

The Impact of High Schools on Student Achievement within the Los Angeles Unified School District: A Value-added Approach

A POLICY BRIEF OF THE LSEAT

November 2008

Highlights:

- In this study, a student's chances of graduating on time from an LAUSD high school are less than 50/50; one-quarter graduate with the successful completion of the A-G sequence of courses;
- Students who begin high school with particular academic experiences—limited English skills, low test scores, and middle school course failures—are among the least likely to graduate from LAUSD high schools, particularly with adequate college preparation;
- Pre-high school experiences alone do not account for all the variation we see in student outcomes—the LAUSD high school a student attends impacts on-time high school and A-G completion;
- Some LAUSD high schools enable first-time freshmen who enter with poor records of academic achievement and/or limited English skills to complete high school four years later and complete A-G requirements at rates that significantly exceed the district average;
- Attending a small LAUSD high school increases a student's chance of graduating on time by 25% and more than doubles a student's odds of completing the A-G sequence of courses;
- One in three graduates fall short of meeting the A-G requirements by 30 credits or less by the end of four years of high school. Some LAUSD high schools effectively narrow this gap.



Marisa Saunders, David Silver and Estela Zarate

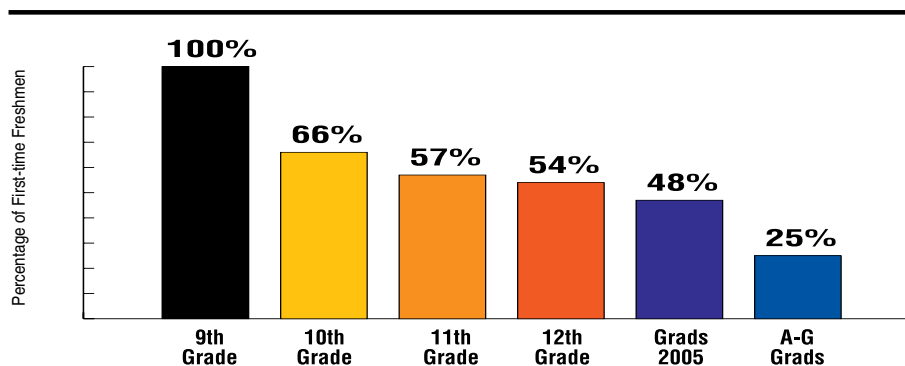
Past research has shown that performance in middle school (grades, test scores, English skill level) is a strong predictor of whether or not students will graduate from high school and move on to college. This study suggests that, while past performance matters, it does not set an inevitable trajectory. Students who enter high school with similar prior educational experiences can have tremendously different rates of success depending on which high school they attend.

Conducted in collaboration with the LAUSD, this study analyzed district data to examine the effectiveness of district high schools in enabling various groups of students to move from the 9th grade to on-time high school graduation four years later, and to graduation with the successful completion of the college preparatory courses required for entry into California's public university system (A-G). Using a value-added approach that considers past achievement to compare schools on the progress they make with students during their time in school, our analyses were based on the cohort of 48,561 students who entered the 9th grade for the first time in 2001-02 and were expected to be members of LAUSD's graduating class of 2004-05. This study looks at what happens to these students and how the experiences of students differ across district high schools, using on-time high school graduation and A-G course completion rates as fundamental indicators of an effective education.

How Many Students Graduated On-Time and with A-G Course Completion?

LAUSD 9th graders have about a 50/50 chance of graduating from high school on time. Four years after beginning high school, in 2001-02, 48% of LAUSD first time freshman graduated.¹ Departure from the system is most prevalent between the 9th and 10th grade, with 34% of first-time freshmen (16,800 students) failing to move on to the 10th grade on time. Of these students, 4,312 left the system before the next school year, and three-quarters repeated the 9th grade. One-quarter of entering 9th graders graduated four years later with the necessary courses required for entry to the state’s public university system (University of California (UC)/ California State University (CSU)).

Figure 1
Persistence Rates



What Academic Experiences Impact On-Time Graduation and A-G Completion Rates?

