



NEW KNOWLEDGE

Improving Student Attainment

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THE BIG PICTURE

As detailed student-level data systems have become more accessible and manageable, school districts have increasingly looked for ways to inform their practices with data grounded in rigorous research, and established partnerships with local universities that can lend their expertise in conducting rigorous, social science research to school improvement initiatives.

In 1990, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) established one of the first research-practice partnerships in the country with Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the nation's third largest school district. A few years earlier, CPS had been dubbed “the worst in the nation” by then-U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett, and high schoolers in Chicago were as likely to drop out as they were to graduate. Since then, CPS has made some of the nation's most remarkable progress in keeping students on track to graduate from high school and producing thousands more graduates and college enrollees each year. This progress has been fueled, in part, by CPS's partnership with both the UChicago Consortium, which has provided research and data on what matters most for student success and school improvement, as well as the University of Chicago's Network for College Success (NCS), which has supported CPS 's high school leaders in translating research and data into improved practice.

The effectiveness of CPS's partnership with the University of Chicago has spurred similar research-practice partnerships in 13 other cities. The research-practice partnership model represents an innovative approach to school improvement. It is a highly collaborative relationship between school district staff and researchers, which centers on conducting research that is directly informed by and can be applied to practice and policy.

More research-practice partnerships have cropped up across the country, in part as a result of major foundations making significant investments in the model. One of these is the William T. Grant foundation¹ which, in addition to supporting research-practice partnerships, provides publicly available [resources for new and existing research-practice partnerships](#). In a recent study, which used data from many in-depth interviews with academics and stakeholders who have experienced successes and failures in research-practice partnerships, the Foundation proposed three “dimensions of effectiveness” for research-practice partnerships:

- Providing research and evidence to support improvements
- Helping practitioners identify productive strategies for addressing problems of practice, and
- Informing the practitioners' implementation and ongoing adjustments of improvement strategies

In an effort to connect research-practice partnerships and create a central infrastructure and communication resources for a growing number of research-practice partnerships, the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University in 2016 launched the National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships (NNERPP). At the organization's 2017 forum, they produced several pieces of advice geared toward creating meaningful results in school improvement, noting the necessity of a “champion”—someone with influence over district-level policy who will agree to make implementing research results a priority—and the importance of starting research projects with an implementation plan already in mind, as opposed to publishing results and then struggling to put them into practice.²

NEW UEI KNOWLEDGE

Between 2007 and 2016, CPS's high school graduation rate rose by almost a third from 57 percent to 74 percent. CPS also saw significant gains in its 4-year college enrollment rate, which increased from 33 percent in 2006 to 44 percent in 2015, and is now on par with the nation's college enrollment rate. What did the city of Chicago do in the last decade to see such significant gains in its students' educational attainment?

That is the question the University of Chicago is helping to answer. In 2014, the UChicago Consortium and its partners at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute (UEI) and NCS launched a new phase of their collective work with the CPS district: the To&Through Project. The To&Through Project was designed to bring the research-practice partnership model to bear on one of Chicago's most persistent problems of practice: a

¹Henrick et al 2017

²Education Week 2017

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sizable gap between students' college aspirations and attainment. In 2016, 71 percent of CPS freshmen reported they aspire to earn a bachelor's degree, yet UChicago Consortium research projects only 18 percent will earn a bachelor's degree within 10 years of starting high school, by their mid-20s. The To&Through Project launched with the goal of closing this gap and helping more students make it to and through high school and college.

To inform this effort, the To&Through Project developed a theory of change this year drawing on the existing efforts of the UChicago Consortium and NCS. The theory is rooted in empirical evidence of a combination of **three factors** driving improvement in the educational attainment of CPS students: research, data, and professional learning:

Research:

In the late 1990s, researchers at the UChicago Consortium identified the [Freshman OnTrack](#) indicator—a measure of students' performance in the ninth grade and a strong indicator of their likelihood to graduate from high school. A student is considered on-track for high school graduation in Chicago if he or she has no more than one semester F in a core course and has enough credits to be promoted to the 10th grade. The UChicago Consortium's research found that Freshman OnTrack is more predictive of a student's odds of graduating from high school than all other factors, including race, socioeconomic status, and prior achievement, *combined*. Students who are on-track in their freshman year are **four times** more likely than their off-track peers to graduate from high school.

