non-core course failure and no other failures, the graduation rate was very similar, at 68%. Students who passed all of their courses during freshman year of high school, however, had a 90% chance of graduating within four years.





TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL

MYTH

Students always do better
academically when they
attend a selective
enrollment school.

TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL



FACT

Families put lots of time and resources into determining which high school will be the best fit for their students. There is a popular perception that all students benefit when attending the highest-performing school to which they have access. However, research in Chicago found that while all selective enrollment high school students reported more positive high school experiences (e.g. feelings of personal safety and positive relationships with teachers and peers), selective high school admission had no effect on test scores, regardless of neighborhood socioeconomic status (SES). In fact, students from low SES neighborhoods who are admitted to a selective high school are 16 percentage points less likely to attend a selective college than students from low-SES neighborhoods who applied to a selective school but were not admitted.



Source: Barrow, L., Sartain, L., & de la Torre, M. (2016). The role of selective high schools in equalizing educational outcomes: Heterogeneous effects by neighborhood socioeconomic status. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL

MYTH

Students' grades drop more in core courses like English, Math, and Science than non-core courses like Physical Education (PE) and the Arts between the eighth and ninth grades.

TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL



FACT

Declines in students' academic performance between the eighth and ninth grades are not limited to their grades in the core subject areas. In fact, GPA declines in the two non-core courses common to both the eighth and ninth grades—Arts and PE/Health—greatly exceed average declines in each of the core subject areas. In eighth grade, most students earn As and Bs in Arts and PE/Health but, in ninth grade, their grades in these subject areas fall to below a B average. Students see their grades fall by an average of 0.81 GPA points in PE between the eighth and ninth grades, and by 0.61 points in Arts—and Black and Latino young men see particularly disproportionate average GPA losses in the non-core subject areas. The Arts grades of Black young men fall by more than three-quarters of a point between the eighth and ninth grades, and their PE/Health grades fall a full point.





FRESHMAN YEAR

MYTH

It's better for students to take a lighter course load in the ninth grade than to take on too much.

FRESHMAN YEAR



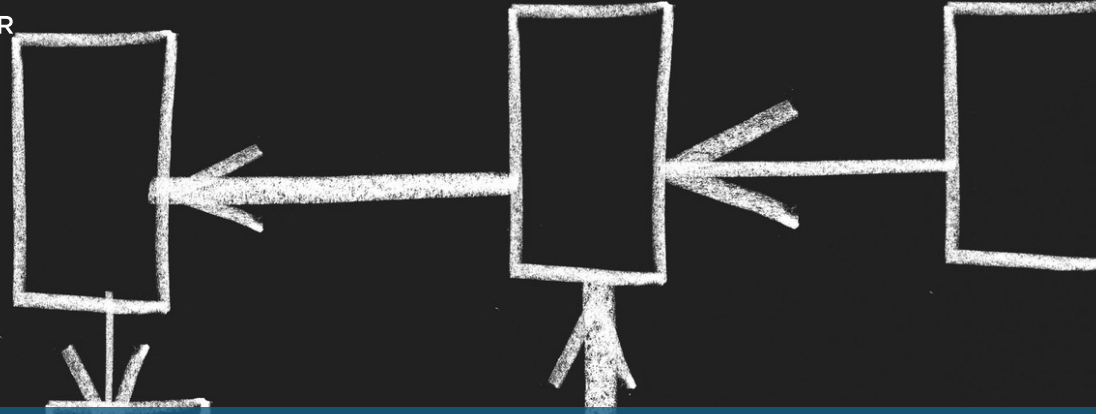
FACT

While most CPS students enroll in seven courses in their freshman year, those who earn only five credits, regardless of whether or not they've failed a course, are unlikely to graduate. Students who earn seven credits during their freshman year of high school are twice as likely as their peers who earn only five credits to graduate from high school within four years.



