



UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO NETWORK FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS

NCS BY THE NUMBERS

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO NETWORK FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS WORKS CLOSELY WITH A NETWORK OF 15–20 HIGH SCHOOLS EACH YEAR, SERVING MORE THAN 300 EDUCATORS AND MORE THAN 15,000 STUDENTS. THE NETWORK INTENTIONALLY MIRRORS THE RACIAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC COMPOSITION OF CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS STUDENTS WHO ARE OVERWHELMING BLACK OR LATINX AND FROM FAMILIES WITH LOW INCOMES.

The UChicago Network for College Success (NCS) works to cultivate postsecondary readiness and success for all students by translating research into practice and supporting high school leaders to organize their schools for improvement and innovation. Developed in 2006 to foster higher student achievement in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the network's long-term partnership with principals and educators has resulted in an unprecedented increase in high school graduation rates in the city, the nation's third-largest school district.

THE PROBLEM

Of the overwhelming majority of freshmen who aspired to earn 4-year college degrees in Chicago in the mid-2000s, only 8% were expected to actually do so by the time they turned 25 years old.¹ Research emerged at the time that showed 9th-grade course performance was more predictive of high school graduation and college enrollment than any other demographic or academic factors combined.² In fact, low GPA in 9th grade causes a ripple effect for students regarding college access: Freshman students who do not achieve a 3.0+ GPA have only a 13% likelihood of accessing selective colleges.³

Importantly, the data also showed clear racial inequities: Students of color were less likely than their white peers to end 9th grade on track to graduate—i.e., earning enough credits to be promoted to sophomore year on time—and they were (and still are) substantially less likely than their white peers to end 9th grade earning a 3.0+ GPA in their classes.

SOLVING THE PROBLEM

Chicago educators needed data, resources, and professional learning to organize their schools for continuous improve and to better serve their students. NCS took up the challenge and partnered with CPS high schools, using a networked approach with a focus on creating the conditions in 9th grade for student success to and through high school and college.

This partnership launched Freshman Success Teams in schools comprised of 9th-grade educators who regularly analyzed student data, developed interventions, and tracked their effectiveness. The teams represented an intentional reorganization of school resources and educator time and capacity in which schools would begin the work focused on graduation and college enrollment as soon as students entered 9th grade. NCS then

leveraged the learnings from and with the schools in the network by providing cross-school professional learning and coaching paired with research and data.

Over time, the NCS network of 9th-grade specialists became an improvement community for testing changes within the context of a Key Driver Diagram for Freshman Success—a theory for improvement based upon research, data, practical expertise, and educator experience.

District and school leadership were critical advocates for this work. Principals ensured that Freshman Success Teams had access to the research, resources, and time to regularly plan and implement their interventions. The district made freshman on-track achievement a part of its accountability rating and supported schools by facilitating professional learning from nonprofits such as NCS.

From 2007 to 2017, CPS improved its freshman on-track rates by over 28% and its high school graduation rates by 20%, with the largest improvements among Black and Latinx males.⁴

KEY LEARNINGS

The story of freshman success in CPS is a marathon, not a sprint.⁵ Part of what makes the story so notable in the history of school improvement efforts is that both the city's school system and the ecosystem that supports it maintained a sustained focus on one goal. The district, school leaders, educators, and school support organizations such as NCS listened to research and targeted their energies on what mattered most for student success.

NCS and CPS have learned a complementary set of lessons regarding improved freshman performance:

- The collective responsibility of educators must be harnessed by forming high-functioning Freshman Success Teams.
- Data systems that allow educators to carefully monitor large classes of 9th graders in real time are critical for early and successful intervention.
- Meaningful change in the student experience comes when educators focus both on high-quality instruction and the supports students need to access that instruction.
- Sustainable change in schools requires school leaders who prioritize freshman success work.

The most important lesson learned pertains to the power of networks. When educators share ideas, problem-solve jointly, and support each other through challenges, they build their capacity to enact improvement in their schools, teams, and classrooms. Over the past four years, NCS has shared the knowledge and practices learned in Chicago with schools and districts across the nation through coaching, trainings, and presentations.

