

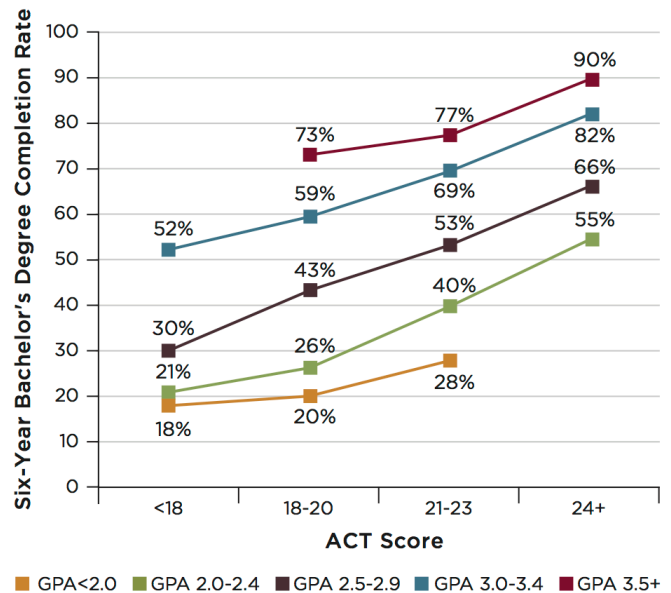
What does UChicago Consortium research say about why grades matter?

UChicago Consortium research has shown that a student's Grade Point Average (GPA) is a better predictor of college success than his or her test scores. Students' eighth-grade GPA and attendance are the best available predictors of whether or not they will be on-track during their freshman year. Moreover, if students want to have even a modest chance of being college-ready by the time they graduate from high school, they need to earn Bs or better in middle school. In high school, students who graduate with a GPA of 3.0 or higher and then enroll directly in a four-year college have a 50 percent or better probability of graduating with a bachelor's degree. While ACT and SAT scores are important for college access, grades are the strongest indicator of college readiness and are more predictive of college graduation than any test score.

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Grades are so important because they capture many of the noncognitive aspects of students' work habits that test scores miss, such as executive functioning, academic perseverance, and growth mindset. There are significant differences in the college graduation rates of students with the same test scores but different high school GPAs: 2006 CPS college enrollees with a GPA of less than 2.0 and an ACT score of 18-20 graduated from college at a rate of 20 percent, while students with the same ACT score but a GPA of 3.5 or higher graduated at a rate of 73 percent.

Six-Year Bachelor's Degree Completion Rates Among 2006 CPS Four-Year College Enrollees, by High School GPA and ACT Score



Note: Data points representing fewer than 100 students are not shown.

What strategies have some high schools used to improve grades?

Carefully tracking attendance

UChicago Consortium research shows that drops in attendance between eighth and ninth grade account for 72 percent of the decline in freshman English grades and 78 percent of the decline in math grades, so attendance is a good place for schools to start when thinking about how to improve grades. Some schools carefully track daily attendance and respond quickly to address a student's attendance issues before they become the norm. These schools can often prevent student absences from becoming chronic and seriously affecting a student's GPA.

Analyzing GPA data for individuals and student subgroups

Schools that collect data on grades look at everything from an individual student's GPA, to the GPAs of different subgroups of students, to the GPA of an entire class of students. In order to ensure that groups of students aren't falling behind, some schools sort freshman by their eighth-grade GPA and attendance. For example, how are students who achieved a GPA of 3.5 or higher in eighth grade doing in first quarter of freshmen year?

Leading conversations with teachers about what grades mean

Some schools have grade-level or school-wide conversations about what grades mean and how to clearly communicate to students how their grades are calculated. When students don't turn in assignments, many schools provide make-up opportunities instead of giving students zeros, since zeros can artificially drag down grades. Other schools have moved toward a practice of standards-based or criterion-referenced grading, in order to better communicate to students what skills they are expected to learn in any given course. At these schools, students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate that they have mastered a skill or course objective.

Communicating to students early on about the importance of grades and their connection to college success

Teachers and counselors at some schools help students closely track GPAs from the beginning of freshman year and celebrate students with GPA growth. When adults in the building have supportive relationships with students, they are able to motivate students and to intervene when grades fall.

References

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