

Highlights from

The Forgotten Year

Applying Lessons from Freshman
Success to Sophomore Year

ALEX SEESKIN
SHELBY MAHAFFIE
ALEXANDRA USHER
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Information in this booklet is derived from



***The Forgotten Year: Applying Lessons
from Freshman Success to Sophomore Year***

by Alex Seeskin, Shelby Mahaffie,
and Alexandra Usher

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P R E F A C E



In Chicago and many districts around the country, sophomore year is a forgotten year. It is a time sandwiched in between high school's more momentous milestones: freshman year is focused on ensuring a smooth transition to high school; junior year on preparing for post-secondary entrance exams; and senior year on applying to college. However, the lack of definition around sophomore year is neither predetermined nor purposeful. Without the pressures of integrating into or out of a school community, sophomore year could be a time of intentional development; a time to focus on the rigor of relevant coursework and to imagine a future of post-secondary possibility and adulthood.

In Chicago, high school principals and sophomore educators can draw lessons from the city's work over the past 15 years around the freshman year and the Freshman OnTrack metric. Fifteen years ago, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research found that students' course performance and credits earned in ninth grade are more predictive of their likelihood of graduating from high school than their race, gender, socioeconomic status, and standardized test scores combined.¹ This research validated the Freshman OnTrack indicator. Students who end freshman year on-track are nearly three times more likely than their off-track peers to graduate from high school.²

After schools began receiving more regular Freshman OnTrack data reports from Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in 2008 and training from the Network for College Success on how to interpret and apply that data, the growth in the Freshman OnTrack rate accelerated.³ Since 2008, CPS's Freshman OnTrack rate has increased by 27 percentage points, and its high school graduation rate has increased by 17 points.⁴ Still, in every cohort, there have been students who were on-track as freshmen but did not graduate. The research explored in this booklet investigates new ways for educators to identify those students who need extra support.⁵

1 Allensworth & Easton (2005).

3 Roderick, Kelley-Kemple, Johnson, & Beechum (2014).

2 Allensworth & Easton (2005).

4 Nagaoka & Seeskin (2019).

This booklet sheds light on a research-based set of indicators for sophomore year, building from the lessons of the district's work around Freshman OnTrack. Using Freshman OnTrack and more nuanced definitions of freshman success, sophomore educators can better target intervention and support from the beginning of sophomore year, and using similar sophomore success indicators, they can better monitor and support students during sophomore year. The focus of these data insights also extends beyond high school graduation to include the more ambitious goals of college and career readiness.

In Chapter 1, we review the existing research on Freshman OnTrack and explore the indicator's ongoing usefulness for freshman and sophomore educators. In Chapter 2, we review how CPS has defined Sophomore OnTrack, consider the relationship between Freshman OnTrack and Sophomore OnTrack, and look at trends over time and across student groups. In Chapter 3, we explore a more nuanced set of indicators of high school graduation and college enrollment that could allow educators to better monitor and support students' progress.

On their own, indicators can't and won't change a system, but our hope is that this research will draw attention to the importance of sophomore year. Freshman OnTrack work in CPS high schools has led to significant gains in students' outcomes, and now we have the opportunity to transfer and extend that knowledge about how to monitor and support students to sophomore year so that more students graduate and have the best chance at post-secondary success.

