Abstract for Paper 2

Title: The On-Track Indicator as a Focus for Student Support in High School

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Background / Context:
Ten years ago, addressing high school dropout rates seemed like an intractable problem. Research had shown that dropping out of school was a gradual process that resulted from a large array of factors throughout students’ time in school. It left the problem almost unmanageable for schools--how could a high school monitor and address so many of these factors that are external to schools, many of which affect students well before they enter ninth grade? Those were the days before there was wide access to student-level data systems. Now that we can track students’ progress through school, we can see that there are early warning indicators that are available and highly predictive when students begin high school, indicators that are readily available to high school practitioners. Research around the ninth grade on-track indicator, in particular, has helped focus high school efforts around improving graduation and dropout rates. Chicago has been in the forefront of the country in its use of ninth grade indicators of dropout. Chicago school administrators, central office personnel, and external partners have developed a number of mechanisms to use ninth grade indicators to stimulate school improvement by: 1) focusing conversations and efforts on actionable problems; 2) identifying students for intervention; and 3) using indicator patterns to address low performance in a strategic way. The strategies they have developed with the data tools have provided a systematic focus to their efforts, which appears to be paying off in substantially improved ninth grade achievement.

Purpose / Objective / Research Question / Focus of Study:
This paper discusses the process through which researchers at the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research worked with practitioners in the Chicago Public Schools on the issue of high school graduation/dropout, including the development and use of the on-track and other early warning indicators. It provides real-world examples of the ways that the research has been used in the district. It has implications for researchers interested in having sustained partnerships with practitioners, showing how sustained engagement on a difficult problem led to new ways of conceptualizing and addressing the problem.

Setting and Population:
The setting for the papers in this symposium is the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). CPS is the third-largest U.S. district, serving 404,151 students in 675 schools. The student population is about 41.6% African-American, 44.1% Latino, 8.8% White, and 3.4% Asian. Approximately
85% of students are eligible for free/reduced priced lunches. The research presented is based on the population of Chicago high schools and students entering ninth grade from 2000 to 2009. It also draws on experiences working with the CPS central office and with particular schools during the 2008-09 school year and later years.

**Findings / Results:**
The development and use of the on-track indicator emerged from an iterative process between researchers and practitioners who built on each others’ work over time. Researchers started out trying to give schools information about what was happening in the district around graduation rates and high school performance. This led to attention to wide differences across schools in graduation rates, and attention to high rates of course failure in the ninth grade year. As schools looked for information about whether students were passing their ninth grade classes, researchers developed the on-track indicator to provide feedback to middle schools on how their eighth grade graduates performed when they moved on to high school. Attention to on-track rates led researchers to identify on-track as a strong predictor of eventual graduation. The district picked up the indicator for its high school accountability system, looking for some measure of high school performance in the early years of high school. Researchers recognized the need for rigorous validation of the indicator, which led them to do research that showed the on-track indicator was predictive across all subgroups. Furthermore, the research showed that the indicator eclipsed all other information about students, including information that school practitioners and researchers generally consider to be strongly associated with graduation. This led to a wide recognition of the key importance of ninth grade on-track rates, but provided little information about how to improve them. As schools looked for ways to address low on-track rates, researchers examined whether other indicators could be used for early warning that students would be off-track and produced charts to help schools evaluate students’ risk of eventual graduation and potential benefits from intervention. The central office then developed a series of real-time data reports based on that research to help schools track students for early intervention, and hired people to help schools develop means of using those data reports. CCSR researchers also worked with a network of schools to design reports that would allow schools to assess their strategies and efforts over time.

There are three general ways that schools in Chicago now use the indicators to help more students to make progress towards graduation. First, research around the indicators is used to focus conversations and effort among staff, and with students and parents, on actionable problems. By showing that students were at risk based on their grades and attendance, the on-track research helped move attention away from students with obvious challenges (e.g., students returning from incarceration or failing half of their classes) to all students who were at risk based on their course performance. It also helps keep conversations focused on how students are performing, and what school staff and parents could do to support better performance, rather than factors which are not under the control of the school. Second, schools use the indicators to identify students for intervention. While teachers can monitor and intervene with students who
are withdrawing without centralized data systems and monitoring reports, schools don’t have to rely on the efforts of individual teachers if they set up systems based on student-level data. Easy-to-interpret data reports that flag students who are showing signs of failure and withdrawal, or who need to recover credits, make it easy to see who needs help. By using these reports, school staff can provide support to students before it is too late to get them back on track. The reports also make it easier for staff to collaborate around interventions and support for particular students. Finally, staff can examine patterns in the indicators to address low student performance in a strategic way, based on the particular problems observed in their school. This allows them to work on strategies that could benefit groups of students, rather than focusing their efforts on one student at a time.

Efforts to improve ninth grade performance seem to have paid off. After hovering around 57-59 percent for a number of years, on-track rates increased to 64 percent after the district introduced the student intervention reports, and continued to increase over the next two years up to 73 percent in 2011. Without a systematic investigation, examining changes in student outcomes, together with changes in practice around data, we cannot know for sure that the improvements resulted because of data use. There was a dramatic change in student performance that occurred at the same time that schools started getting individualized data about their students. These changes were larger than the change that accompanied the entrance of the metric into the district accountability system, and were sustained over a greater length of time. Furthermore, they were not a result of students entering high school with stronger academic performance. The trends are promising, but future research should rigorously examine the degree to which data use practices at high schools are associated with improvements in student performance.

**Conclusions:**

Low rates of high school graduation have been a difficult problem for many years. Chicago’s efforts around using early warning indicators hold promise for leading many more students to make progress towards obtaining a diploma. The data tools, together with clear research evidence on why the indicators matter, provide a way to work on the issue of dropout that makes sense to school practitioners and that can be incorporated into their daily work.