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 has taken 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. Unlike other indicators, it provides information about progress and performance from a relatively early point in a student’s high school career.

Dallas ISD developed its own On-Track indicator in 2007-08. From 2009-10 through 2011-12, the Dallas On-Track Indicator was incorporated into the Principal Appraisal System.

Like the Chicago indicator, the Dallas 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).

Methodology

The model was developed using data for students entering high school for the first time in 2003-04. The cohort consisted 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.

Analyses were conducted in June, 2008, to construct a baseline measure districtwide. The analysis was repeated annually in subsequent years. Only non-special-education grade nine students who were enrolled in the same school for both fall and spring semesters were included. Results were calculated only for schools receiving an accountability rating; alternative schools were excluded from the analyses.

In 2010-11, On-Track documentation was improved, as registrars at all high schools provided prior grade level information for students entering ninth grade from outside the district. In 2011-12, new state testing requirements necessitated identification of all first-time ninth grade students, and this information was made available through the Chancery student data system.

Results

Figure 1 shows freshman On-Track percentages for all district high schools, for all schools other than magnets (i.e., comprehensive and Early College high schools), and for magnets only, for the 2008-09 through 2014-15 school years. The overall On-Track rate dropped considerably in 2010, increased slowly through 2013, decreased slightly in 2014, and remained approximately the same in 2015. The rate for magnet schools, however, fell in 2015 for a second year.

![Figure 1. Percent of first-time ninth grade students On-Track, 2009 through 2015](image)

Figure 2 shows On-Track percentages by student ethnicity. In 2015, the districtwide On-Track rate of African American students was 75.2%; Hispanic students, 73.0%; and White students, 88.8%.

Historically, the On-Track rate of all ethnic subgroups fell in 2010, although the rates of African American and White students fell more sharply than that of Hispanic students. The On-Track rate of White
students increased gradually each year since 2010, but fell in 2015. African American students’ rate increased from 2010 to 2013, fell slightly in 2014, and increased in 2015. Hispanic students’ rate has remained approximately the same since 2010.

Table 1 shows On-Track percentages by school and school group for the 2012-13 through 2014-15 school years, and the percentage change over the three-year period.

As a group, comprehensive high schools had an On-Track rate in 2015 of 72.8%. In 2009, the first year in which the indicator was used, all non-magnet high schools had On-Track percentages of 60% or more. In 2014, four schools fell below 60%, and five more fell below 70%. In 2015, only one school (North Dallas) fell below 60%, but 10 more fell below 70%. Conversely, Garza and Lassiter Early Colleges had On-Track rates of 100% and 98.3%, respectively. Over the period from 2013 through 2015, four schools had On-Track increases of 10 percentage points or more; these were Hillcrest, Pinkston, South Oak Cliff, and Sunset. Comprehensive high schools with decreases of more than 10 percentage points were Carter, Conrad, North Dallas, and Roosevelt.

Magnet high school On-Track rates decreased by 4.7 percentage points, from 91.0% in 2013 to 86.3% in 2015. Rangel Young Women’s Leadership Academy had an On-Track rate of 100% for the third consecutive year. The largest decreases were at the Business Magnet and the Law and Public Services Magnet at Townview, which both had decreases of 11.8 points.

Note. On-Track rates below 60% are highlighted in red, and those above 60% but below 70% are highlighted in orange.

### Recommendations

District On-Track rates have varied little since 2010, despite large year-to-year fluctuations at some campuses. One factor influencing recent On-Track rates may be recent changes in state accountability requirements for End-Of-Course (EOC) tests in core courses, which fall most heavily on ninth-grade students. Progress of freshman cohorts since 2011-12 should be examined to determine whether new measures of course completion and EOC performance should be incorporated into the On-Track measure, as well as to examine the reasons for large annual fluctuations at specific high schools.

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