Students who enter with limited English skills, low test scores, and with poor academic records in middle school are among the least likely to graduate from LAUSD high schools, particularly with adequate college preparation. On the other hand, students who demonstrate academic preparedness as they enter the high school setting (for instance, those who successfully complete algebra by the 9th grade), graduate at higher rates and with A-G completion.

- **Limited English Skills.** Only one-third of cohort members who entered the 9th grade in 2001-02 with limited English skills graduated four years later. Approximately one-tenth (11%) of first-time freshmen designated as Limited English Proficient (LEP) graduated with the successful completion of the A-G sequence of courses.
- **Low Standardized Test Scores.** Almost three-quarters (70%) of LAUSD’s cohort of first-time 9th graders in 2001-02 scored “below basic” or “far below basic” on either the math or English Language Arts portion of the California Standards Test (CST) in 9th grade. Less than half, (46%) of these relatively low-performers graduated from high school four years later. Approximately 19% of first-time 9th graders who scored “below basic” or “far below basic” successfully completed the sequence of A-G courses.
- **Middle School Academic Performance.** Nearly two-thirds of first-time freshmen received at least two grades of D or lower in middle school. The trajectories of students who enter high school with exceedingly poor records of academic achievement (more than seven D/Fs) are the likeliest to end in high school dropout (only 26% graduate four years later). In contrast, students who begin high school with relatively good records of middle school academic performance

¹ That the graduating class of 2004-05 was not subject to passing the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) as a condition for receiving their high school diploma suggests that current on-time completion rates are lower than those reported here. Research has shown that graduation rates fell in California in 2006 (especially for Latino and African American students) to the lowest rates the state has seen since 1997.

(less than two D/Fs) most often graduate four years later (71%). However, the outcomes for those students who struggle academically at times, and demonstrate “poor-average” performance are less determined. This “middle third,” who received between two to six D/Fs in middle school, are almost equally likely to drop out as they are to graduate. For them, the quality of their high school experience is most likely to make a difference. Of first-time freshmen in 2001-02 who received between two to six D/Fs in middle school, over half (55%) graduated from high school on time, and less than one-quarter (23%) graduated with the successful completion of A-G course requirements.

- **Algebra Course-Taking.** Students who enter 9th grade well prepared to take and pass the first semester of college preparatory algebra are far more likely to graduate in four years and to graduate with A-G course completion. Many of the most proficient students, of course, pass algebra before the 9th grade and do not need to repeat the course as 9th graders. Even excluding these students, 69% of those who passed algebra in the 9th grade graduated, and 45% graduated having completed the A-G requirements successfully.

Which LAUSD Comprehensive High Schools are More Effective in Enabling Students to Graduate On Time and with A-G Course Completion?

Notwithstanding the strong relationship between the pre-high school academic experiences of students and on-time high school and A-G completion, our analyses also reveal that pre-high school experiences alone do not account for all the variation we see in these outcomes across the district. Some schools within the district are more effective than others in enabling students to graduate on time and with the necessary preparation to enter California’s public university system.

- **More Effective Comprehensive High Schools with English Learners.** Nine LAUSD comprehensive high schools enabled English learners to graduate on time and *with* the successful completion of A-G courses at a rate that exceeded the district average for these students. At Gardena High School, for example, 48% of first-time freshmen designated as LEP graduated four years later. At Fairfax High School, 22% of students with limited English skills graduated with A-G completion—a rate that is double that of the district for this population.

What is the Latino Scorecard Education Action Team (LSEAT)?

In 2000, United Way of Greater Los Angeles published *American Dream Makers: Facts and Opinions about Los Angeles’ Emerging Latino Majority* to provide a snapshot of Los Angeles’ Latino community. This initial report communicated a clear need to focus energies and resources on moving forward an action agenda. Three years later, a coalition of preeminent local organizations joined together and produced the *Latino Scorecard 2003: Grading the American Dream*, and challenged Los Angeles to put the knowledge produced in its first report for the benefits of all of LA County. In the realm of education, the Scorecard provided recommendations that included the creation of a Latino-African American coalition to advocate for the provision of college preparatory classes to all LAUSD students, hold schools accountable for graduation rates, and to conduct research on the best practices of LA schools that have a strong record of student achievement.

