

Development of the Dallas ISD On-Track Indicator, 2007-08

Dorothea Weir, Ph. D.

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At-a-Glance

A high school diploma is rapidly becoming the minimum qualification for most occupations in the American economy. Consequently, addressing graduation and dropout rates is taking on greater urgency in school districts across the country. The first year of high school is increasingly recognized as a transition period that may be “make-or-break” for many students in terms of eventual high school success and graduation.

The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) developed an on-track indicator in 1999 to gauge whether students in their first year of high school were making enough progress to have a reasonable expectation of graduating in four years. This indicator is now a part of the Chicago Public Schools accountability system. Unlike other indicators, it provides information about progress and performance from a relatively early point in a student’s high school career.

The On-Track Indicator

The Chicago on-track indicator combines two factors: the number of credits earned during freshman year and the number of semester Fs in core subjects. A student is considered to be on-track at the end of ninth grade if he or she has met both of the following criteria:

- The student has accumulated five full course credits, and
- The student has no more than one semester F (that is, one-half of a full credit) in a core subject (English, math, science, or social studies).

Chicago Public Schools requires only five credits to attain promotion to sophomore status, while Dallas ISD requires six. However, the purpose of the on-track indicator is to predict whether students are likely to graduate, and not specifically to reflect policy. Both five- and six-credit models were tested to predict which students would graduate in four years, and the five-credit model correctly identified more four-year graduates than the six-credit model, 81% compared to 80%. Both models identified the same number of five-year graduates. Because the differences were

extremely small, the five-credit model was used as the better predictor of four-year graduation rate.

To calculate the on-track indicator, we used data for students entering high school for the first time in 2003-04. Students who entered ninth grade after the first semester or left the district before the end of the year, or students who had no prior grade reported, were not included. Special Education students, for whom an on-track analysis of four-year graduation rates was not appropriate, were also excluded. That left a cohort of 8,008 first-time, regular education ninth graders who were enrolled for the full school year. The cohort was 35% African American, 58% Hispanic, and 16% LEP.

Why Are Students Off-Track?

Most Dallas students (57%) who started high school in 2003-04 were on-track at the end of their freshman year, compared to 60% in Chicago, but 43% had either failed at least two semesters of a core course or accumulated fewer than five course credits (Table 1). Almost one-quarter of Dallas students had failed by both criteria to achieve on-track status by the end of their first year of high school.

Table 1

Percentage of First-Time Ninth Graders in 2003-04 On- and Off-Track

Number of semester Fs in core courses	Number of credits accumulated freshman year	
	Less than 5	5 or more
2 or more	Off-track 23%	Off-track 19%
0 or 1	Off-track 1%	On-track 57%

First six-weeks grades were an important early indicator of off-track status. Preliminary studies showed that almost three-quarters of students who failed any course in the first six weeks also failed that course for the semester. First six-weeks

failures in core courses were highly predictive of on-track status at the end of the freshman year (Figure 1). While 77% of students who had no core course failures in the first six weeks were on-track at the end of the year, only 36% of those who failed one core course were on-track, and 11% of those who had two failures in the first six weeks were on-track. Virtually no students who had more than two failures in core subjects in the first six weeks managed to get on-track by the end of their freshman year.

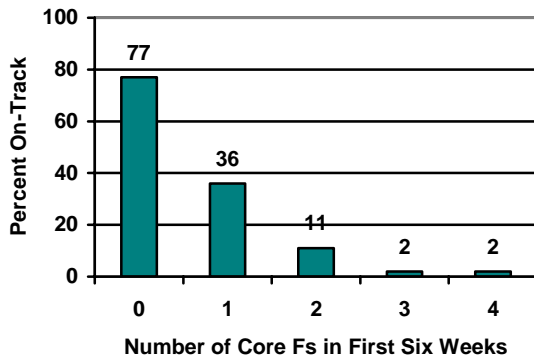


Figure 1. Percent of students on-track at the end of their freshman year by number of first six-weeks core course failures.

On-Track Status and Graduation Rate

Table 2 shows the percent of the 2003-04 cohort who were four-year graduates, five-year graduates, and non-graduates, by the number on-track or off-track at the end of freshman year. While more than 81% of students who graduated in four years were on-track, about 68% of non-graduates were off-track.

Table 2

Percent of Graduates and Non-Graduates by Freshman On-Track Status

	Four year graduates		Five year graduates		Non-graduates		Total N
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
On-track	3,255	81	70	53	1,248	32	4,573
Off-track	748	19	61	47	2,626	68	3,435
Total	4,003		131		3,874		8,008

Note. Five-year graduates include only those students who graduated after May 2007 and before the fall 2008 PEIMS submission.

However, as Figure 2 shows, the first six-weeks grades are an even earlier indicator. Students who made no Fs in core courses in the first six weeks

of high school had a 62% four-year graduation rate. However, with even one F in the first six weeks, the percentages were almost reversed: only 39% of those students graduated in four years. Three-quarters of students with two Fs in the first six weeks failed to graduate on time. It is clear from these data that students who get off-track tend to do so almost as soon as they begin high school.

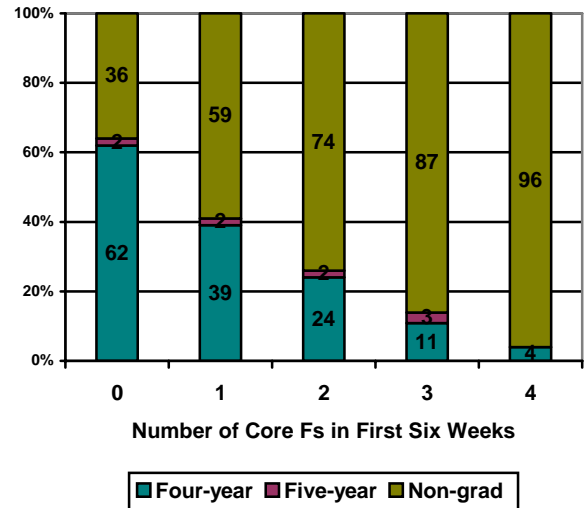


Figure 2. Four-year graduation rate by number of first six-weeks core course failures.

Recommendations

The on-track indicator is a useful indicator of how well students are progressing at the end of their freshman year. However, first six-weeks failures are the earliest indicator of students falling off-track for graduation, and should be used to identify students for immediate focused intervention.

For more information, contact Dr. Dorothea Weir at 972-925-6413.