5 The information in this booklet is derived from Seeskin, Mahaffie, & Usher (2020).



CHAPTER 1

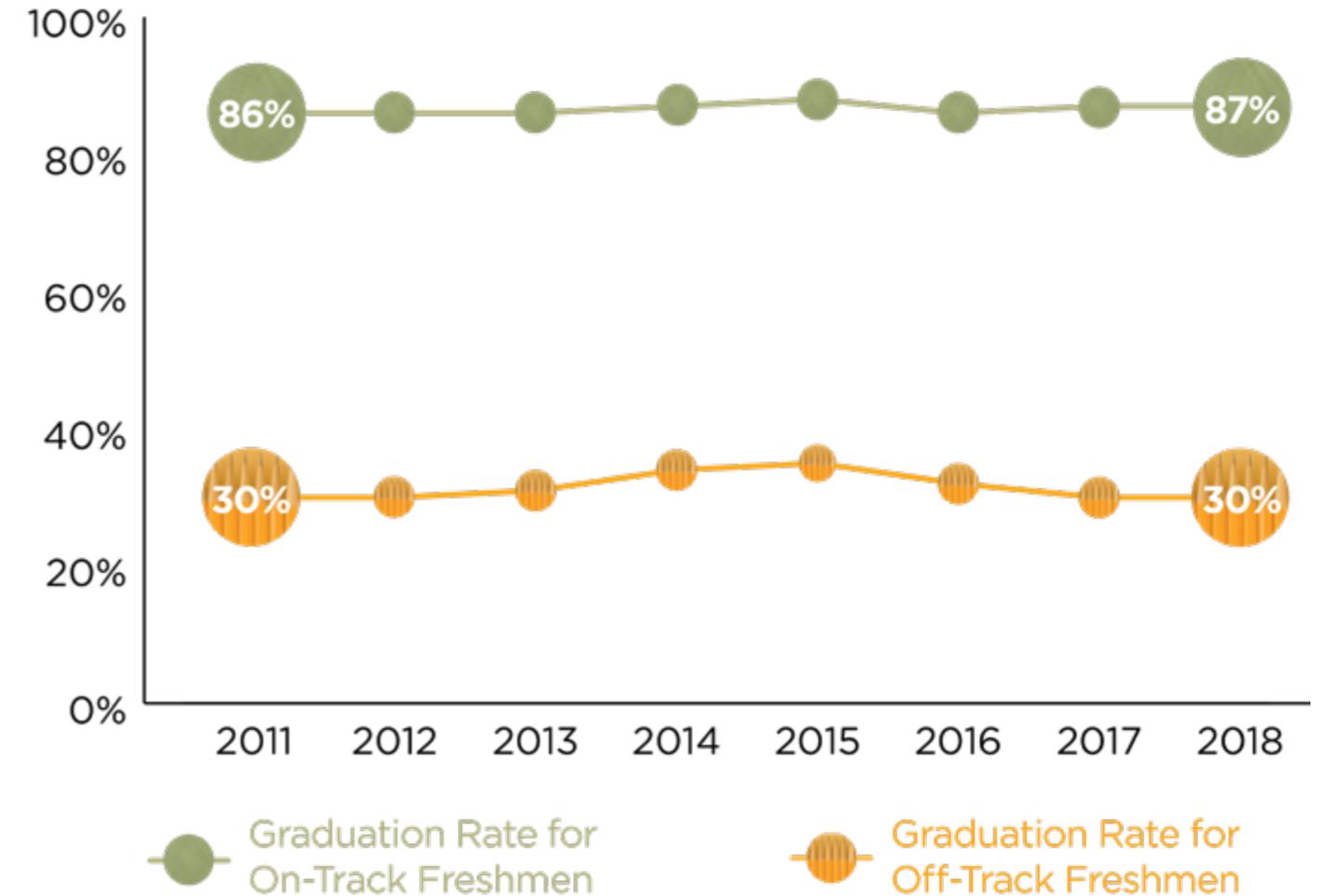
Lessons from Freshman Success



The Freshman OnTrack indicator remains highly predictive of students' high school outcomes. Although Freshman OnTrack rates have improved over time, the percentage of on-track freshmen and off-track freshmen who graduate from high school has remained virtually unchanged.

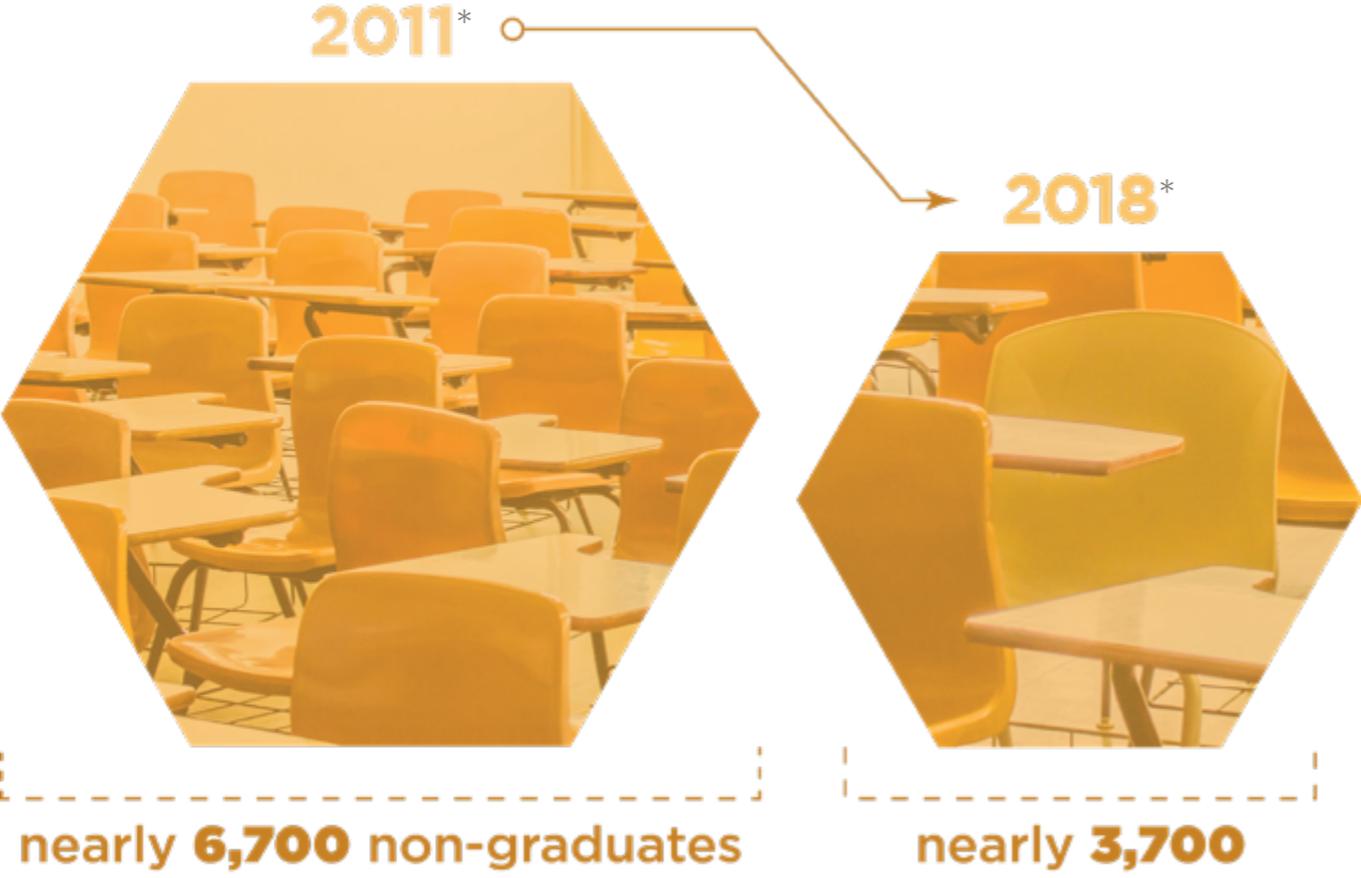
In other words, although more students are now on-track, a student's on-track status remains a strong indicator of whether they will graduate from high school.

The graduation rate for on-track freshmen has remained stable over time.

