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COMMENTARY

Six Ways to Improve High School Graduation Rates

Students are more likely to earn a diploma if they do well in 9th grade

By John Gomperts & Jenny Nagaoka

March 27, 2017

As the final months of the 2016-17 school year unfold, the nation's 4 million 9th graders—the Class of 2020—are entering the make-it-or-break-it final weeks of their first year of high school. And GradNation—the national campaign by America's Promise Alliance to increase graduation rates to 90 percent by 2020—is entering its make-it-or-break-it years.

In recent years, the graduation track record of our 15 million U.S. public high school students has steadily increased. Overall national graduation rates for public school students have **climbed 4.2 percentage points in the past four years**, up from 79 percent in the 2010-11 school year to the current 83.2 percent.

Despite improvements, the stakes remain high. At the current rate, close to 700,000 of today's high school freshmen won't make it. If nothing changes between now and 2020, nearly three-quarters of a million young people each year will see their prospects for higher education, high-skilled jobs, and economic mobility severely curtailed.

But if we successfully reach a 90 percent rate, almost 300,000 more high school seniors each year will get the best possible shot at success—higher incomes, better health, and longer life expectancy. As a nation, we will see a return on this investment in the form of higher employment and tax revenue, reduced costs for social services and prisons, and greater voter turnout.



As two leaders highly invested in improving graduation rates, we know that reaching these individual and collective goals will largely depend on how educators, school leaders, and parents support high school freshmen today. The habits students set as freshmen have an impact on their path to completing high school and their future beyond graduation. Take Chicago, for example: For the last decade, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research has tracked Chicago public schools' efforts to reduce 9th grade course failure and improve graduation rates. These efforts include implementing summer programs, using data to monitor student progress, and hiring 9th grade staff coordinators.

**"The transition
from the middle**

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The results speak for themselves: Between 2007 and 2013, the number of freshmen who went on to 10th grade grew by almost 7,000 students. The **four-year graduation rate also**

increased from 49 percent in 2007 to 69 percent in 2014. The

consortium's research on their progress provides a window into what might work for freshmen across the country. One thing is certain, students are more likely to graduate if they can successfully adjust to high school.

How other school districts can learn from Chicago is best captured by these six suggestions:

1. Make use of proven early-warning indicators. Freshmen who are "on track" to graduate—earning no more than one F in a core course per semester and accumulating sufficient credits to advance to sophomore year—are **four times more likely to graduate than students who are off-track.** The consortium's on-track indicator uses simple data-reports that allow teachers to monitor student performance, identify those at risk of failing classes, and share successful intervention strategies. Chicago's on-track rate for freshmen rose from 57 to 82 percent between 2007 and 2013.

2. Focus on attendance data. Attendance is the precursor to engagement, learning, academic success, and, yes, graduation. The consortium found that each week of absence per semester in 9th grade is associated with a more than 20 percentage-point **decline in the probability of graduating** from high school. In light of this, schools must work to help students and families understand the cost of frequent absences, closely monitor attendance, and provide support from teachers and staff to get students to class.

3. Embrace collective responsibility for academic success. Attendance improves when teachers take collective responsibility for the success of the whole school, not just their individual students. A school culture that stresses collective responsibility for absences and academic success might include team meetings around real-time attendance reports or shared outreach when students do not show up to class. At the K-12 University of Chicago Charter School, which in 2015-16 had **an attendance rate of 97 percent** at one of its four campuses, educators created charts and graphs of attendance for hallways and highlighted its school attendance importance at assemblies and morning announcements.

4. Raise the bar to "Bs or better." Ninety-five percent of students who **earn Bs or better** and have a GPA of 3.0 in 9th grade go on to graduate from high school. With a C average, however, the rate slips to 72 percent. For freshmen with a D average, only half will go on to graduate. Conveying the importance of good grades and strong GPAs early in students' high school careers can keep them from scrambling to catch up when it might be too late.

5. Foster supportive relationships to ease transitions. The transition from the middle grades to high school can lead even good students to struggle—a dramatic drop in grades, attendance, and academic behavior is a common warning sign of this strain. In high school, it's easier to skip class and harder to figure out how to get help with coursework. But high school doesn't have to be impersonal. Teachers, counselors, coaches, mentors, and friends can make a concerted effort to reach out to students when they show signs of falling behind or disengaging, find out why they are struggling, and get them the academic or emotional support they need.

6. Assess and refine disciplinary practices. African-American students, students with low test scores, and vulnerable students with a history of abuse and neglect **receive out-of-school suspensions at higher rates than their peers.** Out-of-school suspensions mean students lose class time, which can place them at greater risk of

grades to high school can lead even good students to struggle."

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falling farther behind. When schools understand which of their students receive suspensions, they can develop targeted interventions for individual students and help keep them on track to graduate.

Making use of proven early-warning indicators, establishing an incessant drumbeat on the importance of freshman-year grades and attendance, reviewing discipline policies to reduce out-of-school suspensions, and giving school staff at all levels a shared stake in students' freshman year success can ensure that the class of 2020—as well as future classes—are ready to take on the world.

John Gomperts is the president and CEO of America's Promise Alliance, which launched the GradNation campaign in 2010 to raise the national on-time graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020 and increase postsecondary enrollment and completion. Jenny Nagaoka is the deputy director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

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Charles Hoff • 2 years ago

Until we have a standard definition for "Graduation" I am not sure that we have a valid measurement. In my state who graduates is purely up to the high school principal.

In a similar manner what a credit means can vary quite dramatically

I fear that all of this, as currently cast, is just an attempt to make "progress" where there may not be any..

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