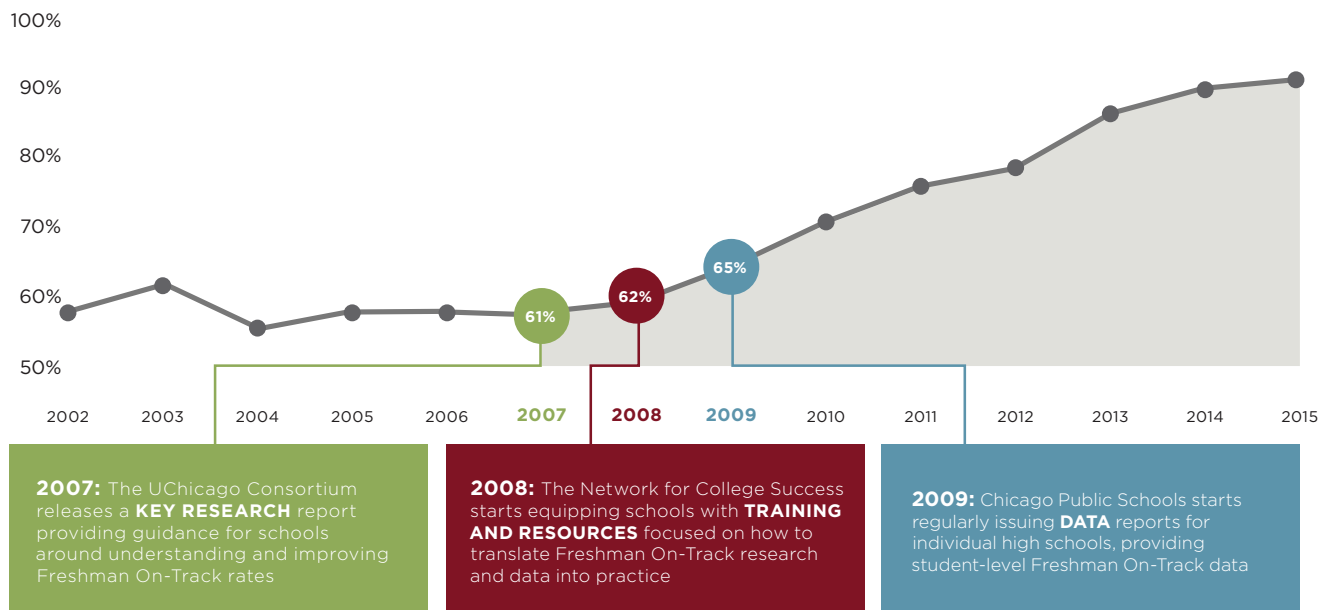
Data:

CPS decided to incorporate the Freshman OnTrack indicator into its official set of accountability metrics in 2003 based on the UChicago Consortium's research. Still, CPS's Freshman OnTrack and high school graduation rates remained stagnant. In 2007, the UChicago Consortium published additional research, this time providing specific strategies for raising Freshman OnTrack rates. Based on this, CPS started providing student-level Freshman OnTrack data reports and tools to individual high schools so that they could more easily use data to inform their systems for supporting students in ninth grade.

Professional Learning:

With guidance on how to improve Freshman OnTrack rates and access to school-level Freshman OnTrack data reports, the University of Chicago's Network for College Success began providing school leaders with professional

Chicago's Freshman On-Track rate skyrocketed when schools were equipped with research, data, and resources



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learning designed to translate research and data into improved practice. Over the next decade, CPS's Freshman OnTrack rate rose by 24 points and its high school graduation rate rose by 17 points, a truly incredible improvement that resulted in over 50,000 more high school graduates in that period.

DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

As research-practice partnerships grow and evolve, they are finding innovative ways to make research findings accessible and applicable to practice.