Authorized by the *Huizar Resolution to Research Best Practices within LAUSD to Increase Student Achievement* (February 2004), this study is a first step in identifying best schooling practices that will benefit all students and lead to the successful completion of high school and college preparation requirements. The LSEAT is the advisory group that has worked with the LAUSD to secure data and design the studies that have been produced as a result of the resolution.

- **More Effective High Schools with Students with low 9th Grade CST Scores.** Eight large comprehensive high schools graduated poor California Standards Test (CST) performers with the successful completion of A-G courses above the district average. Carson Senior High enabled nearly 60% of 9th graders who scored “below basic” or “far below basic” on either the math or English Language Arts portion of the CST to graduate from high school four years later, and more than one-third graduated with A-G completion. The A-G completion rate at Carson is nearly double the district average of 19% with this population of students.
- **More Effective High Schools with Poor-Average Middle School Performers.** In total, eight comprehensive LAUSD high schools had on-time graduation and A-G completion rates that exceeded the average rates at which the district graduated these students and enabled A-G completion. For example, first-time freshmen who received between two to six D/Fs in middle school and attended Cleveland (60% and 33%), or Carson Senior High School (59% and 31%) were able to complete high school four years later and complete A-G requirements at rates that significantly exceeded the district average for these students (55% and 23%, respectively).

See Appendix A for a full listing of LAUSD’s most effective comprehensive high schools for the populations described above.

What School Characteristics Enable On-Time Graduation and A-G Completion?

Additional studies are required to adequately answer this question. However, our analysis of LAUSD’s small high schools point to small size, theme-oriented and/or interdisciplinary curricula that engage students as “more effective.” Seventy-one percent of first-time freshmen attending small schools in 2001-02 graduated on time and 54% completed the A-G sequence of courses compared to 45% and 22%, respectively, for first-time freshmen attending large comprehensive high schools. LAUSD small schools are more likely to be successful with first-time freshmen with limited English skills, and those that enter high school underprepared. Appendix B lists LAUSD’s *most* effective small schools in enabling particular populations to graduate on time and provides corresponding A-G rates.

Why do so Many Students Fall Short of Meeting the A-G Requirements?

One in three LAUSD graduates fall short of meeting the A-G requirements by 30 credits or less. This speaks loudly to the need to identify those practices that allow for successful completion.

A comparison of LAUSD comprehensive high schools reveals that some schools do a much better job of enabling a relatively high percentage of students to graduate with the successful completion of A-G courses, across all subgroups, with few students falling short of meeting A-G by 30 credits or less. At Marshall Senior High, irrespective of prior academic experiences, less than 1% of first-time freshmen graduated four years later shy of meeting the A-G course requirements.

What to do?

Improving district high schools is a formidable challenge that will require a long-term, comprehensive, and multi-faceted strategy. Other studies confirm that signs a student may be at risk of not graduating emerge early on. However, our findings suggest that a high school a student attends can make a difference, supporting the idea that schools need to ensure both the social and academic needs of students are met *prior* to students’ entry into the high school environment *and within* the high school setting.

The identification of district high schools that are “more effective” with students who begin high school at greatest risk of not graduating provides some reason for optimism. The district must take a hard look at the schools identified as more effective, learn what they are doing well, and spread their practices to other district high schools. As such, additional studies are required to gain a fuller understanding of the educational practices associated with the academic growth and success of students attending the schools identified as “more effective.”

Our findings suggest that improving district high schools also requires consideration of the following:

- Exclusive reliance on test-based accountability measures such as AYP and API to determine school effectiveness is inadequate. AYP and API cannot capture the impact of these school differences as no attention is paid to the wide range of academic experiences held by first-time freshmen. The district must adopt measures of effectiveness that consider the high school practices and experiences that prepare and lead to high school graduation and postsecondary opportunities.
- The district must utilize measures of effectiveness that can provide students and parents with information that is distinctly more relevant and informative than test scores alone—i.e., high school graduation and A-G completion rates.
- The district must look into the unique attributes that account for some of the significant differences found in on-time graduation and A-G completion rates between the small high schools and large comprehensive high schools.
- The district must examine the high school practices at schools that have effectively closed the gap between A-G completion and “near A-G” completion.

