

# REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

The State of Chicago Public High Schools: 1993 to 2000



## DECLINING HIGH SCHOOL ENROLLMENT: An Exploration of Causes



Elaine M. Allensworth

Shazia Rafiullah Miller

May 2002

Chicago's public high schools experienced significant loss in their student enrollments over the course of the 1990s. In the first half of the decade, the number of students enrolled in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) high schools was fairly stable, but in the fall of the 1997–98 school year it dropped dramatically and continued to decline through fall 1999. In all, the size of the student population dropped by 11.5 percent following the end of social promotion, from 106,429 students in the fall of 1995, to 94,223 in fall 1999. Most of the loss occurred in neighborhood high schools in the ninth and tenth grades. Throughout this period, eighth-grade enrollment in CPS elementary schools was relatively stable. What was

---

*In all, the size of the student population dropped by 11.5 percent following the implementation of the promotion gate, from 106,429 students in the fall of 1995 to 94,223 in fall 1999. Most of the loss occurred in neighborhood high schools in the ninth and tenth grades.*

---

happening? Was the dropout rate rising? Were more students transferring out of the system after elementary school? Or was there a demographic shift in the population of eligible students?

## Impact of the CPS Promotion Policy

The decline in the ninth- and tenth-grade classes was due primarily to Chicago's promotion policy. Students in the third, sixth, and eighth grades who did not meet a minimum score on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills risked retention. Eighth graders who failed to meet the cut-off score could have been retained or, if they were going to turn 15 by December of the following school year, they could have been sent to Academic Preparatory Centers (APCs). Because more students were retained in elementary school or sent to APCs, smaller cohorts were promoted to the ninth grade. Analysis shows that enrollment decline in grades eleven and twelve was mostly the

result of smaller ninth-grade cohorts, but the policy had residual effects on patterns of dropping out and progression through high school as well.

**Changing Dropout Patterns.** Changes in the patterns of students dropping out had an impact on the size of student enrollment in grades eleven and twelve. Although the drop-

out rate remained roughly the same at any given age between 14 and 19 (actually falling slightly by age 19; see Student Performance: Course Taking, Test Scores, and Outcomes), students were dropping out in earlier grades. Due to the promotion policy and rising retention, many more students were entering high school at older ages. As a result, students who dropped out spent fewer years in high school, thereby depressing enrollment.

## Improved Student Progression through High School

We tend to think of progression through school as something that happens in an orderly and predictable way, like marching in a straight line from beginning to end, but students often move more slowly than the standard, and sometimes more quickly.

When we look at whether 18-year-old students were on schedule to graduate (the age at which a student who had never been retained in elementary school would graduate), we find that more students were off schedule at earlier ages because of the system's promotion policy; that is, at a grade lower than we would expect given their age. This often indicates that they were retained, thereby delaying their entrance into high school and further depressing enrollment. And yet, in spite of students being more likely to fall behind at earlier ages, they were more likely to graduate by age 18 in 2000 than in 1993. This seemingly contradictory trend occurred because students who did enter high school moved through grades more steadily and were more likely to graduate on time.

In addition, the students who were off schedule at an early age were more likely to catch up than in the past and students who were on schedule at age 15 were less likely to fall behind in later years.