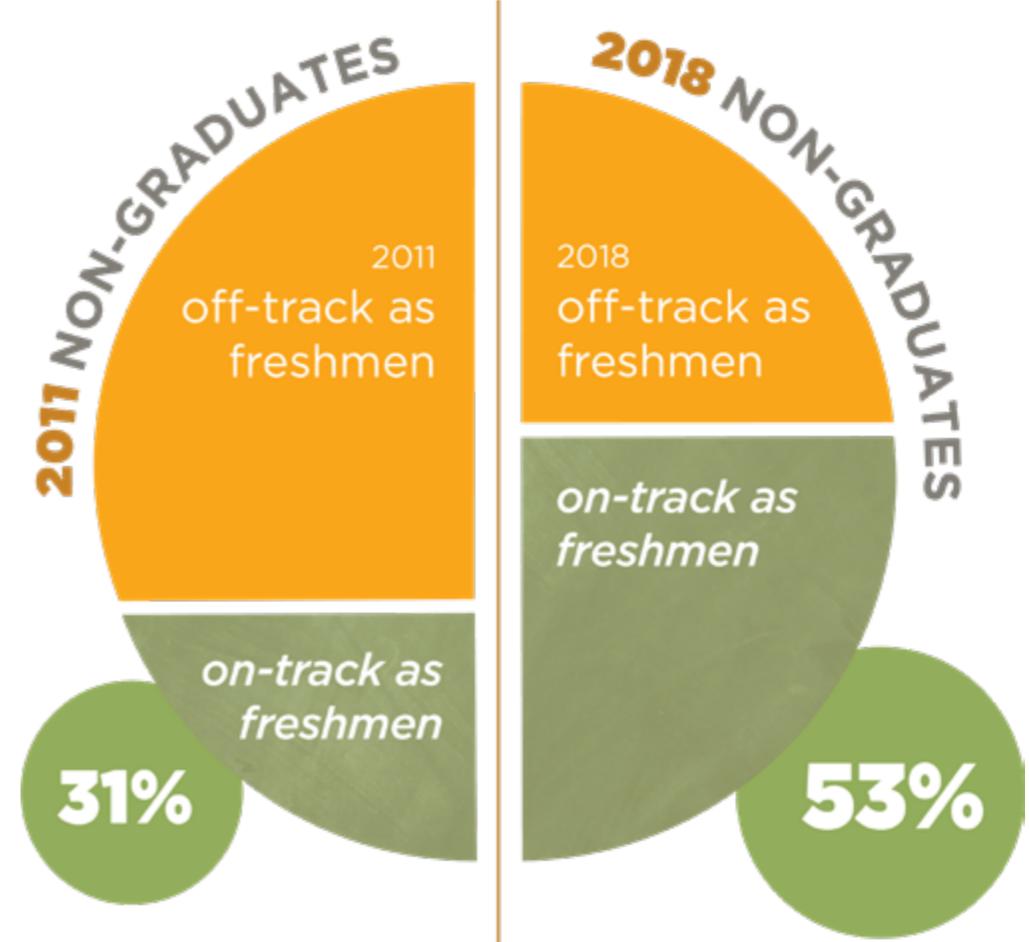


Charter school students are excluded from this analysis. Graduation status is based on whether a student graduated from CPS within four years of starting high school. Diplomas from alternative high schools are not counted towards graduation rates.

The number of CPS students who did not graduate from high school within four years declined significantly over the past decade.



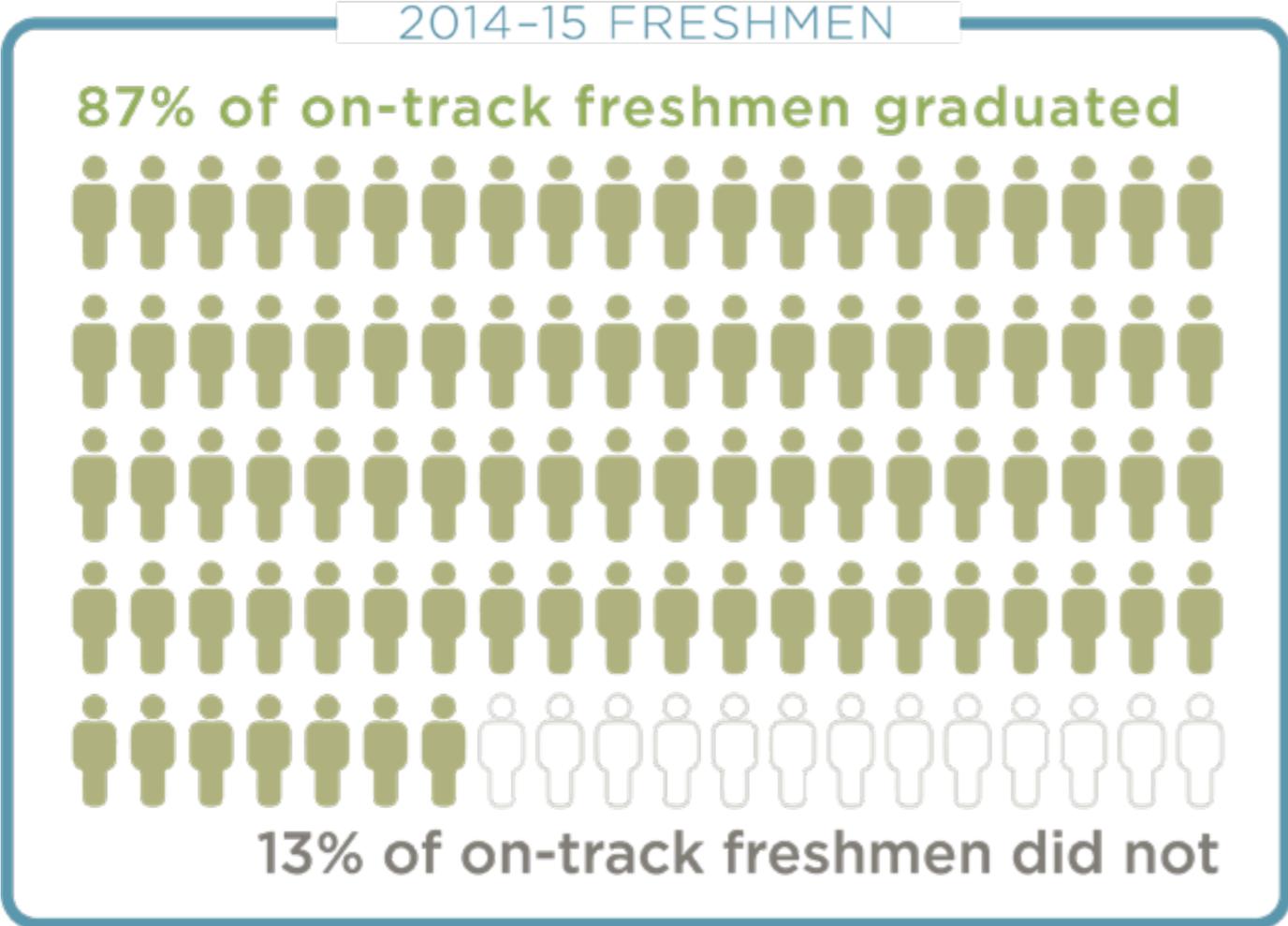
Among the remaining students who did not graduate from high school within four years, a higher proportion were on-track as freshmen.