While we have identified schools that have a greater positive impact on the academic trajectories and success of its students than other district high schools, most district high schools continue to fall short of enabling *all* entering freshman to graduate and to graduate with the courses required for California’s public university system. Graduation from high school prepared for a wide range of postsecondary options must be the standard for all students. These findings can inform those efforts.

Read the full report at:

www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu/LSEAT/

Appendix A:

More Effective LAUSD Large Comprehensive High Schools with First-time Freshmen with Limited English Skills, Low Standardized Test Scores, and with Poor-Average Middle School Academic Performance by On-Time Completion and A-G Completion Rates

SCHOOL	<i>Percent Completing HS On Time</i>	<i>Percent Completed A-G</i>
<i>Limited English Skills</i>		
Gardena	48%	14%
Verdugo Hills	46%	15%
El Camino Real	44%	22%
Chatsworth	43%	14%
Jefferson	42%	18%
Lincoln	40%	12%
Polytechnic	40%	18%
Fairfax	39%	22%
Marshall	37%	34%
<i>Low Standardized Test Scores</i>		
Polytechnic	57%	21%
Carson	56%	35%
Marshall	53%	49%
Eagle Rock	53%	25%
No. Hollywood	53%	21%
Jefferson	52%	26%
Verdugo Hills	48%	23%
Franklin	47%	25%
<i>Poor-Average Middle School Academic Performance</i>		
No. Hollywood	62%	25%
Cleveland	60%	33%
Carson	59%	31%
Reseda	59%	25%
Franklin	57%	31%
Narbonne	57%	39%
Eagle Rock	56%	23%
Jefferson	56%	24%

Appendix B:

Most Effective LAUSD Small High Schools with First-time Freshmen with Limited English Skills, Low Standardized Test Scores, and with Poor-Average Middle School Academic Performance by On-Time Completion and A-G Completion Rates

SCHOOL*	<i>Percent Completing HS On Time</i>	<i>Percent Completing A-G</i>
Limited English Skills		
Foshay Learning Ctr	85%	37%
King-Drew Med Mag	79%	36%
SOCES Mag	74%	17%
Cleveland Human Mag	73%	55%
Elizabeth Learning Ctr	68%	47%
Venice for Lang Mag	61%	50%
Manual Arts Col Prep	61%	22%
Bravo Medical Magnet	56%	54%
Roosevelt Math/Sci Mag	53%	20%
Low Standardized Test Scores		
Poly Math/Sci Mag	87%	42%
Jordan Math/Sci Mag	85%	54%
Foshay Learning Ctr	84%	41%
Fairfax Vis Arts Mag	82%	41%
SOCES Mag	80%	27%
San Fernando Math/Sci Mag	79%	46%
Crenshaw Tch Trn Mag	79%	44%
Sylmar Math/Sci Mag	78%	37%
Grant Comm Mag	76%	27%
Hamilton Human Mag	73%	30%
Poor-Average Middle School Academic Performance		
Jordan Math/Sci Mag	95%	57%
Poly Math/Sci Mag	94%	67%
SOCES Mag	89%	53%
San Fernando Math/Sci Mag	85%	39%
Foshay Learning Ctr	83%	42%
Fairfax Vis Arts Mag	83%	48%
Pearl Journ/Comm Mag	81%	55%
Cleveland Human Mag	80%	67%
Roosevelt Math/Sci Mag	79%	32%
LACES Mag	78%	74%

*Schools serving less than ten students in a particular subgroup are not listed.

**LATINO
SCORECARD
EDUCATION ACTION TEAM**

Thomas Rivera Policy Institute

Families in Schools

United Way

Alliance for a Better Community

UCLA IDEA

Inner City Struggle

Community Coalition

Boyle Heights Learning Collaborative

This report can be accessed online at **www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu/LSEAT/**

For further information, contact

UCLA IDEA

1041 Moore Hall, Box 951521

Los Angeles, CA. 90095

phone: (310) 206-8725; fax: (310) 206-8770; email: idea@ucla.edu

Support for this report was provided by a grant from the James Irvine Foundation