

**Research and Public Informing Agenda for  
The Consortium on Chicago School Research  
at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute  
January 2011**

**Who We Are**

The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute was founded in 1990 after the passage of the Chicago School Reform Act that decentralized governance of the city's public schools. University of Chicago researchers partnered with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), other local researchers, and school reform organizations to form CCSR to study the effects of this landmark restructuring. Since then CCSR has continued to undertake research focused on Chicago and its many school reform efforts.

CCSR has distinguished itself as a unique organization that conducts research of high technical quality that is accessible to practitioners and policymakers. CCSR's place-based research model has allowed the organization to remain focused on issues that matter to practitioners on the ground, build a cumulative knowledge base, apply findings to policies and practice, and respond quickly to emerging questions and policy changes. We do not argue for particular policies or programs. Rather, our mission is to help improve the capacity for school reform by building knowledge about the core problems in schooling and what matters for students' success. Working in partnerships with practitioners, we participate in the search for solutions to the complex challenges facing the Chicago Public Schools and urban education nationally.

**What We Do**

CCSR couples the best techniques of social science research with a deep commitment to helping practitioners and policymakers address the central issues facing urban schools. We pursue these priorities through several interconnected research activities. CCSR *conceptualizes and develops frameworks* for understanding school improvement and student performance issues. These frameworks provide practitioners with a common language for discussing issues, a focus for identifying strategies to address problems, and evidence about what works.

*Indicator development* is also a critical activity for CCSR. Developing high-quality indicators helps schools identify potential leverage points for tackling important issues. Good measurement also brings conceptual clarity by defining the phenomena and outcomes of interest. It translates a research finding to a measurable concept that can be linked to student outcomes and tracked over time.

We also conduct *theory-driven evaluation of district policies and programs*. In too many cases, evaluation is conducted in ways that produce summary judgments of specific initiatives, but does not build the district's capacity to improve. CCSR takes a different approach by conducting theory-driven evaluations in which we work to discern and test the theory of action behind reforms. We seek to help the district learn from past and current initiatives by using rigorous methods (i.e., causal modeling and inference) to isolate the effects of particular changes in policy. This approach has the potential to stimulate new policies that build on past lessons and helps place new evidence in the larger context of what we know matters for school improvement.

## **Where We Are Going**

Our goal for 2011 – 2014 is to pursue a research agenda that is useful to Chicago Public Schools (CPS) leadership and schools, while contributing to national discussions on school reform. In consultation with key stakeholders in the education community – including practitioners, policymakers, foundation leaders, researchers, and district leaders – we have identified several areas to focus our research that will address critical issues facing local schools in Chicago and hold significant implications nationally. This agenda builds on the lessons learned from our most recent work by emphasizing research in four primary areas coupled with our agenda for public informing: (1) rigor and readiness in high schools, (2) middle grade preparation for high school, (3) human capital and professional capacity, and (4) schools as organizations.

### ***Rigor and Readiness in High School***

There is a growing consensus that the role of high schools must go beyond ensuring students receive high school diplomas to preparing students for college, work, and life. Research has found that the rigor of students' high school coursework and the skills students develop in high school are critical for access to college as well as persistence and performance once there. Preparation is a particular concern for racial/ethnic minority and low-income students, as they are much less likely to leave high school with the qualifications that are critical for access to college, especially four-year schools. Moreover, poor high school preparation continues to have consequences for students

even after college enrollment. Increasing the academic rigor has been almost universally accepted as the primary strategy for preparing more students for college. Under this research strand, we will define college readiness and how to measure it and examine what strategies promote college readiness and improve test scores and grades.

Since 2003, CCSR has been engaged in a unique partnership with CPS to track all graduates into college and work and to inform the building of support systems for ensuring that students and schools are focused on postsecondary success. The CPS postsecondary initiative has become a national model; rather than simply espousing the importance of college, districts have begun to follow Chicago's lead in implementing ongoing systems of data supports that allow them to assess their status and measure progress in this area. Our research has highlighted how low qualifications, particularly low coursework performance, create barriers to college access and college graduation for urban students. At the same time, it has shown that many low-income students enroll in colleges with selectivity levels below what they are qualified to attend— a phenomenon we termed “undermatching.” Under this research strand we will investigate the role of college choice, particularly college match, in college retention and the processes by which the institutional characteristics of more selective colleges may lead to more positive college outcomes for CPS graduates.

### ***Middle Grade Preparation for High School***

Raising high school graduation remains a high priority in Chicago and in districts around the country. Yet one of the central puzzles of school reform is that the gains we have seen nationally in elementary reading achievement are not translating into successful student performance in the middle grades and high school. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), for example, have shown progress in reading achievement among fourth graders but a persistent slump at eighth grade. The presumption of many reforms that success in the early grades—especially in reading—would prepare students for high school success has not been borne out by the data.

