

For Immediate Release:
Thursday, June 9, 2016

CONTACT
Bronwyn McDaniel
bmcdaniel@uchicago.edu
(773)-834-0168

New Consortium Reports Explore Improvements in High School Graduation and Degree Attainment Rates for Chicago Public Schools

High School Graduation Rates through Two Decades of District Change: The Influence of Policies, Data Records, and Demographic Shifts

Sixteen years ago, high school students in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) were almost as likely to drop out as they were to graduate; today they are three times as likely to graduate as drop out. What is driving this remarkable increase? This new research report from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) addresses the extent to which various factors could account for the increase in graduation rates, including changes in student performance in elementary and high school, changes in the characteristics of students attending CPS high schools, and increasing numbers of charter and selective enrollment high schools that serve Chicago students.

The study uses age cohorts—grouping CPS ninth-graders by the year they turned 14 and following them until they turn 19. This allows the cohorts to be comparable over time, regardless of changes in grade promotion criteria. It finds graduation rates have increased by 22 percentage points over the last 16 years, from 52.4 percent among students who turned 19 in 1998, to 74.8 percent in 2014, with the most rapid increase occurring in the last six years. Freshman on-track rates have also risen during the same period, from 48 percent among students who were 19 years old in 1998 to 81 percent for students who will turn 19 in 2017, suggesting graduation rates will continue to rise.

While changes in student demographics and achievement in middle school account for some of the increase in graduation rates, improvements in student performance in high school—compared to similar students who started high school in the past—account for most of the changes in recent years; students are passing more classes and earning more credits in ninth grade than students entering high school with similar skills and backgrounds in the past. Not only are more students graduating, but they are leaving high school with higher achievement than graduates in prior years.

“There is a common assumption that graduation rate increases must come at the expense of student achievement—that students are simply being passed through to graduation,” said Elaine Allensworth, Lewis-Sebring Director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research and the lead author of the study. “This study suggests the opposite is happening, that increases in student achievement are driving the upward trend in the CPS high school graduation rate. We find ninth-grade attendance is up and students are earning more credits in ninth grade. This is translating in to more students taking the ACT, and, at the same time, average ACT scores have increased by almost two points from 16.7 to 18.6.”

The report also finds the largest increases in graduation rates have occurred at non-selective enrollment and non-charter high schools, including neighborhood schools, career and military academies, and schools with selective programs. In addition, students of all races, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds are graduating at higher rates, yet gaps in graduation rates by race/ethnicity have increased over time. However, gaps in graduation rates by gender, neighborhood poverty, and learning disability status have all declined.

The Educational Attainment of Chicago Public School Students 2015: A Focus on Four-Year College Degrees

An estimated 18 percent of ninth-graders in Chicago Public Schools will earn a four-year college degree within 10 years of starting high school, according to this 2015 update of the UChicago Consortium’s Bachelor’s Degree Attainment Index (Bachelor’s DAI). In 2014, this number was 17 percent. The Bachelor’s Degree Attainment Index is an estimate of the percentage of CPS students who graduate high school, and earn a bachelor’s degree within six years of beginning college, including students who either delay college entry or first enroll in a two-year college. The Direct Bachelor’s Degree Attainment Index estimates that 16 percent of students take a more straightforward path by graduating high school, immediately enrolling in college, and earning a bachelor’s degree within six years of starting college. This number has doubled since UChicago Consortium first calculated it in 2006.

The most comparable national data suggest that the Direct Bachelor’s Degree Attainment Index increased from 18 percent in 2013 to 22 percent in 2015 for public high school students across the country.

The study also finds CPS’ high school graduation and college enrollment rates have risen significantly since 2006. Grouping students by freshman cohorts, which is more useful to practitioners who organize students by year in school rather than age, the study finds CPS’s 2015 high school graduation rate is 74 percent, an increase of 17 percentage points since 2006. The

district's four-year college enrollment rate for 2014 is 42 percent, two percentage points lower than the national rate, and half of CPS graduates who enroll in four-year colleges will graduate in six years. The brief also compares high school graduation and college enrollment rates for selective enrollment, charter, and all other schools (excluding alternative and special education schools) and finds high school graduation rates for non-charter and non-selective enrollments schools are now similar to that of charter schools, although charter schools' college enrollment rates continue to exceed those of other school types.

"It is encouraging to see improvement on all three degree attainment milestones – high school graduation, college enrollment, and college graduation," said Jenny Nagaoka, Deputy Director of UChicago Consortium and lead author on the study. "We know, though, that efforts to improve educational attainment cannot be accomplished by K-12 systems alone; community partners and higher education have a critical role to play in supporting progress in educational attainment."

The Educational Attainment of Chicago Public Schools Students 2015: A Focus on Four Year College Degrees is part of the Urban Education Institute's To & Through project which aims to provide educators, families, and policymakers with the actionable research, data, and training they need to increase the number of students who make it to and through college.

For 25 years, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research has been building the capacity for school reform by conducting research that identifies what matters for student success and school improvement.