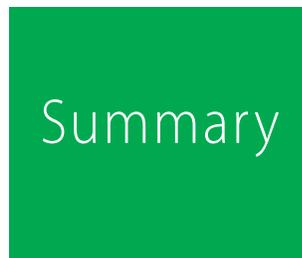




Applying an on-track indicator for high school graduation: adapting the Consortium on Chicago School Research indicator for five Texas districts





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Summary

January 2011

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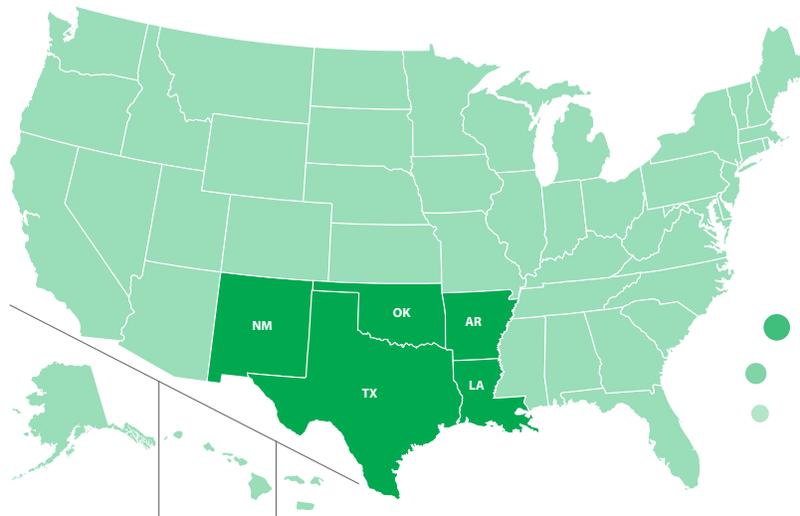
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Applying an on-track indicator for high school graduation: adapting the Consortium on Chicago School Research indicator for five Texas districts

This study uses a measure of the on-track or off-track status of students at the end of grade 9 as an indicator of whether students in five Texas districts would graduate from high school in four years. In all five districts, on-time graduation rates were higher for students who were on track at the end of grade 9 than for students who were off track, both for students overall and for all racial/ethnic groups.

Failure to graduate from high school is a widespread problem in the United States. Although reporting methods vary, one recent estimate indicates that 73.2 percent of grade 9 public school students graduate within four years (Stillwell and Hoffman 2008) and that graduation rates are lower in districts with higher proportions of minority and economically disadvantaged students (Swanson 2004, 2009). Despite variations in reporting methods, there is enough agreement across datasets to conclude “with reasonable confidence that roughly three of every 10 students in the United States are not graduating from high school on time” (Belfield and Levin 2007, p. 6).

The overall graduation rate in Texas is similar, at 72.5 percent (Stillwell and Hoffman 2008),

and state officials have made increasing the proportion of students who graduate from high school a high priority. Several initiatives have been established to identify students who may be at risk of not graduating on time (within four years of entering grade 9 for the first time), so that district and school personnel can intervene early enough to support students before they drop out or fall too far behind to graduate (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation 2009; Texas High School Project n.d.).

These initiatives reflect research that focuses on the systematic use of indicators to identify students who may be at risk of not graduating. Researchers from the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) have developed an indicator using data from a student’s grade 9 year (Allensworth and Easton 2005). CCSR compared Chicago Public Schools students’ course performance in their first year of high school with their graduation rates four years later and classified students as on track for on-time graduation based on two criteria: earning enough credits to be promoted to grade 10 and having no more than one semester “F” in a core course (English, math, science, and social studies). Students who failed to meet either or both of these benchmarks were classified as off track. The CCSR researchers found on-track

status at the end of the first year of high school to be a more useful indicator of whether Chicago Public Schools students graduated from high school in four years than other indicators examined, such as grade 8 test scores and students' background characteristics (Allensworth and Easton 2005).

The current study applies the CCSR on-track indicator in five school districts across Texas. Participating districts were selected on the basis of prior collaboration with the researchers on another project involving early warning indicators; the districts are not representative of districts in Texas. A total of 12,662 students were examined. The CCSR criteria used to determine on-track status were modified to reflect the number of credits required for promotion to grade 10 in each participating Texas district during the 2004/05 academic year. Because graduation rates differ for specific student subgroups, such as racial/ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged students, the study sought to determine how accurately this on-track indicator differentiates between all students who do and those who do not graduate on time and between students in specific student subgroups who do and those who do not graduate on time.

This report answers two research questions:

- How do students who are classified as on track and those who are classified as off track at the end of grade 9 differ in on-time graduation rates?
- How do students in specific subgroups who are classified as on track and those who are classified as off track at the end of grade 9 differ in on-time graduation rates?

The results of the study indicate the following:

- In all five districts, a majority of first-time grade 9 students were on track for graduation at the end of grade 9. On-track rates ranged from 61.2 percent to 86.0 percent.
- In all five districts, on-time graduation rates were higher for students who were on track at the end of grade 9 than for students who were off track. In four districts, the difference between on-time graduation rates for on-track and off-track students was 36.1–51.7 percentage points; the fifth district had a difference of 18.4 percentage points.
- Across districts, variability among racial/ethnic groups was greater for off-track graduation rates than for on-track graduation rates. For all racial/ethnic groups, the on-time graduation rate was higher for on-track students than for off-track students.

This study is a first step in helping local districts and the Texas Education Agency develop an on-track indicator that accurately differentiates at the end of grade 9 between students who do and those who do not graduate on time. Across the districts, the on-track indicator differentiated between students who do and those who do not graduate on time, as seen by the higher on-time graduation rates for on-track students. However, it did not differentiate to the same degree as the original CCSR on-track indicator study (Allensworth and Easton 2005). That study found a differential of 59 percentage points between on-time graduation rates of on-track and off-track students. (Note that the minimum number of credits required to graduate is 24 for Chicago

Public Schools and 22 for Texas schools; Chicago Public Schools n.d.; Texas Education Agency 2008d.)

Further research is needed to determine whether alternative on-track indicators would result in greater differentiation for these Texas districts. The research would be similar to the indicator development work of the CCSR in Chicago Public Schools that explored other possible variables for use in an on-track indicator (attendance data and students' grade 8 academic performance; Ponder n.d.). The research could also investigate whether different on-track indicators are needed in Texas districts with different profiles of student characteristics (for example, urban/rural districts or districts with higher/lower percentages of

students participating in free or reduced-price lunch programs) to more accurately differentiate between students who do and those who do not graduate on time, or whether a single on-track indicator could be used across Texas.

The study had several limitations. Districts were not randomly selected and are not representative of all Texas districts. The findings could differ in districts that have not been involved in previous indicator work or have different profiles of student characteristics. Also, only one version of an on-track indicator was used. The degree of differentiation could change if other versions of an on-track indicator were used.

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