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Freshman Year Course Performance and Absenteeism Predict High School Graduation Rates for Students with Disabilities

Washington, D.C. – Freshman year course performance—more than background characteristics such as race, gender, socioeconomic status or prior achievement—predict which students with disabilities are most at risk for dropping out of high school, according to a new report from the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) at the University of Chicago and the National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research.

The report, *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools: A Focus on Students with Disabilities*, found that absences, course failures, course credits and GPA all can be used to accurately predict whether ninth-graders with disabilities will graduate from high school.

“These predictive warning signs help schools target resources before it’s too late,” said Elaine Allensworth, PhD, Interim Co-executive Director of CCSR and a co-author of the report. “We found that students with disabilities exhibit the same warning signs that show up in the general education population.”

Identifying these early warning indicators is especially crucial for students with disabilities, who drop out of high school at alarming rates. Only 50 percent of CPS students with disabilities graduate in five years, compared with 70 percent of CPS students without disabilities. The national graduation rate of students with disabilities hovers around 57 percent, according to the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs.

The new report builds on the findings of a 2007 CCSR report, *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools*, which showed that students who accumulate at least five semester-long credits and fail no more than one core course during their freshman year were nearly four times as likely to graduate. CCSR researchers incorporated those measures into an on-track indicator, adopted by CPS and other urban districts as part of their accountability systems, which proved more helpful in predicting graduation rates than either background characteristics or previous achievement. The National High School Center has used this and other high-yield indicators from the report to develop an *Early Warning System Tool* for districts and individual high schools to use in identifying ninth-graders who face a higher risk of dropping out.

The report demonstrates that this on-track indicator can be applied to the special education population as well. Students with disabilities who are “on-track” are three- to six-times more likely to graduate than their off-track counterparts, according to the report.



“While high school graduation rates for students with disabilities have been improving in the United States, their graduation rate remains disproportionately lower than that of the general education population. Many special education students continue to perform below their non-disabled peers, and the question becomes what must we do differently earlier on to support students with disabilities so that more students fail fewer courses and earn a higher overall GPA,” said Joseph R. Harris, Ph.D., Director of the National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research.

Most of the analyses in the report concern students who were first-time freshmen in 2004. Researchers separately analyzed five groups of students with different types of special needs: students with learning disabilities, mild cognitive disabilities, emotional disturbances, speech/language disabilities and physical/sensory disabilities. In addition, researchers considered the course performance and academic behaviors of students who do *not* receive special education services but enter high school two or more years below grade level.

Other key findings from the report:

- Students with emotional disturbances have the lowest academic performance of any category of students receiving special education services. Students in the study with emotional disturbances missed an average of 19 days per semester and failed nearly one-third of their freshman year courses. Almost none had a GPA higher than a D+. Less than one-quarter graduated within five years.
- The freshman year course performance of students who enter high school two or more years below grade level but do not receive special education services was actually weaker than that of students *with* identified learning disabilities.
- Reported study habits were *not* an important factor in explaining the weaker course performance of students with disabilities and students who enter high school two or more years below grade level. In fact, these students reported similar study habits as students without identified disabilities but do not seem to benefit as much from studying.
- A higher percentage of students with physical/sensory disability were on-track to graduate than students with no identified disability.

The full report is available on the National High School Center’s [Web site](#) and the Consortium on Chicago School Research’s [Web site](#).

About the Consortium on Chicago School Research

The Consortium on Chicago School Research (<http://ccsr.uchicago.edu>) aims to conduct research of high technical quality that can inform and influence policy and practice in Chicago and nationwide. Founded in 1990, the Consortium is located at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute.

About the National High School Center

The National High School Center (www.betterhighschools.org), established in 2005, serves as a central source of expertise on high school-related issues for the Regional Comprehensive Centers, a national network developed by the U.S. Department of Education. The National High School Center is housed at the American Institutes for Research (www.air.org), located in Washington, D.C. Subcontractors include Learning Point Associates, MDRC, the National Center for Educational Accountability, and WestEd.