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CONTACT
Emily Krone
ekrone@uchicago.edu
(773)-834-8036

New UChicago CCSR Report: Schools Implementing Common Core Must Focus on Classroom Order and Support—Not Just Challenging Content—to See Benefits in Student Achievement

Challenging work is a key component of student learning, but challenging work only benefits student achievement in classrooms with strong student behavior, according to a new research brief by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (UChicago CCSR). Asking students to do more difficult work can cause them to disengage or act out, which can lead to lower student achievement despite more challenging assignments. It can also lead to lower grades and higher rates of course failure, which can have long-term consequences for educational attainment. These findings have clear implications for districts nationwide grappling with the new, more rigorous Common Core State Standards. “Many districts implementing Common Core are primarily focused on creating new lesson plans and assessments,” said report lead author Elaine Allensworth. “This research suggests that without concurrent efforts around helping teachers maintain classroom order and student engagement in the more difficult work, Common Core could ultimately lead to worse outcomes for students, particularly in already low-achieving schools.”

The brief, *Setting the Stage for Academic Challenge: Classroom Control and Student Support*, summarizes findings from two UChicago CCSR multi-year studies on high school instruction in Chicago Public Schools. Key findings from the brief include:

- **Students learn the most in classrooms that are both very orderly and challenging.** In classrooms that are very controlled and also have challenging instruction, gains on ACT’s EPAS system from the PLAN to the ACT are 0.92 points higher than classrooms that are average in terms of challenge and order.
- **In disorderly classrooms, students do not learn much, even if the academic demands are high.** In fact, students learn more in orderly classrooms with average demands than in disorderly classrooms with high demands.

- **Order is harder to maintain when work becomes more challenging, particularly in classrooms with low-achieving students.** Teachers in classrooms that have low-skilled students may have a hard time getting students to engage in challenging work; these classrooms are much more likely to have substantial problems with student behavior than classrooms with high-achieving students.
- **Academic challenge can lead to lower grades, unless accompanied by sufficient support for teachers and students.** A substantial body of research shows that students' high school grades and pass rates are much more important than their test scores for both high school and college completion. Unfortunately, increasing challenge raises the risk that students will fail and receive low grades. Grades do not decline, however, if teachers provide high levels of support when asking students to do more difficult work.

“Rigorous standards and work on curriculum are a good first step,” said report author Julia Gwynne. “But ultimately it is the combination of challenging work together with greater attention to classroom control and student support that will lead to college and workplace success.”