

Overall Reduction in Sixth Grade Early Warning Indicators: A Positive Sign for Baltimore City Schools

Recent research has emphasized the utility of an early warning system to inform dropout prevention efforts. With this in mind, the Baltimore Education Research Consortium examined the 2000-01 cohort of sixth grade students from the Baltimore City Schools to determine whether there were indicators that predicted eventual dropout with a reasonable level of certainty and identified enough students to justify intervention efforts. After identifying four such indicators, we compared indicator prevalence in 2000-01 to a more recent sixth grade cohort (2008-09).

Our analysis identified the following early warning indicators of non-graduation:

- Chronic absence (defined as missing 20 or more days of school);
- Failing English, math, or both, and/or a failing average of English, math, science, and social studies;
- Being at least one year overage for grade¹ and
- Being suspended for three or more days.

Overall, of students with at least one early warning indicator in the sixth grade, approximately a third (36.4 percent) went on to graduate within one year of expected graduation, i.e., by June 2008. In contrast, students with no warning indicators graduated at almost double the rate (70.5 percent).

The good news is that the **prevalence of some indicators has decreased**. When we compared sixth graders in 2000-01 (the Class of 2007) with those in 2008-09 (the Class of 2015), we found that chronic absence, course failure, and being suspended three or more days had substantially declined (Table 1). While the percent of sixth graders overage for grade nearly doubled, the percent of students currently retained in the elementary grades is lower than it was for 2002-03. This will probably lead to a lower percent of overage for grade sixth graders within several years. Given the impact of retention on graduation outcomes, **City Schools may want to continue to monitor retention policies and practices**.

Number and Percent of Baltimore City School Grade 6 Students with
Early Warning Indicators for the Classes of 2007 and 2015

Early Warning Indicators	Class of 2007		Class of 2015	
	N	%	N	%
Chronic Absence	2,693	34.2	1,084	18.6
Course Failure	1,658	21.0	556	9.6
Overage for Grade ¹	1,300	16.5	1,836	31.6
Suspended 3 or more days	1,481	18.8	386	6.6

Note: The number of sixth graders was 7,887 in 2000-01 and 5,816 in 2008-09. Risk indicators were assigned a 0 when data were missing. So, the reported prevalence of indicators may be lower than the actual, particularly for course grades.

¹ The definition of overage is the same for the Class of 2007 and the Class of 2015. State policy for both cohorts allowed students who would not be 5 until December 31 to enroll in Kindergarten. Thus, the reported percent overage for each cohort likely underestimates the number of students actually retained. For more detail, see the full BEREC report, *Destination Graduation? Sixth Grade Early Warning Indicators for Baltimore City Schools: Their Prevalence and Impact*.

Policy Implications

Reduction in sixth grade early warning indicators is a positive sign for the district. Overall, sixth graders are much more likely to be on-track to graduation than they have been in the past.

At the same time it is important to keep in mind that students who are on-track in sixth grade can fall off at a later point in time. Rates of chronic absence tend to increase through the middle grades and especially from eighth grade to ninth grade. It is crucial for City Schools to continue to help schools maintain high levels of attendance for students in seventh and eighth grades.

First-time ninth graders have high chronic absence rates and course failure rates as documented in the recent BERC report *Keeping On Track in Ninth Grade and Beyond* ([http://baltimore-berc.org/pdfs/3A Final report_06-15-10.pdf](http://baltimore-berc.org/pdfs/3A%20Final%20report_06-15-10.pdf)). Given the strong relationship between ninth grade attendance and course passing with graduation (outlined in BERC's soon to be released policy brief *Moving Forward to Increase Graduation Rates in Baltimore City*), efforts to address both attendance and course passing in ninth grade are crucial.

For more details please read the full technical report at <http://baltimore-berc.org/pdfs/SixthGradeEWIs.pdf>.



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