*In CPS, the number of students in each cohort has declined over time from 20,882 students in 2011 graduation cohort to 17,962 students in 2018. In 2011, 32 percent of students did not graduate within four years of starting high school vs. 21 percent in 2018. The decline in overall enrollment accounts for some of the decline in the number of non-graduates. Charter school students are excluded from this analysis.

Non-graduates are defined here as CPS students who did not graduate within four years of starting high school. Among the 6,663 non-graduates in 2011, 2,083 were on-track as freshmen. Among the 3,720 non-graduates in 2018, 1,989 were on-track as freshmen. Charter school students are excluded from this analysis.

Not all students who finished freshman year on-track graduated from high school.



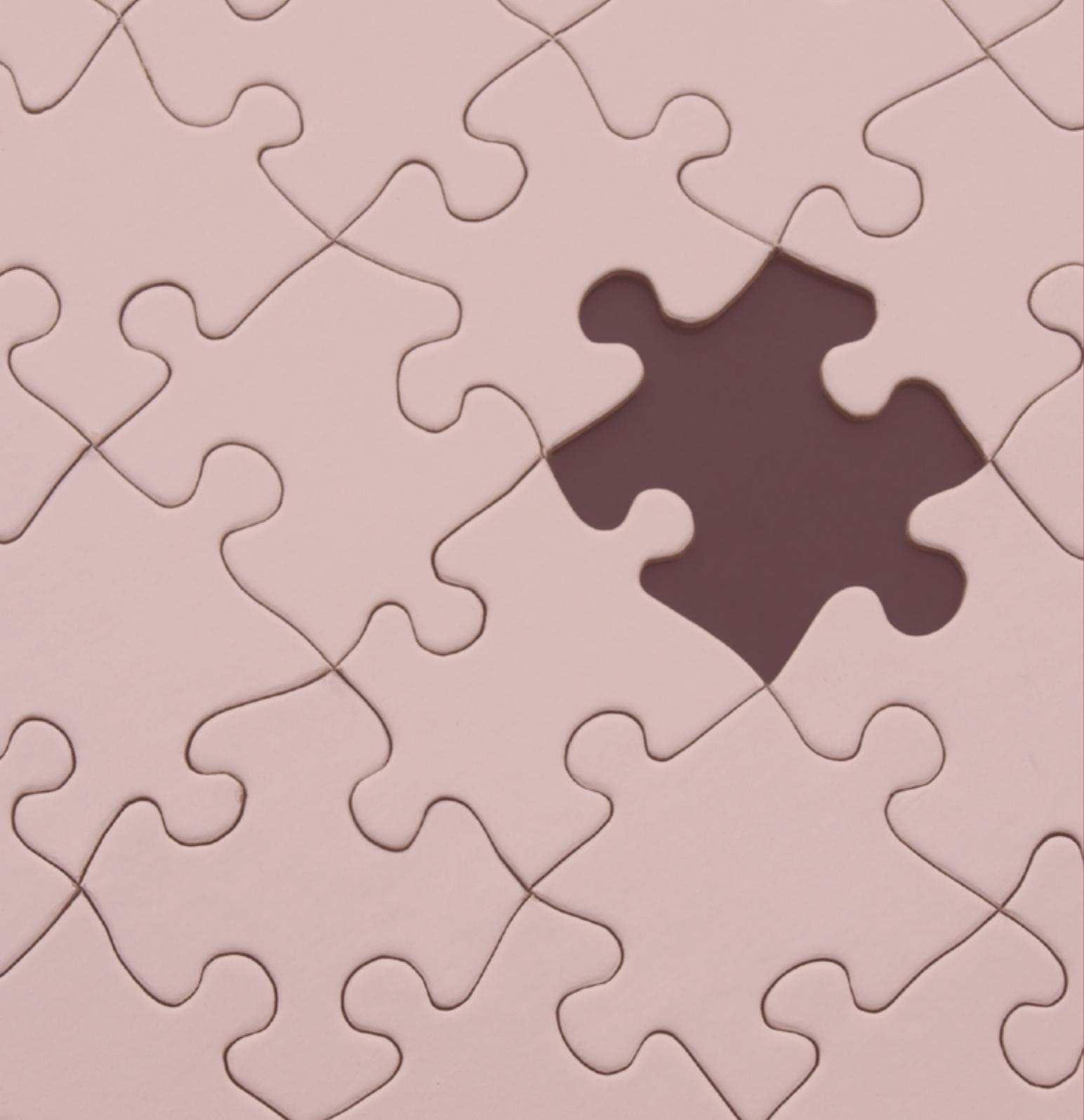
Charter school students are excluded from this analysis. Graduation status is based on whether a student graduated from CPS within four years of starting high school.



Fewer students were off-track as freshmen and more students graduated every year.

Still, in every cohort, there have been students who were on-track as freshmen but did not graduate.

This suggests an opportunity to shift some of the focus to students who are on-track at the end of freshman year, but may require supports or interventions during sophomore year to graduate from high school.



CHAPTER 2

The “Forgotten” Sophomore Year



CPS defines Sophomore OnTrack similarly to Freshman OnTrack:

To be on-track, sophomores must fail no more than one semester of a core course during sophomore year and must accumulate 11 total credits by the end of sophomore year—enough to be promoted to the eleventh grade.

In this way, the Sophomore OnTrack metric incorporates both within-year and cumulative performance.

A sophomore is considered on-track for high school graduation if:

They have no more than



core* course failure during sophomore year.

They have accumulated



credits or more by the end of sophomore year.

*English, math, science, and social studies. Failures are counted by semester, and a yearlong one-credit course has two semesters. At CPS, students need at least 11 high school credits to be promoted to the eleventh grade.

For freshmen who were on-track, sophomore year can be a time of risk.

NEARLY HALF OF OFF-TRACK SOPHOMORES



WERE ON-TRACK AS FRESHMEN

Of the 3,147 students in the 2013–2014 freshman cohort who were off-track at the end of sophomore year, 1,542 (49 percent) were on-track as freshmen. Only students who were freshmen at CPS are included in sophomore analysis. Charter students are also excluded.