NNERPP and *Education Week* recently launched a blog devoted to illuminating the impact of research-practice partnerships. The UChicago Consortium regularly contributes to the blog: [a recent post](#) from the UChicago Consortium's Lewis-Sebring Director, Elaine Allensworth, highlighted research on the importance of the ninth grade to students' success in high school and beyond. In a [companion post](#), Wells Community Academy High School Principal, Rita Raichoudhuri, shared the routines of practice her school uses to support its ninth-grade students and increase its Freshman OnTrack rate based on the UChicago Consortium's research.

Also, an increasing number of nonprofit groups are working to bridge the worlds of education research and practice by making education research more actionable to education policymakers and practitioners as well as students and families.

[The Alliance for Excellent Education](#) synthesizes research to produce accessible briefs, infographics, and toolkits designed to help people understand the state of debate across a wide range of education issues. [The Data Quality Campaign](#) has built an extensive library that includes fact sheets, infographics, and a broad range of other resources designed to help practitioners make effective use of education data. In a similar vein, the To&Through Project launched two new [toolkits](#) this year designed to help make research and data on what matters most for students' high school and college success accessible and actionable to educators, students, and families. The new [Communications Toolkit](#) is designed to support school leaders and school partners in their efforts to share the UChicago Consortium's research on what matters most for high school and college success with educators, students, and families. It includes social media posts that condense UChicago Consortium research takeaways into 140-character posts, posters, and flyers that visualize key data insights, and lesson plans educators can use in their efforts to spark student dialogue on what it takes to make it to and through college, among other messaging resources. The Network for College Success's new [Postsecondary Success Toolkit](#) includes a collection of protocols, reports, resources, and artifacts designed to help schools put research on what fosters students' college readiness into practice. The Network for College Success has also produced a [Freshman OnTrack Toolkit](#) with resources designed to help schools better support students through their critical first year of high school.

Additionally, the Network for College Success hosts quarterly To&Through Institutes, in which leaders from more than 100 high schools across Chicago convene to use research on attainment and data on their schools' performance on key attainment milestones to guide improvement strategies for their daily practice.

Partnerships and initiatives such as these are increasing, along with resources to sustain them.

As Bill Gates summarized in his [keynote address](#) at this year's Council of the Great City Schools fall conference, "In Chicago, researchers found powerful insights in their data that are predictive of student progress and success. Excited by insights like these, school leaders in Chicago partnered with the University of Chicago to create the Network for College Success. This network of schools is using data to identify strategies that educators can use to solve specific problems...we believe this kind of approach will lead to more impactful and durable systemic change that is attractive enough to be widely adopted by other schools [and] we are seeing more examples of this popping up all the time." He went on to describe the Foundation's planned investment in similar networks across the country which feature "a commitment to continuous improvement, and a focus on addressing common problems that are identified by using proven indicators predictive of students' learning, progress, and postsecondary success."

In the coming months, To&Through Project leaders will begin to make a more concerted effort to share the To&Through Project model that is effectively bridging the worlds of education research and practice on behalf of students who aspire to make it to and through college.

To&Through Project Director and Urban Education Institute Chief Strategy Officer Alex Seeskin shared lessons learned from Chicago's Freshman OnTrack and To&Through Project work at the Council of the Great City Schools 61st Annual Fall Conference, which brought together the nation's largest school districts and illuminated promising approaches to closing gaps in urban schools. The To&Through Project will also be on the SXSWedu conference agenda this coming year. The SXSWedu conference spotlights innovations in education that have the potential to impact the future of teaching and learning and draws a diverse mix of education policymakers and practitioners. Finally, in April 2018, the UChicago Consortium's Deputy Director, Jenny Nagaoka, and the Network for College Success's Co-Director, Sarah Duncan, will talk about the To&Through Project as part of a panel on transforming urban districts for large scale college access. The panel will also include two leaders from New York City Department of Education, which is also focused on expanding college access and fostering college attainment for more of its students and graduates.

As openness to collaboration between the K-12 and higher education communities grows, we expect to see more research-practice partnerships emerge and the pool of knowledge from existing research-practice partnerships expand, driving even better results for our nation's students.

A Collaborative Model for Change



The To&Through Project integrates research, data, and professional learning to help more students get to and through high school and college.



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To download the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute's full New Knowledge in Public Education Report, visit: <https://www.ueiknowledge.org/newknowledgereport>