1. Roderick, M., Coca, V., & Nagaoka, J. (2011). Potholes on the Road to College: High School Effects in Shaping Urban Students' Participation in College Application, Four-year College Enrollment, and College Match. *Sociology of Education*, 84(3), 178–211. <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/potholes-road-college-high-school-effects-shaping-urban-students-participation-college>.
2. Allensworth, E.M., & Easton, J.Q. (2007). *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools*. Chicago, IL: UChicago Consortium on School Research. <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/what-matters-staying-track-and-graduating-chicago-public-schools>.
3. Nagaoka, J., Mahaffie, S., Usher, A., & Seeskin, A. (2020). *The Educational Attainment of Chicago Public Schools Students: 2019*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. <https://toandthrough.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/The%20Educational%20Attainment%202019-Dec%202020-Consortium.pdf>.
4. Nagaoka, J., Mahaffie, S., Usher, A., & Seeskin, A. (2020). *The Educational Attainment of Chicago Public Schools Students: 2019*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. <https://toandthrough.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/The%20Educational%20Attainment%202019-Dec%202020-Consortium.pdf>.
5. The long-term trajectory of freshman success work in Chicago is well told in the book *Make or Break Year* by Emily Krone Phillips and the short documentary film *The Second Window*.

OUR MISSION

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is committed to solving long-standing inequities in educational outcomes. The foundation addresses problems that impact large numbers of students, tests innovations on the ground; understands what works, why it works, and in what contexts; and shares what it learns for use by others. In so doing, Carnegie integrates the discipline of improvement science and the use of structured improvement networks to build the education field's capacity to improve.

THE SPOTLIGHT STORY

In pursuit of its mission, the Carnegie Foundation launched the Spotlight on Quality in Continuous Improvement program in 2017 to elevate clear and compelling examples of how the rigorous application of improvement principles, methods, processes, and tools solve educational problems. The Spotlight program provides educational organizations and improvement networks with the opportunity to learn about excellence in continuous improvement, assess their own progress, gain access to resources and education that support improvement, and be recognized for their proven quality practices within the field of education.

NCS is being spotlighted this year because of its use of continuous improvement to dramatically increase the number of 9th graders on track to high school graduation, especially for Black and Latinx students and students from low-income households. It achieved success by using improvement methods and principles to translate foundational research findings into practical tools and insights that could be leveraged to improve 9th-grade educational outcomes. The Chicago high schools that NCS worked with saw their overall on-track rates rise by nearly 20 percentage points from 72% in 2010 to 91% in 2019, which translated into an average graduation rate that grew from 71% in 2013 to 84% in 2019.

LOOKING FORWARD: OUR CONTINUING IMPROVEMENT STORY

Despite the improvements over the last 15 years, more work is needed. While on-track rates have increased dramatically, maintaining focus on the broader goal of high school graduation and college success requires educators to constantly evolve their understanding of the problem, the system that produces the problem, and the drivers that could change the results. Critically, Black and Latinx students are not being served equitably and, therefore, have lower rates of success. According to 2019 data from CPS, only 30% of Black 9th graders and 39% of Latinx 9th graders were successfully supported to achieve a 3.0 GPA or higher, with the rates even lower for Black (21%) and Latinx (31%) male students. In comparison, 61% of white male and 74% of white female students were successfully supported to achieve a 3.0+ GPA.*

With this in mind, anti-racist educator development is the next edge of growth for NCS. In an effort to reach equitable outcomes, we will continue to support school administrators and educators to: (1) critically examine their own race/s and culture/s; (2) build awareness of the sociopolitical context, the history of race and education, and the role of white supremacy culture; (3) interrogate student data by race, gender, and other demographics; and (4) leverage continuous improvement to change practice to better serve students.

* UChicago To&Through Project. (n.d.). District: Chicago Public Schools milestones. <https://toandthrough.uchicago.edu/tool/cps/hs/2019/#/milestones> (accessed 01/14/2020).