Rates of course failure increased in every subject between freshman and sophomore year. For the 2016–17 freshman cohort, the course failure rate increased most in math, from 5.0 percent in freshman year to 7.5 percent in sophomore year.

Since rates of course failure increased between freshman and sophomore year, the Sophomore OnTrack rate is lower than the Freshman OnTrack rate. This suggests a need to better monitor and support sophomore students.

For freshmen who were off-track, sophomore year can be a time to recover.

AMONG OFF-TRACK FRESHMEN WHO GOT BACK ON TRACK AS SOPHOMORES
3 OUT OF 4 GRADUATED



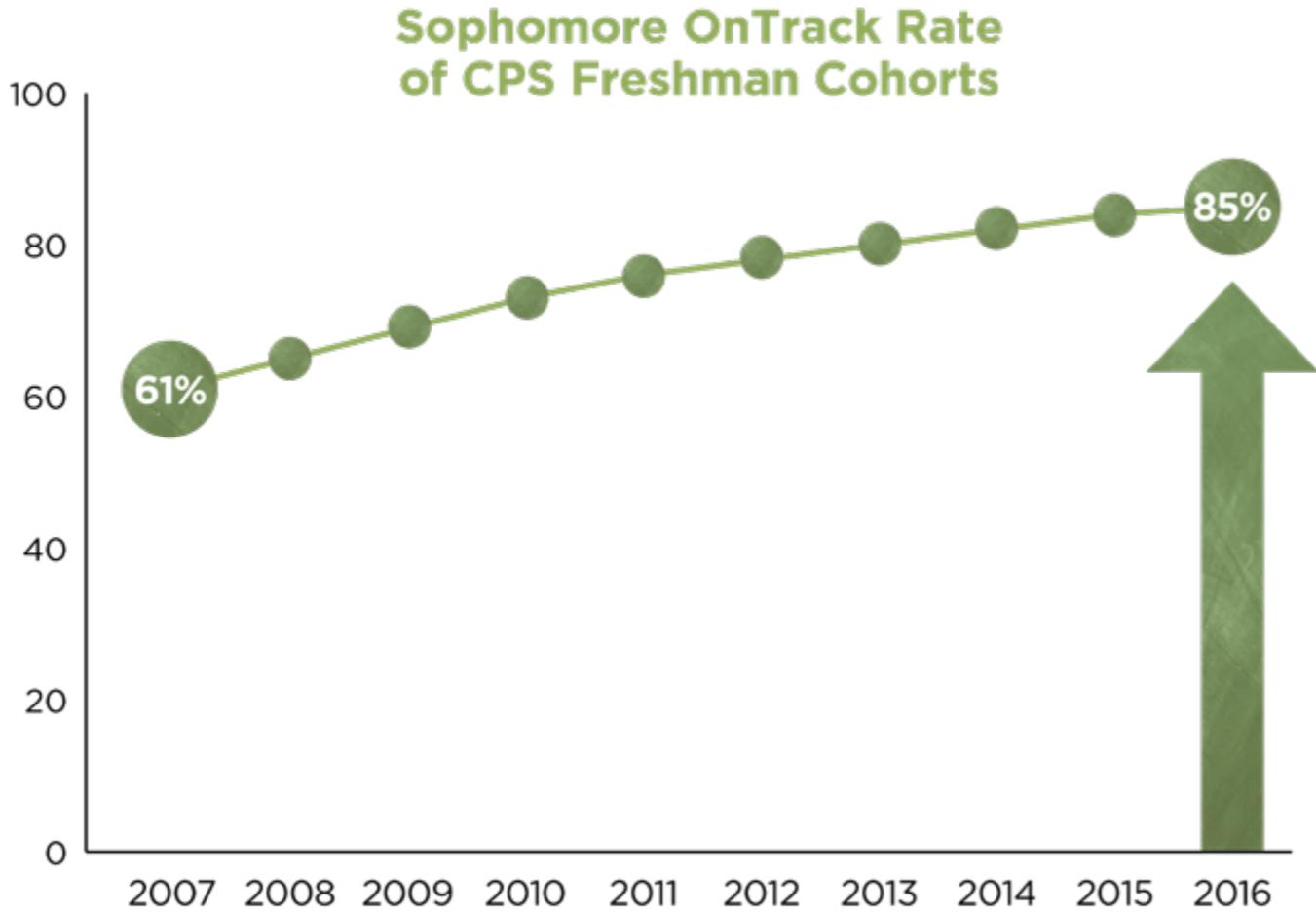
This rate includes sophomores who were first-time freshmen during the 2013–2014 academic year. Only students who were freshmen at CPS are included in sophomore analysis. Charter students are also excluded.



Students who finished freshman year off-track but got back on-track sophomore year graduated at a rate similar to the district’s overall high school graduation rate.

The fact that some students who were off-track as freshmen went on to graduate suggests that proper supports and interventions can and do change outcomes for students.

Sophomore OnTrack rates at Chicago Public Schools have increased over time.



Freshman cohorts are labelled based on the fall of students' first-time freshman year at CPS. Only students who were freshmen at CPS are included in sophomore analysis. Charter students are also excluded.



As the CPS district and schools have invested heavily in intentional work around supporting their students as freshmen, they have seen significant gains in their students' sophomore performance.

CPS has integrated Sophomore OnTrack into its internal data dashboards and regular reporting for all CPS high schools, although it is not a part of the district's accountability system. Sophomore success teams are still less prevalent than freshman success teams, but some schools have expanded freshman success strategies to sophomore year, extending student supports and adopting similar meeting structures to monitor sophomore data.

More than 20 percent of Black and Latino young men were off-track as sophomores.

Sophomore OnTrack Status at CPS by Race & Gender

DISTRICT AVERAGE



BLACK



LATINO



WHITE



ASIAN



Rates include sophomores who were first-time freshmen during the 2016–2017 academic year. Only students who were freshmen at CPS are included in sophomore analysis. Charter students are also excluded.



Not all students received the supports that they needed to be successful during sophomore year. Disparities in students’ performance during sophomore year persist despite improvements in the district’s overall Sophomore OnTrack Rate.

In particular, 21 percent of Latino young men and 22 percent of Black young men in the 2016–17 freshman cohort were off-track at the end of sophomore year, compared to an average of 15 percent for the district.