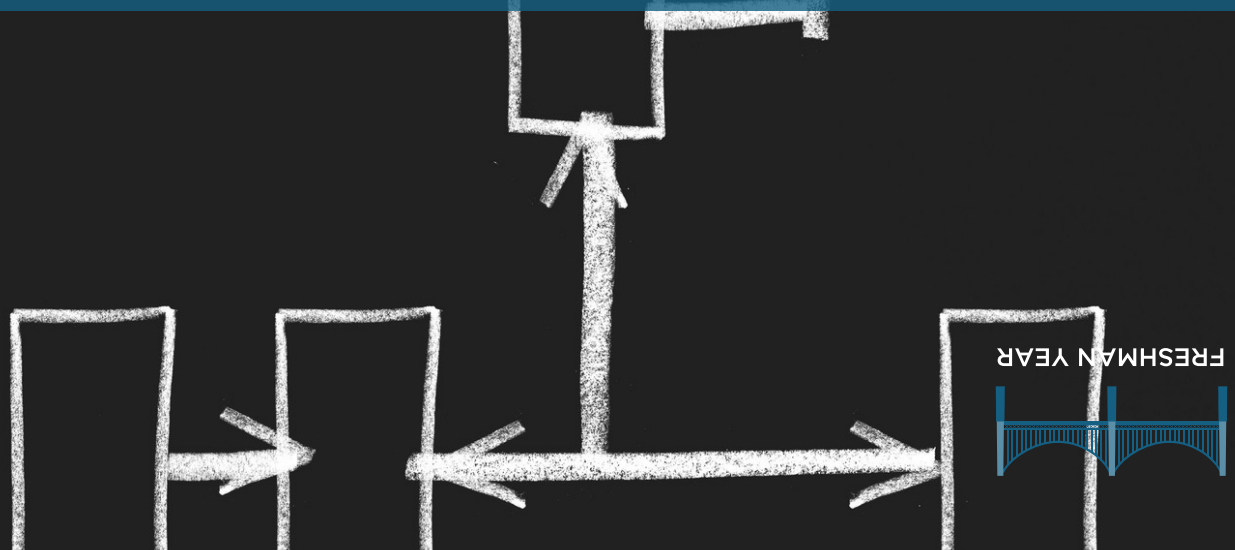


FRESHMAN YEAR



MYTH

When freshmen fail classes,
they learn important
lessons about actions
and consequences.



FACT

There is no evidence that students who fail classes during freshman year dramatically improve their performance during the rest of high school. When freshmen fail core or non-core classes, their chance of graduating is greatly reduced. With each failed semester course in freshman year, a student's chance of graduating drops by 15 percent. Although students have opportunities to retake classes and make up credits, catching up to peers is difficult work and each class failure keeps a student further behind. Failing a class can cause feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment that make it very difficult for students to recover credits at a time when belonging is really important to them developmentally. The most important lessons students can learn during freshman year are the study habits, mindsets, and positive academic identities that will equip them for the rest of high school and college.



Sources: Farrington, C. A. (2014). *Failing at school: Lessons for redesigning urban high schools*. New York, NY: Teacher's College Press.; Nagaoka, J., Farrington, C., Ehrlich, S., & Heath, R. (2015). *Foundations for young adult success: A developmental framework*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research; Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. Q. (2007). *What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago public high schools*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research..



FRESHMAN YEAR

MYTH

Freshman grades don't matter all that much for college.

FRESHMAN YEAR



FACT

Freshman year is not only predictive of high school graduation, but also has a strong correlation with college enrollment and persistence. Moreover, GPA at the end of freshman year is strongly correlated with 11th grade GPA, which is the GPA submitted on college applications. Among students with similar prior achievement who attended the same high school, 70 percent of students with mostly As in ninth grade enrolled in college, compared to 50 percent of students with mostly Cs in ninth grade.



Source: Easton, J.Q., Johnson, E., & Sartain, L. (2017). The predictive power of ninth-grade GPA. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



FRESHMAN YEAR

MYTH

By the time students reach high school, they should take full responsibility for what they need to do to succeed.

FRESHMAN YEAR



FACT

Fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds entering high school are still very much adolescents, and adolescent brains are still developing. Their pre-frontal cortex is still forming, so adolescents struggle with executive functioning, which means that skills like organization, time management, and long-term planning do not come naturally to them. In addition, adolescents are deeply engaged in the process of forming an identity, and their sense of themselves as learners and as people at this stage of development is highly malleable. All of this developmental context means that it is important for teachers to support students in developing the executive functioning skills they need to succeed in the classroom and beyond. This means ensuring students build their academic skills and habits, such as completing homework and participating in class, and receive the message that they are capable of succeeding in school.



Sources: Farrington, C. A. (2014). *Failing at school: Lessons for redesigning urban high schools*. New York, NY: Teacher's College Press.; Nagaoka, J., Farrington, C.A., Ehrlich, S.B., Heath, R.D., Johnson, D.W., Dickson, S., & Hayes, K. (2015). *Foundations for young adult success: A developmental framework*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research



FRESHMAN YEAR

MYTH

Many freshmen go on to improve their GPAs during sophomore and junior years.

FRESHMAN YEAR



FACT

Ninth grade is the year when students develop habits and behaviors that persist through the rest of high school, and even through college. Since 9th grade GPA is highly predictive of 11th grade GPA, a student who is successful in 9th grade is more likely to be successful in later years. A student who does not do well in the ninth grade can recover, but will likely remain on the trajectory established in the freshman year. Starting strong in high school is crucial for finishing strong at graduation.



Sources: Easton, J.Q., Johnson, E., & Sartain, L. (2017). The predictive power of freshman year high school GPA. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.; Rosenkranz, T., de la Torre, M., Stevens, W.D., & Allensworth, E.M. (2014). Free to fail or on-track to college: Why grades drop when students enter high school and what adults can do about it. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



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