

Defining 9th Grade Success: A New 9th Grade On Track

Definition

Theodore Wills, Senior Research Associate

Research consistently shows that success in 9th grade strongly predicts continued success in high school; but what is meant by “success in 9th grade?” This brief introduces a concise way to measure 9th grade success in the School District of Philadelphia by providing early indication of a student’s progress to on-time graduation (within four years of the first time attending 9th grade). It also presents evidence from analyses of Chicago Public Schools data and internal School District of Philadelphia (SDP) analyses that support the use of this measure.

Support for the new definition comes from two sources: prior research from Chicago Public Schools (CPS), and analyses of recent SDP graduating cohorts.

Chicago’s 9th Grade On-Track Metric

In 2003, in response to research from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research,¹ CPS adopted the following definition for *Freshman OnTrack*: “A student is on track if he or she fails no more than one semester of a core course and earns at least 5 credits by the end of freshman year.”

Researchers found that students that meet this definition are more likely to graduate within four years, compared with those who do not qualify as “on track.” In collaboration with the Chicago Consortium’s [To and Through Project](#), CPS has leveraged this metric to track and motivate continuous improvement in their high schools.

However, CPS and SDP have different systems for semester-based grading, which means this definition must be modified. In addition, we needed to verify that an approach that is meaningful in Chicago, also connects 9th grade and graduation in Philadelphia.

We arrived at the following definition:

SDP 9th Grade On-Track Definition

A first-time 9th grader in SDP is considered On Track if he or she earns at least one credit in each of four core areas (English, math, science and social studies), plus one additional credit from any source.

¹ E.g., Allensworth, E. M, and Easton, J. Q. (2005). The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Analysis of Recent SDP Data: Does the new On-Track Definition Predict On-Time Graduation?

Three full SDP cohorts were analyzed (see box at right for details). Students in the dataset included all first-time 9th graders from 2011-2012, 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 for which we could determine graduation status four years later. For each cohort, On-Track students were much more likely to graduate (Figure 1).

On Target (for Promotion) vs. On Track (to Graduate)

The long-standing SDP guideline for promotion to 10th grade is the successful accumulation of 5 credits *regardless of content area*. For this reason, there is an important distinction between simply meeting the requirements for promotion and meeting the On-Track definition. Our analyses show that, at least when it comes to predicting on-time graduation, 9th grade core courses matter.

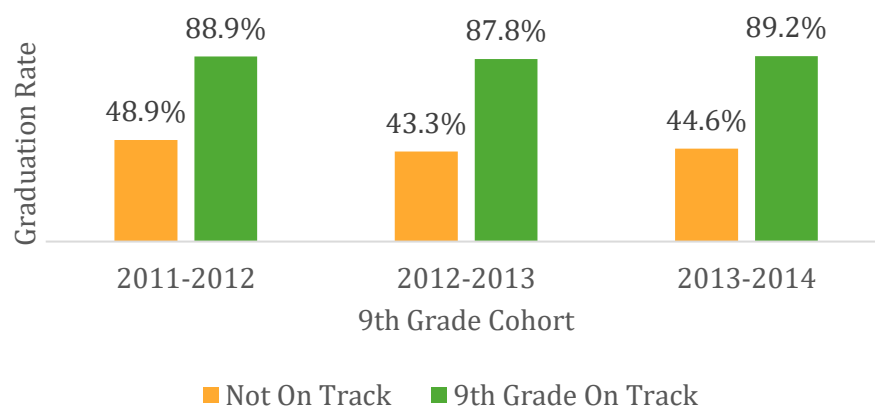
Number of Students Included in On-Time Graduation Analyses:

Cohort	Number of first time 9 th graders
2011-12	7887
2012-13	7381
2013-14	7727

How is a 9th Grade Cohort Defined?

A student is included in a specific year's cohort if that is their first year as a 9th grader in SDP, AND they are enrolled at least 10 days during that year in SDP schools.

Figure 1. Four-Year Graduation Rates for First-Time 9th Graders: On Track and Off Track



Why is this important to SDP?

We know that success in 9th grade is important, but to act on this we need a clear definition of 9th grade success. The On Track metric provides this definition, and:

- Is a powerful tool for continuous improvement, helping schools to identify problems and to modify practices as early as possible.
- Provides a foundation for critical research on success in high school and beyond. Several related projects are forthcoming, including analyses of:
 - the relationship between 8th grade course marks and attendance and 9th grade On-Track rate,
 - early 9th grade attendance and likelihood of staying on track, and
 - differences in On-Track rate across schools and across student sub-groups.

Focusing on 9th grade also provides foundational information that will inform future analyses and enhanced focus on 10th-12th grade preparation for college attendance and completion.