

How to assess whether middle schoolers are ready for high school

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The [CORE Districts](#) began in 2010 as a collaboration across school districts exploring ways to improve teaching and learning. In 2013, several school districts in the CORE consortium [received a federal waiver](#) from some provisions of the No Child Left Behind law and are working together to develop a new School Quality Improvement Index to provide more and better information about schools and the learning needs of students.

In this series of essays published as a public service by EdSource, the CORE districts describe their new school improvement system, and the often difficult decisions district leaders had to make to develop a system that more fairly and comprehensively measures how well schools and students are doing. The six school districts developing this new accountability system are Long Beach Unified, Los Angeles Unified, Santa Ana Unified, Fresno Unified, Oakland Unified and San Francisco Unified.

In this second part of the series, Oakland Unified School District Superintendent Antwan Wilson, a member of CORE's [Board of Directors](#), describes the challenge of how to measure whether students leaving middle school are ready for high school.

Part Two: Measuring High School Readiness

As we began designing the CORE Districts' new School Quality Improvement Index, my colleagues and I came to a swift consensus that we wanted to include a metric rooted in one of the most difficult transitions in K-12 education: how well a student traverses the path from middle to high school. For the [Oakland Unified School District](#) (OUSD), this is a pivotal time where we see students leaving the system, and those that stay often not being prepared for high school success or our ultimate goal – college, career and community success.

Research shows – and our educators' experience tells us – that we are losing far too many kids during this transition. We also know that students who drop out of school usually don't make the decision on a whim. Rather,

it is a slow process of withdrawal that begins in middle school. But if students do drop out, it frequently occurs during the 9th grade or the summer following 9th grade.

To learn more, we decided to track the persistence of 8th graders – those who successfully make it through to high school – by calculating the percentage of students who left 8th grade and were still enrolled in 10th grade as part of our School Quality Improvement System.

About the Redesigning Accountability series

This is Part 2 of an ongoing series on the CORE Districts' work to design a new accountability system.

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This seemed like a logical and relatively easy way for us to provide valuable information to middle schools about the risk factors linked to dropouts associated with their schools. Once we did the research, however, we found that the percentage of students who finished 8th grade and were still enrolled in 10th grade was not as valuable a piece of data as we had hoped and did not give us the information we were actually seeking. To our surprise, we found that a significant number of students were still enrolled when they reached 10th grade – an apparent indicator of a successful transition from middle school.

When we dug into the data a little more deeply it became clear that many of those 10th-grade students were so deficient in school credits that they were not truly on a path to graduating from high school. Using our original metric – the percentage of 8th graders who were still enrolled in high school in the 10th grade – might make schools appear to be on the right track, but would not raise the red flags we desired to ensure the entire system focused on the kids in need of intervention.

We also encountered data limitations with our original metric. For instance, in districts such as OUSD where many students elect to attend charter schools after 8th grade, tracking students is not as manageable because so many of them are no longer with the district. Further, the research was unclear as to the extent to which students' persistence in high school is attributable to their experiences in middle school. Our school district data and assessment experts were concerned that middle schools would be unfairly held accountable for how students did in high school. So we began to rethink how we might use student persistence rates as part of the school improvement system we are designing.

In the fall of 2014, after extensive consideration among our school districts, the CORE board of directors voted to change the focus to middle school measures that data showed were quite predictive of high school success and graduation. These included a GPA of 3.0 or better, scoring at a proficient level on math and English language arts standardized tests, an attendance rate of 96% or better and a history of no suspensions.

Initially, these appeared to be good indicators of whether or not an 8th grader was truly on track to graduate high school. Additionally, it seemed that gathering the data would be a straightforward task and student achievement would be directly attributable to middle school. However, when we examined a large cohort of students from the high school class of 2013, we saw that 80% would not have met the new criteria – yet many of them still graduated from high school.

After further work and refinement we found that slightly lowering the GPA threshold from 3.0 (to 2.5, for example) would provide a more accurate view of 8th graders who could be expected to graduate from high school on time. Further, we decided against using students' scores on standardized tests at this stage because of the transition to Smarter Balanced tests and the uncertainty of the correlation between those test results and student success in high school.

Ultimately we decided that our High School Readiness Rate would best be measured in middle school by the percentage of 8th graders in a school who had a GPA of 2.5 or better, no D's or F's in English language arts or math, attendance of 96% or better and no suspensions. Based on our initial analysis of the high school class of 2013 in one of our districts, nine out of ten students who graduated would have met these criteria when they were in the 8th grade.

The work was not over yet, though. We also spent a significant amount of time working with our colleagues designing shared definitions around issues like which 8th grade English language arts and math courses to consider as a core courses (vs. a helper/support class like tutoring). We discovered, for example, that we couldn't just use the state's [CALPADS](#) course codes for this because they are too broad, so our work with course-taking is compiled district by district.

Further, simply projecting those students who are highly likely to graduate on time was not enough. We also wanted measurements that would provide us more fine-grained information. We thought of it as a "traffic light approach." For those students fulfilling the requirements, the light would be green. But for those that were struggling, we would create a red group to identify the substantive number of students most at risk of not graduating as they enter high school. For those students in the yellow category, while it might not trigger intensive interventions, it would help educators target additional needs for assistance. This way, we could best target interventions.

We had a deep and, at times, challenging discussion about this newly proposed metric. My school colleagues and I also believed that information on whether students were on a trajectory to go to college, not just graduate from high school, was critical and should be part of our system too. To address these concerns, we agreed to develop another two indicators in addition to the High School Readiness Rate: 1) a college readiness indicator; and 2) 8th graders most at risk of not graduating from high school on time.

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We have been working to develop measurements of these factors. Neither is fully developed yet, but the college readiness indicator is intended to show whether high school graduates are indeed graduating "college ready." It might include criteria like a student's score on the [Early Assessment Program](#) tests, ACT scores and other measures.

The indicator of 8th graders at risk of not graduating from high school on time is closer to completion and will likely be calculated by looking at the percentage of students with a GPA of 2.0 or less, receiving D's or F's in English language arts or math, attendance rates of 92% or less, and any suspensions.

Our work to refine how we measure high school readiness among 8th graders will continue, but we have already learned much along the way. Our progress (including mistakes) has shown us that accountability systems need to be continuously monitored and revised. It has also demonstrated the need for local innovation and the great value of ongoing collaborative input from experienced educators in their design. By identifying schools that are performing well, as well as those that are struggling, we can learn from one another and work together to improve student achievement.

••• **Antwan Wilson** is superintendent of the Oakland Unified School District and a member of the CORE board of directors.