

What does UChicago Consortium research say about why Freshman On-Track matters?

Research from UChicago Consortium shows that freshman year is a make-it-or-break-it year for high school students. Course performance in the freshman year of high school is the most predictive indicator of whether a student will drop out of high school—more predictive than race, ethnicity, poverty level, and prior test scores combined.

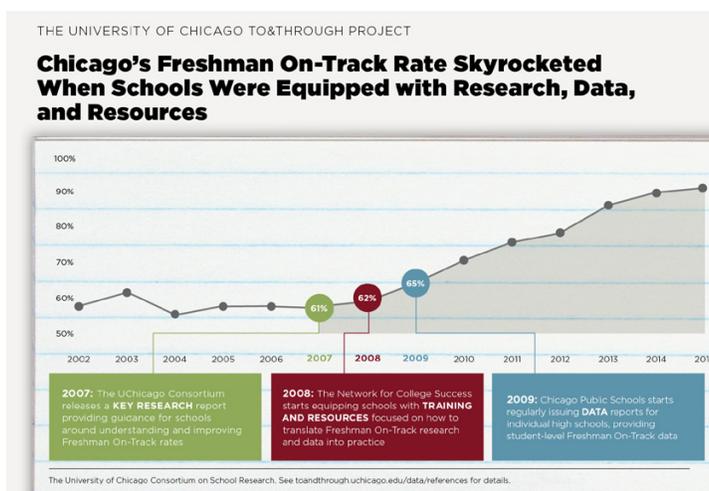
A student is considered “on-track” for high school graduation if he or she has enough credits to be promoted to the tenth grade at the end of freshman year (at least five full-year course credits; 10 semester credits) and has no more than one semester F in a core course (English, math, science, or social science). On-track freshmen are four times more likely to graduate from high school than their peers who are off-track.

Most students fail courses because they aren't attending class, aren't studying, or aren't turning in their homework, rather than lacking academic capacity.

After the Consortium published a report identifying strategies for improving on-track rates, educators and experts across Chicago started working on solutions. In 2009, CPS began providing every public high school with regular Freshman On-Track data reports. That same year, the Network for College Success began training school leaders on how to interpret and apply Freshman On-Track data.

After remaining in the mid-50s for years, the percentage of CPS ninth-graders completing the freshman year on-track skyrocketed to 84 percent by 2014. Notably, improvements occurred across all racial/ethnic groups, genders, and incoming achievement levels. More importantly, increases in the Freshman On-Track rates in CPS high schools closely tracked with those schools' graduation rates, showing a strong relationship between increasing on-track rates and improved outcomes three years later at graduation. CPS changed from a district where students were as likely to drop out as graduate, to a district where students are twice as likely to graduate as drop out.

Academic indicators also improved along with the Freshman On-Track rate; grades increased at all ends of the achievement spectrum. Moreover, even though some educators and policymakers expressed concern that ACT scores would decline due to weaker performing students taking the test, the average score rose between 2006 and 2015 from 17.6 to 18.9.



What strategies are some high schools using to improve Freshman On-Track rates?

Data-sharing between middle and high schools as a tool to identify those students who are at risk of falling off track in high school

Eighth-grade attendance and GPA data can be used to indicate which students are at risk of falling off track in high school. Research indicates that chronically-absent middle school students (who miss 10 percent or more of school or roughly 18 days) or those with Ds or Fs are very likely to be off-track in ninth grade and drop out without significant interventions and supports. Transition years—when there is a change in the physical environment and level of expected responsibility—are particularly vulnerable times for students. Though many other students will not demonstrate any red flags until the transition occurs, students with low attendance and grades in middle school should be flagged for early intervention before entering high school.

Leveraging Freshman On-Track data to monitor and support students who are in danger of falling off track

Some school leaders and teachers carefully monitor students of all achievement levels and respond to changes in course performance or attendance. Credit recovery is leveraged for students who have failed any courses, not just those who have failed three or more; even one failure makes a student at risk of dropping out.

Teaming high school teachers by grade instead of by subject

Many teachers already team and collaborate by subject area. A valuable tool to consider for increasing on-track rates is teaming by grade levels, particularly during the make-it-or-break-it freshman year. This team structure allows teachers to monitor the same students, comparing course performance in different subjects and sharing successful intervention strategies for particular students.

Building stronger, more supportive relationships between adults and students

Freshman year is a critical transition year in which students may receive less monitoring, support, and assistance because they are expected to become more independent; this can lead to negative student outcomes. Strong supports for students during the freshman year may act as “protective factors” that help students persevere in their schoolwork throughout high school, earn better grades, and graduate on time. Relationships are especially important to helping students persist through high school: grades and attendance are better in schools where students trust their teachers to help them and where students see their coursework as meaningful for their future.

References

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