CHAPTER 3

Integrating Indicators of High School and College Success

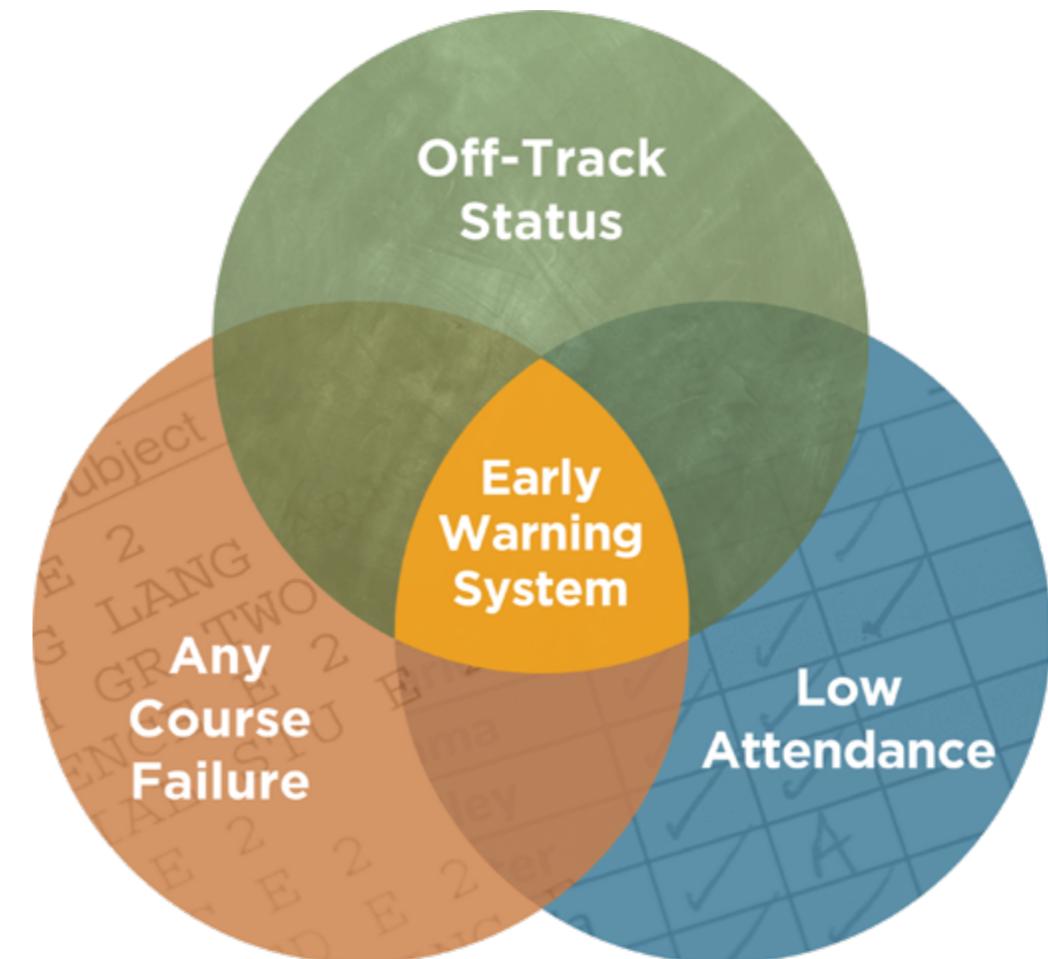


Like Freshman OnTrack, Sophomore OnTrack is a powerful but limited indicator of high school outcomes. A student's Sophomore OnTrack status reflects important information about their likelihood of graduating from high school, but may not reflect other important changes, such as low attendance and course failures.

At the **beginning** of sophomore year, nearly 70 percent of non-graduates could have been identified as needing additional support, based on their **freshman** performance, using **three warning indicators**.

By the **end** of sophomore year, an even larger proportion of non-graduates could have been identified, based on their **sophomore** performance, using the same **three warning indicators**.

Sophomore educators can identify students who need extra support using three key early warning indicators.



Even if a student fails just one semester of any course, it is considered a course failure. Low attendance is here defined as an attendance rate below 85 percent.



Off-track status, course failures, and attendance are powerful warning indicators for high school graduation, but GPA is the most powerful indicator of college access and enrollment.

By using a system that combines all of these key predictive indicators—a GPA threshold of 3.0, in addition to the three warning indicators for high school graduation—sophomore educators could further differentiate among their students to better identify potential challenges, and more effectively target supports.

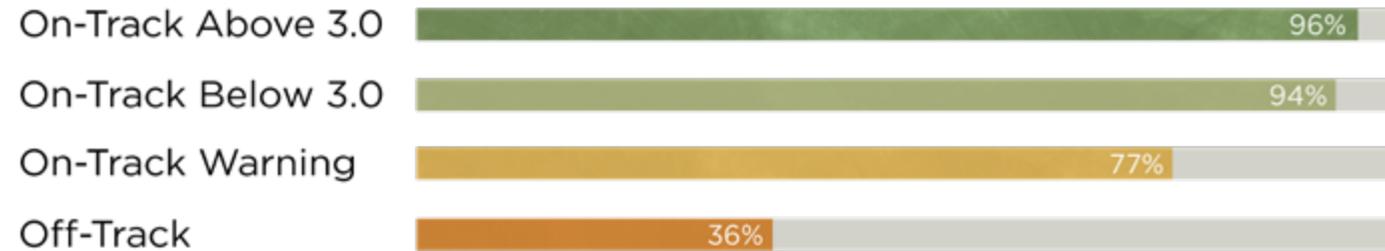
By monitoring GPA, course failures, and attendance, educators can identify additional students who need support.

