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Taking Action Based on Freshman Indicators

Paige Ponder • June 2009

Topic: Dropout Prevention

Practice: Data Systems

Highlights

- The Chicago Public Schools Department of Graduation Pathways supports schools in using data on its freshman.
- The department provides schools with a Freshman Watch List to help identify incoming freshman who need immediate interventions to be on-track for graduation at the end of the freshman year.
- The district supports Freshman On-Track Lab Action Research Project Schools with additional staff who design a set of practices for students who are off-track. The artifacts, practices, and templates from the lab school will be disseminated throughout the district.

About the Interviewee

Paige Ponder joined the Department of Graduation Pathways at Chicago Public Schools in August 2007. As Senior Project Manager, she managed the Freshmen On-Track Labs initiative and developed the Early Warning Indicator reports, focused on piloting and evaluating new ways for the district to better support students during their critical freshman year. In September 2008, she was named

Director and in this role leads district's comprehensive drop-out prevention strategy which encompasses all credit recovery, re-enrollment, and youth development work in addition to the continuing focus on prevention and early intervention with freshmen.

Prior to joining Chicago Public Schools, Paige was Director of Product Research and Development at The Grow Network/McGraw-Hill, an internationally recognized leader in assessment reporting and personalized instruction. Before joining The Grow Network in 2002, Paige was Assistant Principal at Holy Cross School, a parochial elementary school in South Bronx, NY. At Holy Cross, Paige was a seventh grade advisor, special projects manager, budget director, development director, volunteer liaison, and school gardener.

Paige earned an MBA in 2002 from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and a BA in 1996 from the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. Paige enjoys spending time with her husband and her two bouncing baby boys, Max and Sebastian.

Full Transcript

My name is Paige Ponder. I'm the Director of the Department of Graduation Pathways in the Office of High Schools and High School Programs at Chicago Public Schools.

The purpose of my department is simply to raise the graduation rate and reduce the dropout rate in CPS across the district, and we have a particular focus on freshmen and the early indicator of the freshman on-track rates. This is an indicator that we found to be really very useful and really profound in terms of understanding how well our schools are supporting freshmen in this first really critical watershed year of high school. A student who, at the end of his freshman year, has earned five credits—and Chicago has a 24 credit graduation requirement, so five credits at the end of the freshman year and failed no more than one semester of a core academic course, that student is considered to be on-track. We have found this indicator to be really useful in focusing our efforts around helping students develop those behaviors that we know will support them as they go towards graduation, and those behaviors are showing up for school, going to class, and doing as well as they can and doing all of the work required to pass that class.

We've developed a set of early-warning indicator reports, the Freshman Watchlist, and that is simply a spreadsheet that high schools can download from our internal data system, and it has a list of all of their incoming freshmen and information from their eighth-grade experience. After the first quarter, then we transition to what we call the Freshman Success Report, and this is essentially the exact same thing, but we drop all of the eighth-grade data because it's pretty stale at that point, and we bring in all of the first quarter ninth-grade data and add all of the academic, the core academic subjects—so English, math, social studies, and science—and use the exact same system of intervention flags or warning flags to say, if a student has a D or lower in any of those subject areas or has high absences, then those students are flagged for intervention.

My department, Graduation Pathways, supports schools in looking at incoming freshmen in a number of ways. So we develop these reports, we have a presentation that we do that sort of says, “Here’s what the reports look like. Here’s why they are designed this way, and here’s our suggestions for who in a school should be looking at which pieces of data and what those people should be doing about it.” So we have a set of suggestions, but of course that’s going to look different at each school. We have what we call the Freshman On-Track Labs Action Research Project. We have two full-time staff people in each of six schools across the city whose sole professional mission is to increase the freshman on-track rate at that school and really design a strategy for supporting freshman that is unique to that school, that works for that school and implement that strategy and really create some new practices at the school to provide freshman with early supports. We’ll have the benefit of the experience of the Freshman On-Track Labs project and have some much more concrete examples of how schools undertook freshman interventions and be able to give all schools different types of artifacts and templates, for example, templates for conducting one-on-one goal-setting conferences with students. So we’ll have all of those kinds of examples that schools can really evaluate and use what makes sense to them in terms of how they want to structure their interventions with freshman. The data will always be the foundation and the filter by which schools will know what they need to best serve their students.