At-a-Glance

The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) was created in 1990 after the passage of the Chicago School Reform Act. Researchers at the University of Chicago joined with researchers from the school district and other organizations to form CCSR, with the imperative to study Chicago's school reform efforts. Recently, the CCSR has focused on the first year of high school as a critical transition period for students.

In April 2008, Dallas ISD participated in a pilot Freshman Year Performance Institute, conducted by the CCSR and supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The purpose of the institute was to support school districts in building high school indicator systems to understand and improve student performance in the freshman year of high school, and the relationship between freshman year performance and high school graduation.

High School Completion in Dallas

High school course completion issues are extremely important to Dallas ISD, and will increase in importance in the near future, because of four major factors:

- High school TAKS exams will be replaced with End-of-Course (EOC) assessments in core areas, beginning in 2011-2012.
- New state graduation requirements this year (2007-08) stipulate additional credits for graduation and more credits in core areas.
- TEC 28.0212 requires a personal graduation plan for any student who "is not likely to receive a High School diploma before the fifth school year following the student's enrollment in grade level nine."
- The four-year graduation rate is an indicator in the NCLB accountability system in order to meet Adequate Yearly Progress.

Dallas ISD Evaluation and Accountability staff replicated and expanded on previous work of the CCSR. The first series of investigations examined three freshman-year predictors of graduation or dropout that the CCSR found were accurate 80% of the time: absences, semester course failures, and grade point average (GPA).

Absences

High absence rates are strong predictors of students dropping out. The CCSR found that even moderate levels of absences, from two to four weeks per year, "are associated with a substantially reduced probability of graduating."

In Dallas, during the 2006-2007 school year, first-time ninth graders and students entering from outside the district had 95% or better attendance, while attendance for repeating ninth graders was around 89%. First-time ninth graders missed nearly two weeks of school on average, while repeating students missed nearly a month (19.6 days) over the course of the year.

Absence data were also collected for the cohort of first-time ninth grade students from the 2003-2004 school year, who would be expected to graduate in 2006-2007. The association between freshman absences and progress towards graduation was as strong for Dallas students as it was for Chicago students.

About 78% of students with less than one week of absences, and 66% of students with less than two weeks, were still enrolled in Dallas ISD schools in grade 12. The percent of students who left the district increased dramatically at higher levels of freshman absences. More than half of students with 25-34 freshman absences had left the district, and more than 70% of students with 35 or more absences were no longer enrolled. In the highest absence group, nearly 12% were still classified as ninth graders after four years of high school.

Credit accumulation in high school was strongly affected by absences (Figure 1). Most seriously, only first-time ninth graders with fewer than five freshman absences averaged 26 credits (the number now needed to graduate under the Recommended High School Program) within four years. Students with 15 or more freshman absences failed to accumulate even the 22 credits needed for graduation under the Minimum High School Program.
Failure to accumulate course credit is a more serious barrier to on-time graduation than TAKS failure. In the 2003-04 cohort, about 800 out of 9,111 students, or 9%, were in danger of not graduating because they failed the English/Language Arts TAKS test in their junior year, and about 1,100, or 12%, failed in mathematics. More than 4,300, or nearly half of the original cohort, were not on schedule to graduate in four years because they either had left the district or did not have enough credits to reach 11th grade.

A majority (59%) of first-time ninth graders in Dallas ISD failed at least one semester course. Almost 10% failed 8 or more courses. At five high schools, more than 70% of first-time ninth graders failed at least one semester course. At two schools, more than 20% of students failed 8 or more courses (Figure 2).

Course grades in the first six weeks were strongly related to fall semester grades. Nearly three-quarters (73.5%) of students receiving a grade of F in the first six weeks failed that course for the fall semester, as did almost a quarter of those with six-weeks grades of C. The first six-weeks grade is an extremely important sign of a student’s need for immediate intervention of he or she is to complete the year on track for graduation.

The mean GPA for first-time ninth graders in 2006-07 was 78.6, or a C+. Only 6% had GPAs of A- or above. About 43% had B averages, 39% had C averages, and almost 12% had failing averages. Both course failures and GPA were seriously affected by even moderate levels of absences, for higher-achieving as well as lower-achieving students.

Recommendations

It is critical for district high schools to increase course passing rates. However, we are not suggesting that students be given passing grades if they fail to meet coursework standards, or that course requirements be “dumbed down.” The need for students to pass EOC assessments in order to graduate means that they must learn the course content. Like the CCSR researchers, we are “advocating that teachers and schools identify students who are failing, find out why they are failing, and then try to give them the support they need to recover from this failure and avoid future failures.”

For more information see EA08-200-2, “Preliminary Investigation of Absences, Course Failures, and the Probability of Graduating in Four Years,” available at www.dallasisd.org/insidedisd/depts/evalacct/, or contact Dr. Dorothea Weir at 972-925-6413.