

FOR EMBARGOED RELEASE  
Thursday, Nov. 6—12:00 AM

CONTACT  
Emily Krone  
[ekrone@uchicago.edu](mailto:ekrone@uchicago.edu)  
(773)-834-8036

## New UChicago CCSR Report: Middle School Grades and Attendance Matter More than Test Scores for High School and College Success

Grades and attendance—not test scores—are the middle grade factors most strongly connected with both high school and college success, according to a report released Thursday by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (UChicagoCCSR). In fact, grades and attendance matter more than test scores, race, poverty or other background characteristics for later academic success, the researchers found. “Test scores are very good at predicting future test scores but not as strongly predictive of other outcomes we care about, like whether students will struggle or succeed in high school coursework or graduate from college,” said UChicago CCSR Lewis-Sebring Director Elaine Allensworth, the lead author of the report.

The report, *Looking Forward to High School and College: Middle Grade Indicators of Readiness in Chicago Public Schools*, follows roughly 20,000 Chicago Public Schools students as they transition from elementary to high school. It is designed to help answer questions about which markers should be used to gauge whether students are ready to succeed in high school and beyond. It also considers the performance levels students need to reach in middle school to have a reasonable chance of succeeding in high school. In light of prior UChicago CCSR research highlighting the importance of the high school transition, as well as growing national attention focused on middle grades, the report provides important insight into where policymakers and practitioners could most effectively intervene and support students.

Key findings from the report include:

**Students’ middle school grades are a crucial point of intervention. Students show considerable growth and declines in grades between fifth and eighth grade, and these changes can have strong implications for high school grades.** Students need very high grades in middle school to be on course to earn high grades in high school. In fact, only those students who leave eighth grade with GPAs of at least 3.0 have even a moderate chance of earning a 3.0 GPA in

high school, the threshold for being considered college-bound. A 3.5 middle school GPA was found to give students about a 50 percent chance of college success. But grades can and do improve in middle school—with real payoffs. For example, a one point difference in GPAs in eighth grade corresponds to a 20 percentage point difference in the likelihood of passing ninth-grade math.

**Whether students are “ready” for high school depends not only on their academic performance in the middle grades but also on the context that they enter into in ninth grade.**

Students with the same academic records in middle school often have different high school outcomes depending on which high school they attend. Furthermore, many students leave the middle grades looking like they are prepared to do well in high school only to see their grades and attendance drop dramatically in ninth grade, putting them at risk of not graduating or not being ready for college. In fact, only about half of students exceeding the state standards on tests and earning a 3.5 GPA in eighth grade earned at least a 3.0 GPA in high school. When students get mostly As and exceed testing standards in eighth grade, and then get Cs or lower in ninth grade, it suggests the problem with low grades is at least has at least as much to do with the high school context as with students’ preparation. This highlights the need for monitoring students’ academic performance closely during the ninth grade year, to make sure they are performing up to their potential, as well as working to improve their attendance and grades before high school.

**Strategies aimed at attendance improvement could likely have as much or more of a payoff for high school and college graduation as efforts aimed at improving test scores.**

Test scores are hard to move and students do not show much variability in their growth on tests throughout middle and high school, when they are followed for multiple years. Meanwhile, attendance shows considerable variation in growth over the middle years, and it is much more predictive of passing high school classes and getting high grades in high school than test scores. As a result, high school outcomes are HIGHER for students who improve their attendance during the middle grade years than for students who improve their test scores, among students who start with the same levels of achievement.

“The most consistent finding throughout this report is that grades and attendance in middle school matter considerably for high school outcomes,” said UChicago CCSR senior researcher Marisa De la Torre, an author of the report. “If our ultimate goal for students is high school and college success, then we would do well to spend at least as much time providing the instructional environment and supports that would lead to higher grades and attendance as schools currently put on improving test scores.”