



Freshman Year: The Make-it or Break-it Year

Let's say you put all your freshmen in one room and had to predict who among them would be graduating in four years. What factors would you consider when making those predictions? Their 8th grade test scores? The elementary school they attended? What about their race? Or age? Or family income?

IN REALITY, THOSE FACTS DON'T TELL YOU MUCH.

What really counts when it comes to predicting graduation: **GRADES AND ATTENDANCE.**

How do we know this? Because researchers at the University of Chicago—the Consortium on Chicago School Research—have spent years trying to understand what really matters when it comes to graduating from Chicago Public Schools. Working in cooperation with the district, the Consortium researchers have analyzed years of data—surveys, standardized tests, student grades, attendance records—and uncovered some surprising connections.

The freshman year is the most important year of high school and a crucial chance for a fresh start. Strong students can quickly fall off course if they start cutting classes and blowing off homework. And students who struggled in elementary school can turn things around if they come to school every day and aim for a B average.

Based on earlier research about On-Track Indicators, we know this is the year that will set the stage for whether high school students will graduate and whether they will be ready for college. It sounds simple, but there is much room for improvement.

THAT'S BECAUSE:

- More than half of Chicago freshmen fail a course.
- About 40 percent miss more than a month of school in that first year (which includes class cutting).
- The average GPA is lower than a "C."

This research doesn't suggest that teachers should make it easier to earn a B in their class; in fact, that could harm students' subsequent course performance. Instead, it suggests teachers are critical in shaping student outcomes. The classroom and school context set the stage for good grades and attendance. Research demonstrates that 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.

Our new research doesn't offer pat solutions to the drop-out crisis facing Chicago and many other urban districts—its causes are far too complicated for that. What the data does tell us is that schools can improve their graduation rates by paying attention to the right things and the right freshmen right away.

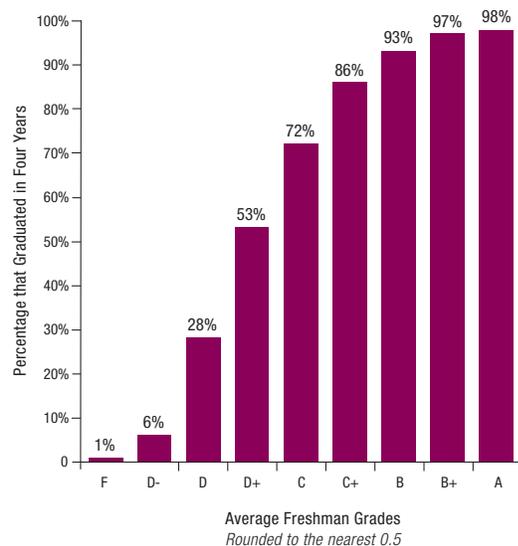
Consider these key findings...

Grades and Attendance

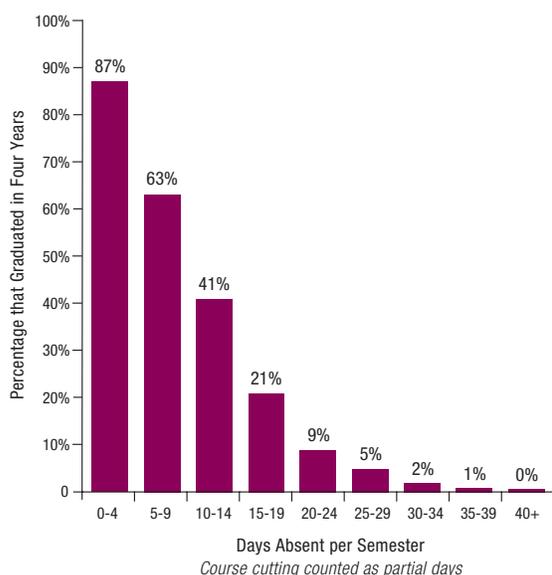
GRADES

- More than 95 percent of students with a B average or better in their freshman year graduate.
- Freshmen who earn a B average or better have an 80-percent chance of finishing high school with at least a 3.0 GPA.
- Freshmen with less than a C average are more likely to drop out than graduate.
- Course grades also are the best predictors of test score gains and college graduation.
- People think that grades are subjective, but there is little evidence of grade inflation in Chicago high schools.

Freshman Grades Predict Graduation



Missing Classes Puts Graduation at Risk



ABSENCES

- Attendance rates vary substantially across schools, even when comparing schools with similar student achievement and background—by as much as one month a year.
- Nearly 90 percent of freshmen who miss less than a week of school per semester graduate, regardless of their 8th grade test scores.
- Freshmen who miss more than two weeks of school flunk, on average, at least two classes—no matter whether they arrive at high school with top test scores or below-average scores. In fact, freshmen who arrive with high test scores but miss two weeks of school per semester are more likely to fail a course than freshmen with low test scores who just miss a week.



So...what can you do?

- ✓ **You may have your greatest impact** with struggling, just-below-average freshmen—those with GPAs of C- or D who miss one or two weeks of school per semester. These middle students have about the same chances of graduating as they have of dropping out, yet are least likely to be identified for help.
- ✓ **Reach out early to each student whose grades and attendance start to slip.** Freshmen—regardless of their background—are more likely to come to class and pass courses in schools where they feel teachers can be trusted, give them individual attention and show concern.
- ✓ **Make sure your class is organized coherently** so that students know exactly what they need to do to earn good grades. Students can lose trust in teachers with inconsistent grading practices, resulting in less effort and lower attendance. Also, help your students make connections between the work they're doing in class and the skills they'll need in the future.
- ✓ **Work collaboratively with your colleagues.** Absences are lower than expected in schools where teachers take collective responsibility for the whole school, not just their own students.