

HOW ACADEMIC LEADERS CAN IMPROVE GRADUATION RATES USING COURSE FAILURE DATA

One or more failed courses can have more serious implications for a student’s future than many of us realize. And now that you’re at least two grading periods into the school year, it’s the perfect time of year to review—and reduce—the number of students who are failing courses.

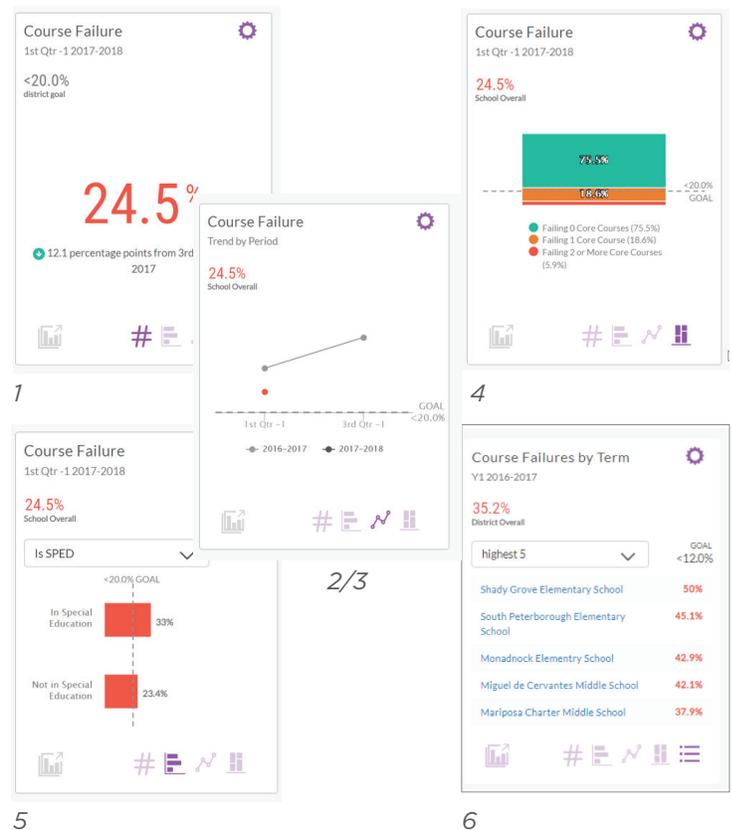
Dropout prevention research has shown that students who failed one English or math course in middle school were much less likely to graduate from high school (Balfanz, Herzog & Mac Iver, 2007). The University of Chicago’s research has shown that ninth graders who succeed in earning a substantial number of full-year credits without failing more than one semester of a core class are far more likely than their off-track peers to graduate from high school. (Roderick, Kelley-Kemple, Johnson, & Beechum, 2014).¹

The good news is that you can do something to help students avoid course failures. Chicago Public Schools targeted the reduction of course failures in ninth grade starting in 2007. The district saw improvements in ninth grade course performance carry over through later grades and ultimately saw an increase in graduation rates (Roderick et al., 2014).²

One easy way to track how well your school system is reducing the percentage of students who are failing one or more courses is to use Schoolzilla’s [Mosaic District Progress Monitoring](#), which provides real-time tracking by student, course, school, and district. We’ll show you how to answer the [eight essential questions](#) in Mosaic* and then provide you with a worksheet to support your data-driven conversation, regardless of what tool you use.

Eight Essential Questions

1. How many students are failing one or more courses? How does this compare to our stated district or school goals?
2. Compared to earlier this year, are fewer students failing one or more courses over time?
3. How does the current course failure rate compare to outcomes from a year ago for a given school? Is that trend surprising? Why or why not?
4. How many students have no course failures? One course failure? Two or more course failures?
5. What equity challenges do we have related to course failures? Are certain groups of students (e.g., particular schools, grades, race, gender) overrepresented in course failure rates? How might that inform the interventions we design to reduce the number of students failing courses?
6. Do we see any outliers? Are there schools who have especially high or low course failure rates that deserve recognition or require intervention?



7. How are similar schools performing on this metric? What can they learn from each other?

	Chronic Absence ↓↑	Suspension Rate - ↓↑ Ongoing	Course Failures by Term ↑↓	Normed Benchmark ↓↑ ELA
Middle School Overall DISTRICT GOAL	21.2% <10.0%	20.4% <10.0%	31.3% <12.0%	37.4% >50.0%
Desert Rock Middle	14.9%	19.5%	21.6%	40.6%
Twin Peaks Middle School	19.1%	21.5%	26.9%	34.4%
Westish Academy Middle School	17.6%	23.2%	29.4%	34.5%
North Meadow Middle School	21.5%	20.5%	32.6%	39%
Mariposa Charter Middle School	15.9%	19.8%	37.9%	38%
Miguel de Cervantes Middle School	37.4%	18%	42.1%	37.4%

8. What else is going on with the student or school that might affect course failure?



Now what?

- CLEAN.** Clean the data, but don't wait for perfection before you share. Presenting the data with some data quality errors can also make a compelling case for fixing the underlying problem.
- SHARE.** Shining a light on challenges and bright spots is critical to driving action to better support students. Ensure that you're sharing the data with staff who can intervene to change the trajectory for students and in a context where staff feels supported in intervening.
- MONITOR.** Make the time to monitor the data regularly. Pick a cadence that is tied to real outcomes and opportunities to intervene (like grading periods), and stick with it.

**Data portrayed is fictitious and for illustration purposes only.*

Eight Essential Questions Worksheet

	<p>How many students are failing one or more courses? How does this compare to our stated district or school goals?</p>	
	<p>Compared to earlier this year, are fewer students failing one or more courses over time?</p>	
	<p>How does the current course failure rate compare to outcomes from a year ago for a given school? Is that trend surprising? Why or why not?</p>	
	<p>How many students have no course failures? One course failure? Two or more course failures?</p>	
	<p>What equity challenges do we have related to course failures? Are certain groups of students (e.g., particular schools, grades, race, gender) overrepresented in course failure rates? How might that inform the interventions we design to reduce the number of students failing courses?</p>	
	<p>Do we see any outliers? Are there schools who have especially high or low course failure rates that deserve recognition or require intervention?</p>	
	<p>How are similar schools performing on this metric? What can they learn from each other?</p>	
	<p>What else is going on with the student or school that might affect course failure?</p>	

References

1. You can read more about the data insights from the University of Chicago's research here: <https://toandthrough.uchicago.edu/data-insights>.
2. The Network for College Success at the University of Chicago has put many of its resources, including data protocols and sample dashboards, online in a Freshman On Track Toolkit at <https://ncs.uchicago.edu/on-track-toolkit-index>.

Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., & Mac Iver, D. J., (2007). Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions. *Educational Psychologist*, 42 (4), 223-235. <http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS/images/TDMG/DougPreventingStudentDisengagement.pdf>

The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. (2014). Preventable Failure: Improvements in Long-Term Outcomes when High Schools Focused on the Ninth Grade Year. Roderick, M., Kelley-Kemple, T., Johnson, D. W., & Beechum, N. O.