**Anthony S. Bryk**  
Senior Director  
University of Chicago

**Albert L. Bennett**  
Roosevelt University

**John Q. Easton**  
Consortium on Chicago School Research

**Melissa Roderick**  
University of Chicago

**Penny Bender Sebring**  
University of Chicago

**Mark A. Smylie**  
University of Illinois at Chicago

**Sarah-Kay McDonald**  
Associate Director  
Consortium on Chicago School Research

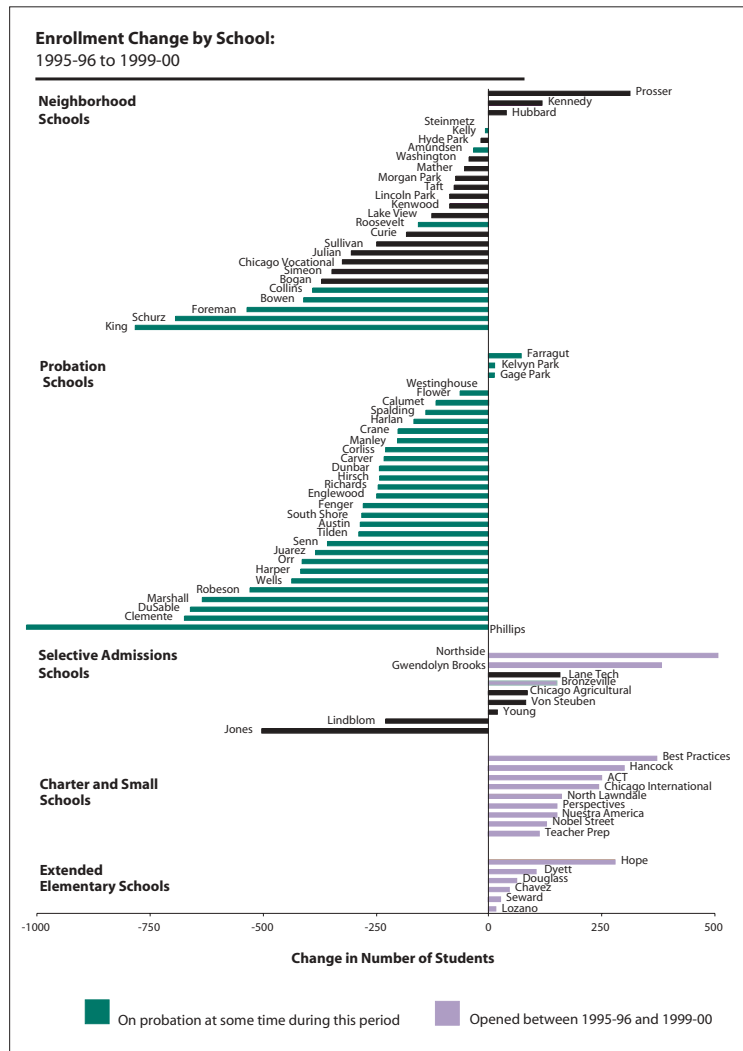
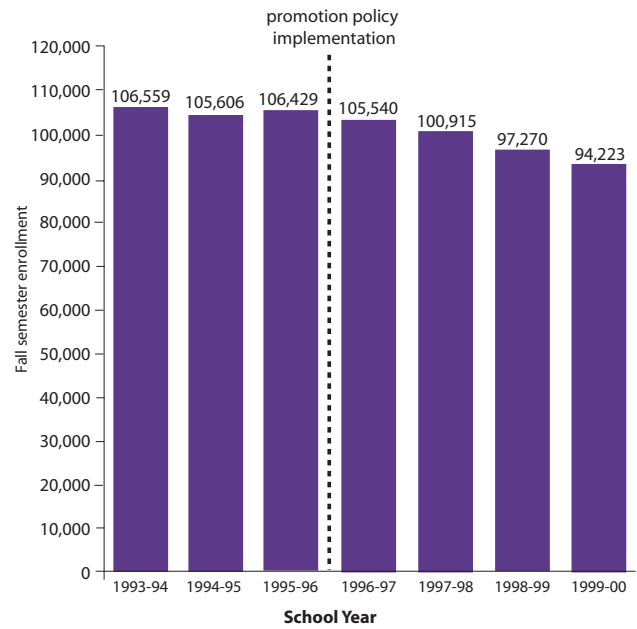
The Consortium on Chicago School Research is an independent federation of Chicago area organizations that conducts research on ways to improve Chicago's public schools and assess the progress of school improvement and reform. Formed in 1990, it is a bipartisan organization that includes faculty from area universities, leadership from the Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Teachers Union, the Chicago Principals and Administrators Association, education advocacy groups, the Illinois State Board of Education, and the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, as well as other key civic and professional leaders.

The Consortium does not argue a particular policy position. Rather, it believes that good policy is most likely to result from a genuine competition of ideas informed by the best evidence that can be obtained.

Consortium on Chicago School Research  
1313 East 60th Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60637  
(773) 702-3364  
(773) 702-2010 fax  
[www.consortium-chicago.org](http://www.consortium-chicago.org)

*... in spite of students being more likely to fall behind at earlier ages, they were more likely to graduate by age 18 in 2000 than in 1993. This seemingly contradictory trend occurred because students who did enter high school moved through grades more steadily and were more likely to graduate on time.*

**CPS High School Enrollment Declines**



## Contents of Full Report

### **Introduction: Decline in Enrollment: The Magnitude of Loss**

*including school-by-school and grade-by-grade losses*

### **Factors Affecting Enrollment**

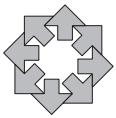
*including magnitude of retention and promotion rates*

### **Students Progression through High School**

*percent of students on schedule, off schedule, dropped out, or leaving system*

### **Trends in Factors that Affect High School Enrollment**

*For a more in-depth look at CPS high school enrollment trends, see our full report at [www.consortium-chicago.org/publications/p53.html](http://www.consortium-chicago.org/publications/p53.html). All reports from The State of Chicago Public High Schools: 1993 to 2000 series are available online. These include Student Performance: Course Taking, Test Scores, and Outcomes and Changing Special Education Enrollments: Causes and Distribution among Schools.*



Consortium on Chicago School Research  
1313 East 60th Street  
Chicago, IL 60637