On-Track Indicators

A Powerful Data-Based Tool for Action

Recent data from statewide assessments, scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and college remediation needs show that an increasing number of K–12 students are not performing at grade level. As schools look to support these students' learning, some districts are turning to a proven strategy for identifying the students most in need of support early and keeping them on track to graduate. Leveraging this information—termed "on-track indicators"—can make a huge difference, but only if schools and districts have access to robust, timely state data.

On-Track Indicators and Student Interventions Work Together

Systems that incorporate on-track indicators—most commonly called student success systems or early warning systems—make use of a combination of research-backed on-track indicators, which include data on student grades, attendance, and behavior that research has found to be predictive of future performance in high school. With these systems, educators can use available information to quickly and accurately identify which students are on track to graduate from high school and which need additional support to be academically successful. Critically, these systems allow educators to identify students in need of support early, so schools can provide personalized supports well before those students have failed classes or, worse, dropped out.

SUCCESSFUL SYSTEMS

In Chicago, one of the first places to develop and use on-track indicators, success has been clear. **Chicago Public Schools** raised the rate of students on track to graduate by nearly 30 percentage points in seven years—with 7,000 more students graduating every year than before the district implemented the system in its high schools. The district expanded its on-track system to earlier grades once district leaders saw the success of the secondary school early warning system. The To&Through Middle Grades Network uses academic and nonacademic measures on an indicator dashboard available to school personnel. The network also provides support for schools and practitioners through in-school coaching, personalized professional development opportunities, and quarterly meetings during which practitioners can build skills and solutions using quantitative and qualitative data.

Providing resources for educators to learn to use on-track indicators is an important component of the **Massachusetts Early Warning Indicator System** (EWIS) as well. EWIS, which uses data from across the K–12 system, offers webinars and materials that help educators learn how to best use the system. Massachusetts developed EWIS alongside stakeholders, holding work groups that led to enhancements to the platform to meet stakeholder needs.

Like Massachusetts, Wisconsin's **Madison Metropolitan School District** designed an early warning system that incorporates on-track indicators from more than just high school and is heavily informed by stakeholder needs. The district makes use of a training and feedback approach that the system's educators have said is targeted and actionable.

Innovative Indicators Provide New Ways to Support Students

While traditional student success or early warning systems rely heavily on quantitative data (e.g., number of absences, course grades), research-based models are increasingly incorporating qualitative data as well. Qualitative data is especially important as researchers and educators explore the role that school climate and student feelings of belonging play in a student's persistence through high school.

Some schools and districts are working with The GRAD Partnership's comprehensive student success model, which expands traditional on-track indicators and integrates them with other research-based measures that focus on student well-being, connectedness, and holistic supports. As part of the student success model, schools develop student support teams that take the following approach:

- Meet regularly;
- Analyze a wide range of holistic predictive data to monitor all students' progression to high school graduation and readiness for postsecondary success; and
- When the data indicates that additional supports maybe needed, talk with school staff, students, and families to gain insight and identify the most strategic point of action, which could be at the individual, classroom, grade, or school level.

Teams are empowered to take action to change practices so they can improve student learning and experiences and to monitor the impact of these actions, modifying them as needed until they work. Chicago school leaders recently began using Cultivate and Elevate, a set of surveys designed to better understand students' school and classroom experiences. Administered multiple times throughout the year, the surveys ask questions about classroom conditions and supportive relationships with teachers and school staff. This data can be used in tandem with student-specific data to tell a robust story of what Chicago school leaders should be focused on.

Leaders Must Carefully Consider Equity and Potential Bias in Emerging Models

The growing adoption of student success and early warning systems and the innovative emerging models and practices that schools are adopting provide a wealth of opportunities for states and districts to learn from each other and adapt a model to best fit their specific needs. However, it is essential that education decisionmakers rely on the robust existing research base about predictors of academic success to ensure that the design and implementation of their systems are accurate and free from bias.

Additional data points can tell a fuller story of student experiences for often-marginalized student groups. But unvalidated data points can rest on stereotypes and structural inequities. States and districts can take advantage of what they know about their own communities, but they must be sure that new or more subjective measures are evidence based and do not perpetuate biases, as was the case in one state's early warning system. Education data must always be used to open doors for students, never close them. Student success and early warning systems are no exception.

States Have an Important Role in Supporting the Use of Student Success and Early Warning Systems

Many schools and districts have already adopted these systems or are moving toward the next iteration of this work to bring educators and school leaders together regularly to review student data, look for patterns, and find ways to better target supports and improve learning conditions for students. But states have a central role in ensuring that local leaders and school teams have access to the longitudinal data and supports they need to develop and implement these systems. State leaders can support districts and schools by:

- **Making use of their statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs) to securely provide real-time, individual-level data back to districts and schools.** This data system infrastructure enables district and school leaders to implement student success and early warning systems by looking at state data over time side by side with district- and classroom-level data. Doing so enables educators to see a complete picture of their students' performance across different areas and understand how that performance has changed over time.

- **Providing state-level tools or models that districts can use.** While some districts or schools will choose to build their own student success or early warning systems, others will look to the state for a model they can simply adopt. State leaders can help schools and districts access existing student success or early warning systems tools that fit their local needs.

- **Using state policy to build in time and support for educators and leaders to review student data and develop meaningful, personalized interventions.** Student success and early warning systems may create more efficient ways to identify students who are at risk of dropping out or not prepared for postsecondary success, but teachers and school leaders will ultimately be working with these students. Educators need time for data use, training on data literacy, and well-resourced supports to connect students with the interventions and learning condition improvements that will help them the most. State guidance can also help local leaders see opportunities to use federal funding for this work; both Louisiana and Kentucky leveraged Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund funds to make new investments in early warning systems for schools and districts.

Schools and districts can use student success and early warning systems to quickly identify students at risk of dropping out and proactively provide supports to keep them on track—but only if they have access to the data they need. After years of investment in their SLDSs, many states now have a tool with tremendous potential to help educators support individual students' success. A state data system that provides longitudinal, complete, and real-time data back to educators should be the backbone of any successful student success or early warning system effort. With access to this data and existing research on how to keep students on track for graduation, educators across the country have a new, evidence-based way to support their students.