Success Status	GPA	Course Failures	Attendance
On-Track Above 3.0	≥ 3.0 GPA	no Fs	$\geq 85\%$ attendance
On-Track Below 3.0	< 3.0 GPA	no Fs	$\geq 85\%$ attendance
On-Track Warning	at least one F or $< 85\%$ attendance		
Off-Track			

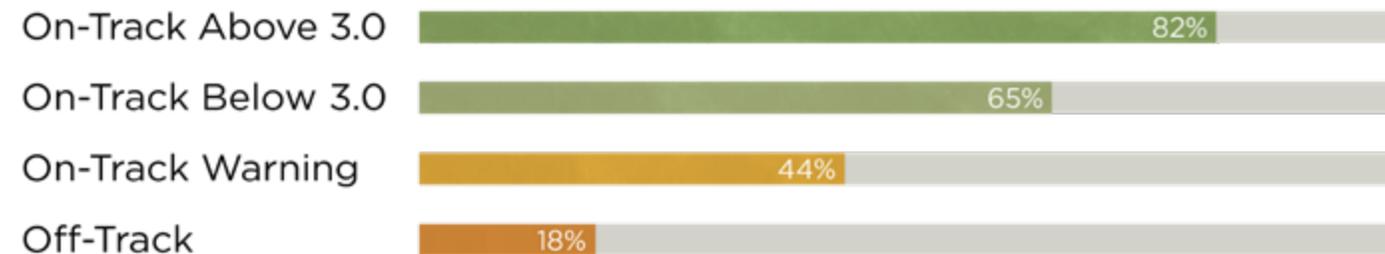
These success status groups can be applied at the beginning of sophomore year, using freshman year performance data, and throughout sophomore year, using sophomore year performance data.

Sophomores in the On-Track Warning group were less likely than other on-track students to graduate and to enroll in college.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE by sophomore success status



IMMEDIATE COLLEGE ENROLLMENT RATE by sophomore success status



The rates depicted are for students who were first-time freshmen during the 2013-2014 academic year. GPA is not cumulative. Only students who were freshmen at CPS are included in sophomore analysis. Charter students are also excluded.



Earning a GPA above 3.0 during sophomore year is an important indicator of students' likelihood of enrolling in college. While sophomores in the On-Track Below 3.0 group graduated from high school at a high rate, they enrolled in college at a lower rate than their peers with at least a 3.0 GPA as sophomores.

The high rate of college enrollment for the On-Track Above 3.0 students highlights the importance of earning a GPA above 3.0 and maintaining a high attendance rate during both freshman and sophomore year.

Freshman *and* sophomore success matter for high school graduation.

93%

of students who finished freshman *and* sophomore year on-track graduated

vs.

43%

of students who were on-track freshman year but fell off-track sophomore year graduated

The rates depicted include students who were first-time freshmen during the 2013–2014 academic year. Only students who were freshmen at CPS are included in sophomore analysis. Charter students are also excluded. Graduation status is based on whether a student graduated from CPS within four years of starting high school.

Students with a 3.0+ GPA freshman *and* sophomore year were most likely to immediately enroll in a 4-year college.

2/3

of students who finished freshman *and* sophomore year with above a 3.0

immediately enrolled in a 4-year college

vs.

1/3

of students who finished freshman year with above a 3.0 but *not* sophomore year

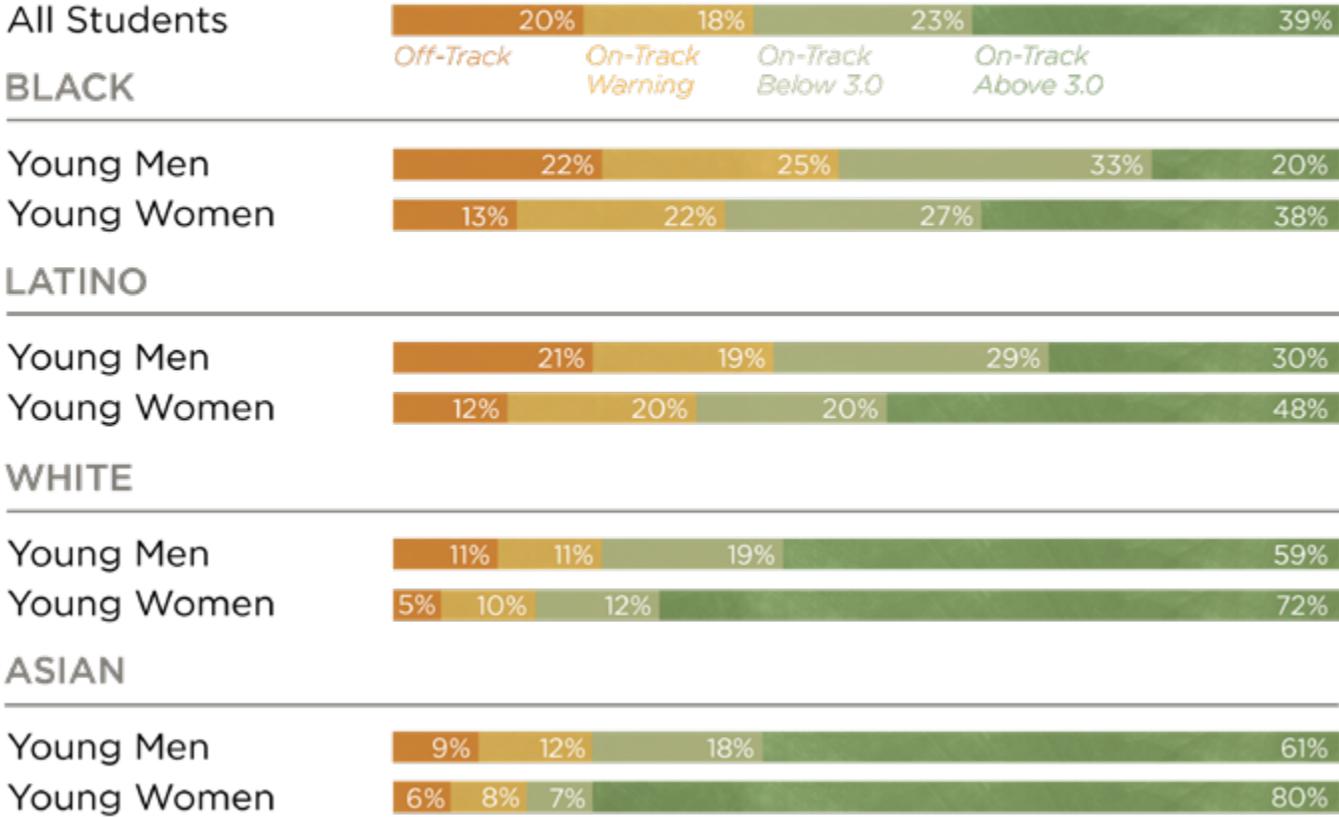
immediately enrolled in a 4-year college

The rates depicted include students who were first-time freshmen during the 2013–2014 academic year. Only students who were freshmen at CPS are included in sophomore analysis. Charter students are also excluded.