We have focused much of our recent attention on this problem of high school success. We will continue with this line of work and investigate strategies for increasing the number of students who graduate high school ready for college. Current practice for gauging progress in the middle grades, and placing students into high school programs, is often based on an arbitrary set of standards. Students are often placed into programs in ninth grade based on whether their eighth grade scores are above or below the national median, while middle schools judge their success based on whether students meet proficiency standards. However, there is no research showing that either of these makes a good standard by which to judge high school readiness. As opposed to many who focus

narrowly on test scores or student behavior, CCSR research shows that the one factor most directly related to high school success, graduation and college enrollment is students' performance in their courses.

To address high rates of high school dropout and low rates of college-readiness, a crucial starting point is ensuring that students enter high school with the cognitive and behavioral skills that make high school graduation and college-ready standards attainable by the end of high school. While research gives some direction on the indicators of students' school performance and behavior that are highly predictive of later academic outcomes, it does not provide definitions of high school readiness that can be easily used by practitioners. Increasing high school readiness rests on elementary schools having a deeper understanding of their students' performance and what strategies may have an impact. The research strand on the middle grades will include defining and measuring high school readiness and identifying strategies to increase it.

### ***Human Capital and Professional Capacity***

The professional capacity of school staff is an essential lever for improving student learning, as indicated through CCSR's work on the essential supports for school success. Teachers' knowledge of subject matter and effective pedagogies determines the quality of instruction students receive. Similarly, principals can powerfully affect student learning by focusing teachers' attention on instructional improvement and developing initiatives for increasing professional learning. Over the last few years CCSR has conducted several studies examining the human capital issues facing CPS and how the district can support the professional growth of teachers and principals. This work has identified roadblocks principals face in improving schools and how they manage these challenges. It has also shown how quality mentoring for new teachers is related to positive teaching experiences. Finally, we have traced trends in teacher retention and have begun studying factors important for developing an effective system of teacher evaluation.

Research in this area remains important as CPS and urban districts nationwide grapple with how to train teachers and principals to work in urban settings and to staff newly created and reconstituted schools with effective educators. Important issues to examine as part of this research strand include schools' ability to recruit, train, support and retain skillful principals and teachers, and the implementation and efficacy of performance feedback programs. In addition, it is important to explore the capacity of school staff to form a viable professional community that shares responsibility for student learning and creates a climate of mutual support for instructional improvement.

## *Schools as Organizations*

CPS has initiated school reform efforts that include autonomous and flexible school governance, strong principal leadership, innovative and high quality teaching, and the collaborative development of schools as models of practice. This focus has led to a proliferation of new school types – small, charter, contract, and performance schools – often emphasizing not only autonomy and innovation but also the development of a range of high quality schooling options for parents and students. It has also prompted the district to close or “turnaround” schools for either low enrollment or chronic underperformance. This research strand will focus CCSR efforts on understanding and evaluating initiatives that seek to change the organizational structures of schools and the district as a strategy for improvement.

Given the importance of the CCSR’s five essential supports—leadership, parent-community ties, professional capacity, student-centered learning climate, and ambitious instruction—for improving student learning, CCSR will also seek to understand how best to organize urban elementary and secondary schools for success as a central component of our current and future research projects.

## *Sharing Our Work*

Underlying all of CCSR’s work is a deep commitment to producing research that drives school and district improvement. This commitment requires robust communication between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners at every stage of the research cycle – from the initial planning stage to final presentations of results. These communications must be robust, transparent and reciprocal. Our stakeholders help shape our research agenda, make sense of results and frame findings while simultaneously challenging and offering critique of our assumptions and analyses. CCSR, in turn, strives to make findings easily digestible to practitioners and policymakers at the school, district, state and nationally levels. To maximize our impact both locally and nationally we employ a variety of communications methods and strategies. Our dissemination efforts include easy-to-read reports for major research projects and frequent presentations to district, state and national audiences. Through our Data Practice Collaborative we work closely with schools to design data reports and to help school-based practitioners who are in search of solutions. CCSR is also committed to working with other similarly focused research partnership organizations, as well as practitioners and policymakers locally and nationally, interested in conducting problem-focused research for the improvement of public schools and schooling.

In sum, building knowledge to improve the quality of urban schooling is a multi-faceted, long term endeavor. It demands careful attention to complex information that is constantly changing. It requires sophisticated analytical skills to decipher test-score trends given changing test forms, changes in demographics, shifting policy tides and a mobile student and teacher population. It also requires consideration of indicators beyond standardized tests such as school persistence, high school placement and graduation, and entry and success in postsecondary education. Finally, it means being an interactive partner in the central mission of helping students succeed. The Consortium on Chicago School Research plays this role for Chicago Public Schools promoting rigorous, independent, and longitudinal analysis of school and system progress.