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Contact: Jessica Puller jpuller@uchicago.edu
773.702.3476

New research: Grades indicate that most students were engaged in learning during remote/hybrid pandemic years

A new UChicago Consortium on School Research study released today asks: **How much did students' grades in spring 2020 and spring 2021 differ from grades during pre-pandemic years?** Researchers used course grades data for students in grades 4–12 in Chicago Public Schools in spring 2020 and spring 2021, and compared them to course grades in spring terms from 2017–19. This study also considered differences in the proportion of grades that were Fs or, in spring 2020, Incompletes—including for different student groups and school serving higher percentages of student groups (i.e., students with different races/ethnicities, genders, free or reduced-price lunch statuses, English learner statuses, housing statuses, and prior test scores).

Researchers found:

1. High school students earned more As (by 8-10 percentage points) during remote and hybrid learning than in pre-pandemic years. (*see Figure 1*)
 - Most of the improvement was among students who had been earning Bs before the pandemic started.
 - Failure rates were fairly comparable to pre-pandemic years.,
2. More students in grades 4-8 failed classes than pre-pandemic (21% in 2021 vs. 11% 2017-19), but two-thirds of their grades were still As and Bs. (*see Figure 2*)
3. Some elementary schools had very high failure rates during remote learning, even compared to similar schools. (*see Figures 3 & 4*)

“These findings point to important wins during early pandemic learning—high school students, in particular, showed a continued engagement learning, as measured by grades,” said Julia Gwynne, UChicago Consortium researcher and lead author of the report. “We’ve heard a lot about teachers, school staff, students, and families going the extra mile for remote learning during the really challenging upheaval from 2020–2021. So as a next step, we’re looking into survey data to see if students and teachers districtwide did report things like more supportive relationships and environments than pre-pandemic.”

This report’s findings are particularly notable for two reasons. The first is that educators, families, and students themselves raised concerns about students’ ability to engage in remote learning. They noted challenges around access to technology, digital literacy, consistent attendance, and motivation, especially for students in communities with high rates of illness, greater job risks or insecurity among parents/guardians, and other stressors that made remote learning more difficult. Yet, strong grades data indicate that most students were able to continue their engagement in school despite these challenges. The second is that the widely-reported test score data pointing to unfinished learning is important—but it doesn’t tell the whole story.

“School and district leaders could use student grades data to prioritize support for students and schools who most need pandemic recovery efforts,” said Elaine Allensworth, report author and Lewis-Sebring Director of the UChicago Consortium. “Thousands of students’ unfinished learning resulted in course failures, and making up both that learning and those credits will be key to their continued academic success.”

Additional details about each of these 3 key findings can be found on p.2–5 in the 6-page research snapshot that accompanies the full report.

About the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research

With the goal of supporting stronger and more equitable educational outcomes for students, the [UChicago Consortium](#) conducts research of high technical quality that informs and assesses policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, families, and communities as we support the search for solutions to the challenges of school improvement. The UChicago Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action and practice but does not advocate for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school improvement by identifying what matters most for student success, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.

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