Black and Latino young men were less likely than their peers to be on-track with above a 3.0 GPA by the end of their sophomore year.

Sophomore Success Status at CPS by Race & Gender

DISTRICT AVERAGE



Rates include sophomores who were first-time freshmen during the 2016–2017 academic year. GPA is not cumulative. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Only students who were freshmen at CPS are included in sophomore analysis. Charter students are also excluded.



If Black and Latino young men aren't getting the supports that they need to be successful during the first two years of high school, they will not have access to as broad a range of post-secondary opportunities as their peers.

A 3.0 GPA has critical implications for students' access to selective and highly-selective colleges and other post-secondary pathways. Fewer than one-third of Black young men and Latino young men earned above a 3.0 GPA during their sophomore year, highlighting that not all students are receiving the supports that they need to be successful during sophomore year.

Key Takeaways



1. Freshman year remains the most critical year in students' educational trajectories. Even with rising Freshman OnTrack rates, Freshman OnTrack remains predictive of high school graduation.
2. For students who were off-track during freshman year, sophomore year can be an opportunity to recover. For some students who were on-track during freshman year, sophomore year can be a time of significant risk.
3. Sophomore year presents educators with an additional opportunity to identify and intervene with students who need more support. By monitoring low attendance rates and all course failures, educators can provide support to a wider group of students in danger of not graduating or enrolling in college.

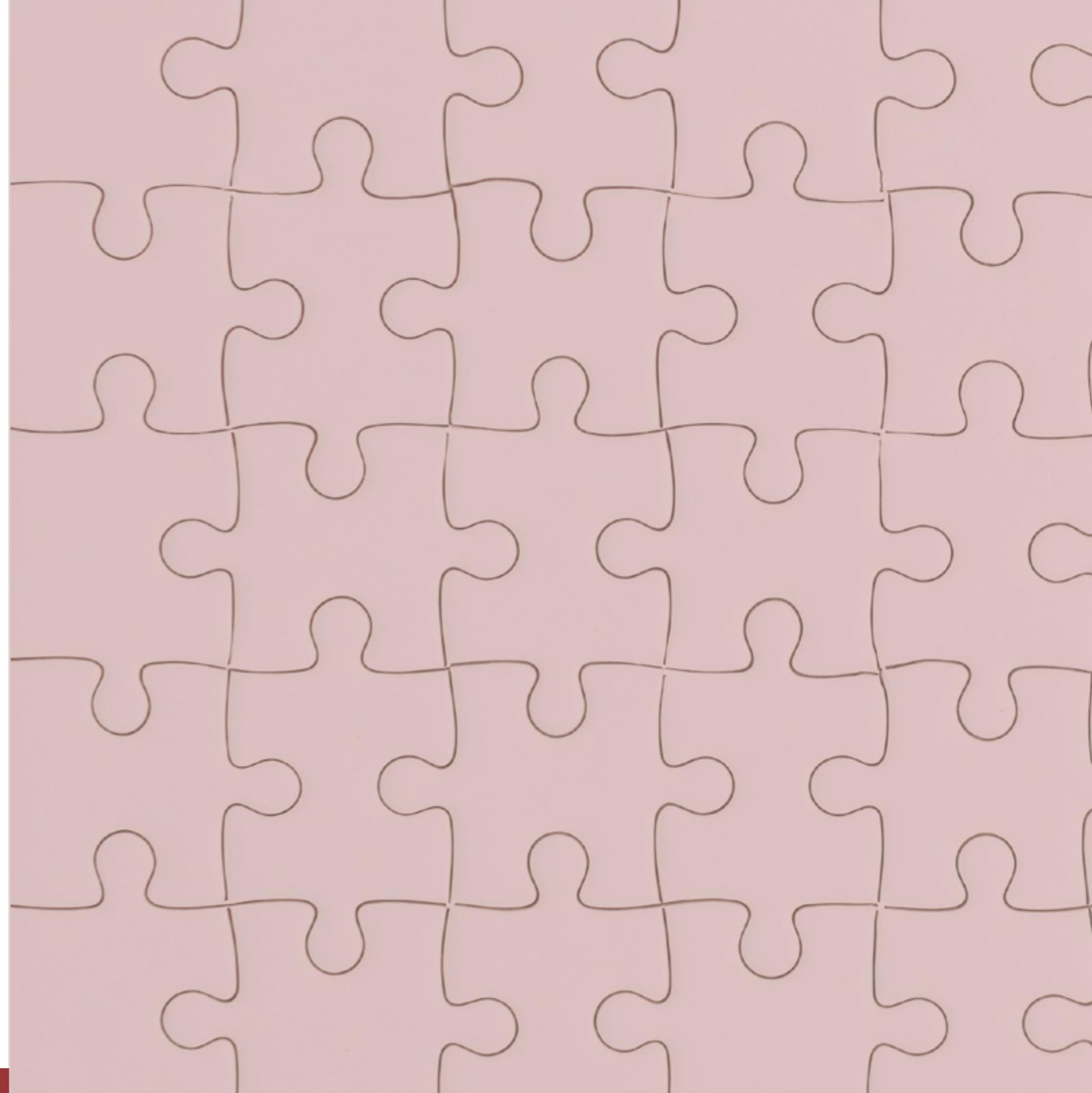
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About the To&Through Project

In collaboration with educators, policymakers, and communities, the To&Through Project aims to significantly increase high school and post-secondary completion for low-income students of color in Chicago and beyond by providing stakeholders with research-based *data* on students' educational experiences and facilitating *dialogue* on its implications for adult practice. The To&Through Project is a part of the University of Chicago's Urban Education Institute and the School of Social Service Administration.

The To&Through Online Tool makes data on key milestones for students' high school and college success available to the public. To access, please visit toandthrough.uchicago.edu/data.

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About the UChicago Consortium

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) conducts research of high technical quality that can inform and assess policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners as we support the search for solutions to the problems of school reform. The UChicago Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action and improvement of practice, but does not argue for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school reform by identifying what matters for student success and school improvement, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.

